

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

Perspectives from Inside a Tumultuous Middle East: Syria-Iraq-ISIS-Russia and Iran

Public Affairs, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

Rami Khouri, Joanne J. Myers

Transcript

Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good afternoon. I'm Joanne Myers, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I would like to welcome you to this Public Affairs program.

At a time when the rhetoric from and about the Middle East is given to extremes, it's not often that we have the opportunity to listen to a fair, reasonable, and authoritative voice from the region. But today we do.

Rami Khouri is our guest, and he will be discussing the tumultuous Middle East. As you all have received a copy of Rami's bio, I won't go into too many details. But for those listening in on this live webcast, let me just briefly note that our guest is founding director and senior fellow at the [Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs](#) at the American University of Beirut, and he is a nonresident senior fellow at the [Belfer Center](#) at Harvard. He also serves as editor-at-large of the Beirut-based [Daily Star](#) newspaper, and as a syndicated columnist for [Agence Global syndicate, USA](#), and the [Daily Star](#).

It has been 14 years since the [attacks of 9/11](#) brought Islamic terrorism to the forefront of American and Western awareness and launched the global war on terror. Since then, the violent strain of Islam has metastasized. We can have it not only in the Middle East but in the West. [Terrorist attacks in Paris](#), [twin suicide bombings in Lebanon](#), the [downing of a Russian airliner](#), a [bombing in Ankara](#), have either been blamed on ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] or ISIS has claimed full responsibility—all of which seem to indicate a dramatically more capable organization and a much more problematic security environment than [al-Qaeda](#) ever was.

But that's not all. With tracts of [Syria](#) and [Iraq](#) in the hands of a self-styled Islamic state, [Libya](#) and [Somalia](#) engulfed in anarchy, Yemen being torn apart by [civil war](#), the [Taliban resurging](#) in Afghanistan, and [Boko Haram terrorizing](#) Nigeria, policymakers are farther away from eliminating the threat of Islamism than they were when they began the effort. Add to that a spiraling [refugee situation](#) in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, which has led to recruiting opportunities for ISIS. Much of the world agrees ISIS must be stopped.

I guess you could say we have a lot to talk about, ISIS being front and center. Rami and I will have a brief conversation for about 25 or 30 minutes, and then I will turn the floor over to you because I'm sure there are a lot of questions racing through your minds, especially after the terror attacks.

Discussion

JOANNE MYERS: Rami, let me begin by asking you, what's going on? Is this the beginning of the

third world war?

RAMI KHOURI: Well, first, thank you for having me. I'm delighted to be back.

Just one little editorial comment. I wouldn't call the 9/11 attacks "Islamic terrorism." It was terrorism by a few criminal Muslims, but it's not Islamic terrorism any more than there's Jewish or Christian terrorism.

What's going on essentially is we are paying the price, I think, for a rather calamitous century. From 1915 to 2015 we've had a century of very erratic development in the Arab world. We did pretty well from 1920 until 1980. There was sustained national development all over the region. But since the 1980s and the [end](#) of the [Cold War](#) in 1990, the well-being of the majority of people in the Arab world has been on a downward slide.

What we are dealing with now is the combination of lousy governance in the Arab world mostly, the terrible consequences of continuous foreign military intervention in our region—and I say foreign because it's not just American; it's Russian, European, Iranian, Israeli, and inter-Arab as well. So you have the Saudis fighting in places and the Emiratis and [Hezbollah](#) in Syria. So there are a lot of foreign troops fighting inside Arab countries, and it has been nonstop for the last 25 or 30 years.

And population growth has outstripped economic growth. So that, broadly speaking, of the 370 million Arabs today, we probably have around 150 or 200 million, something around half the people in the Arab world, living at, near, or under the poverty line. And if you look at more nuanced analyses of their conditions, there is a huge sense by tens of millions, maybe even a couple of hundred million, Arabs that they don't have a chance to really improve their lives anymore.

Unlike the previous five generations since the 1920s, when all the people in the Arab world, even if they were poor, even if they were living in autocratic countries, which mostly all of them were, they felt that the future was going to be better. By education, by working hard, by being creative, by interacting with people, they felt that their world and their children's world was going to be better than theirs. That sense has pretty much vanished from so many people's lives, which we saw with the [Arab uprisings](#) five years ago, which was a phenomenal process across the region, and we saw it with the birth of [ISIS](#) as one deviant expression of this.

So what has happened is that a century of development has stalled and started to go back. Corruption, mismanagement, abuse of power and autocracy, and incompetence have come to define a large section of governance in the Arab world. Not every Arab government is like that, but many of them are, and ordinary people's lives have hit a wall. You have a terrible, terrible sentiment of vulnerability, of real fear for the future and total helplessness and hopelessness by millions and millions of people.

The consequences are what we see—warfare, polarization, sectarian conflicts, civil wars, retreat of central governments, collapse of national authorities, mass migration, whether it's legal or illegal, [millions and millions of refugees](#), and a rather bewildered international response which still heavily focuses on militarism and doesn't address the underlying political issues, with the continued impact of the oldest and most destabilizing and radicalizing process in the region, which is the [Arab-Israeli conflict](#), which started about the same time as the Arab century. Around the 1920s you started to get the first Zionist-Arab conflicts in Palestine, and it hasn't stopped, and it continues to be a radicalizing force, and foreign militarism, and ecological stress.

All of these things together have converged, but in the last 15-20 years there has been a speeding up of the deterioration, and this is why we are in this terrible situation.

JOANNE MYERS: But does that explain the rise of ISIS, all this?

RAMI KHOURI: All of these things have to be seen as part of an integrated process. You can't isolate any one thing, like refugees, like civil war, like sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing, like mass corruption, like the Arab uprising, like the rise of the [Muslim Brothers](#) in the last 30 years, foreign intervention. All of them come together.

ISIS is the most vulgar and violent form of rule that the Arab world has experienced in the last 60 or 70 or 80 years. But it's not qualitatively that different from much of the Arab world that we've experienced. It is worse in being more vulgar, being more brutal, but the fundamental nature of rule that ISIS is using is simply an extreme version of the autocracy, the brutality, the police state rule, the violence, the lack of civil rights, the lack of pluralism, the lack of tolerance, that has defined much of the modern Arab world, unfortunately.

Nobody would speak about this in the last 20 or 30 or 40 years. Some of us were speaking about it all over the region, but nobody in the world was speaking about this because the world was happy buying oil from the Arab world, or then, after [9/11](#), everybody was happy using counter-terrorism assistance from Arab countries, and nobody asked about human rights, about civil rights, about economic development, sustainability, environmental prospects, because these issues mattered to people in the region but they didn't matter much to foreign powers, whether they were Russian or American or British or Israeli or Iranian or whoever they were. But these issues all come together. ISIS is the latest and worst manifestation of these trends that we've seen.

The other thing I would mention is that ISIS claims to be an Islamic state. Very few people in the world accept that. The majority of Muslims reject it. They see them as criminals. But it's interesting that they use the Islamic state approach. They didn't call themselves an Arab nationalist state, they didn't call themselves a Levantine state, they didn't call themselves a developmental state; they called themselves an Islamic state. The reason for that is because—and this is another indicator of the terrible background of the last 50 years or so, which is that any mass movement in the Arab world that has tried to challenge or change the existing power structure has only made any progress if it used an Islamic veneer, if it used religion as a force to justify and to mobilize what it was doing.

The reason for that is because the vast majority of people in our region who are Muslims had no other opportunity other than their religion to express grievances, participate politically, challenge oppression, challenge foreign colonization and domination and attacks, resist unjust rule. Religion was the last refuge that people could turn to because they had no rights in civil society or in political democratic rights. Therefore, the Islamic State people, ISIS people, understood this and they used this strategy.

So I think we can understand why ISIS came about. It's very important to remember that ISIS to the Arab Islamic world is about the same ratio of people and has about the same ratio of support as the [Ku Klux Klan](#) has to Christians in the United States. I would put that equation as a very compelling way to see these people, as a very tiny minority of people who use religion in a devastating, violent way, appealing to fears, appealing to ignorance, appealing to certain vulnerabilities that a small number of people have. But this is blown out of proportion, exaggerated now, because they are so violent and because they get such media coverage.

JOANNE MYERS: But ISIS poses a threat to every single Middle Eastern country, including Iran, but none of them act in sync, with all the very different interests that they have. Could you talk a little bit about the interests that are competing and that's why we can't defeat ISIS in the region?

RAMI KHOURI: One of the really terrible situations is the unwillingness or inability of Arab governments, in particular, but also the Turks and the Iranians—the Israelis are out of this for the moment; this is not an issue where Israel is directly involved; it indirectly has concerns—but the Arab governments, Turkey and Iran, all look at ISIS with concern. They all do something to try to do something about it—they [help](#) the United States, they give them bases, they do things—but they have

not individually or collectively come up with a serious response, to try to do the two things that must be done to rid us of this threat: to defeat the structures of ISIS militarily, which is the easy part, if they all joined together with ground forces and air forces and other things.

ISIS's coordination center, which is in Raqqa and in Mosul in northern Syria and Iraq, that could be wiped out in 10 days. This is a small group of people. There's probably a core of about 4,000 or 5,000 true believers, and the rest are there for other reasons.

But the other thing that has to be done, which nobody—nobody in the Middle East, nobody in the Western world, nobody anywhere on Earth—has seriously tried to look at is: how do you address and deal with and reform and fix those underlying drivers that have brought ISIS to life? This is where the problem gets much more complex, because the complicity of Arab governments, other Middle Eastern governments—the Turks, for instance, have a role to play in allowing ISIS to develop for the last three or four years; the Syrian government—and the impact of the two things I mentioned before, the indirect impact of the Arab-Israeli conflict on this situation and the impact of Western policies, particularly American policies—and this is where the American link gets very complex and embarrassing for the American government in particular, because it was the [American-British invasion of Iraq](#) that created the environment of chaos which then allowed criminals like [Abu Musab al-Zarqawi](#) from [al-Qaeda](#) to go to Iraq in 2004 and start the [sectarian provocations and killings against Shiites](#) to create this tension to get the Sunnis in Iraq to work with them.

They started the [Islamic State in Mesopotamia](#) to begin with in Iraq in [2006-2007](#), and then it grew over the years. But it was the British and American invasion of Iraq that provided the environment in which this monster could emerge. The forces that prepared many people in this region to use this vehicle as an expression of their discontent or their fear and vulnerability, that was the consequence mainly of Arab government mismanagement, poverty, inequality, abuse of power, loss of hope—all of these things I mentioned before.

So there are a lot of people who need to share responsibility for the birth of ISIS. But they are not at all honestly addressing the real issues that have to be addressed, which is to defeat ISIS militarily you need also to defeat the underlying drivers that keep giving it life.

Why do tens of thousands of people go to the Islamic State, or some people send them money? It's the discontent, the disparity, the distortions, in the Arab world primarily. ISIS is primarily an Arab problem. You have some Muslims from other places and you have some Western people who go and join it, but this is fundamentally an Arab problem. It came out of the Arab world. The incubators were the autocracy of Arab regimes, the lack of opportunity and human development for millions and millions of ordinary Arab people, and the abuse of Islamists in Arab jails who became radicalized, like [Abu Musab al-Zarqawi](#), who essentially created ISIS in the beginning in Iraq, like [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#), now the head of al-Qaeda, and dozens and dozens of people who were radicalized in Arab jails in Syria, in Iraq, in Jordan, in Egypt, in Saudi Arabia, all over the Arab region.

Many of them wanted to join ISIS. Many didn't; they just became radical Islamists. It was the combination of these forces that finally came together in that space that was created by the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, that space of chaos and ungovernability, and that's when they said, "Let's create this Islamic state."

So the Islamic State was a project by a very small number of militant, radical, extremist people who were trying to find any alternative to the discontent and the lack of opportunity and the humiliation that shaped the lives of probably several hundred million people in the Arab world.

JOANNE MYERS: Let me just stop you there. So you do think then that the United States has a moral obligation to step in now and have boots on the ground and try to do something about this situation,

stop the war and then probably help with economic development?

RAMI KHOURI: I would not say only the United States. I think it's unfair to single out the United States. I think it's all of the countries in the region, and I say all of them, without exception—the Arab countries, Israel, Turkey, Iran—all of them have a moral obligation with the Western powers and the Russians and others who over the last 40-50 years allowed these situations to evolve.

This did not happen overnight. There was nobody talking about an Islamic state 20 years ago or 50 years ago. There were one or two people here and there, like there's one or two people here in the United States who talk about creating a separate state for black people or a separate state for gay people or a separate state for Italian-Americans. You always find these small individuals who just want to come up with nutty ideas.

But the creation of ISIS, like the creation of al-Qaeda before it, like the mass support for the peaceful Muslim Brothers before it, and like the Arab uprisings of 2010-2011—we have had four wake-up calls: the Muslim Brothers since the 1970s; al-Qaeda starting in the 1980s; the Arab uprisings four or five years ago, which are still going on; and now ISIS—four wake-up calls that there is mass discontent, to the point that it has turned into a sense of existential vulnerability and fear, where people are prepared to do crazy things like they are doing now.

These refugees who are [fleeing](#) the Arab countries for Europe and risking their lives, they are doing it because the risk of dying in the sea is less than the risk of staying where you are in some Arab countries. This is a terrible, terrible comment.

So this is the reality that a lot of people share this responsibility, and therefore there must be a more concerted effort by the people of the region as well as foreign powers to not repeat the mistakes that happened after 9/11, not to exaggerate the Islamic dimension of this, to understand the underlying political and social and economic drivers, and not to respond primarily militarily but to respond with a military and a political response that everybody can be involved with. This is very difficult, very difficult.

JOANNE MYERS: Yes. Let me ask you then, who has the moral authority to enact all these changes or to direct the Gulf States to participate more?

RAMI KHOURI: The only people who have the moral authority are the citizens of these countries. The principle of the consent of the governed is the one principle that has never been attempted in Arab countries, popular self-determination, citizen-led governance.

The [Tunisians](#) were the first country that has actually done this now, and there is now a [constitution](#) that was drawn up by Tunisians and is being implemented slowly in a pluralistic, constitutional, democratic, and accountable governing system. No other Arab country has done this.

It's the citizens of these countries who have the greatest moral authority to demand change and to bring about change. They have been trying to do this for 30, 40, 50 years, but the autocrats in the Arab world have been too powerful, the support from abroad by the East and the West was very strong for these autocratic regimes, and the people themselves who tried to argue for human rights, for democracy, for sustainable development, had no voice, had no power. They were crushed by the political elites that continue to dominate the Arab world.

JOANNE MYERS: Why was Tunisia so successful? What was it about Tunisia that could be adopted by some of the other countries in the region?

RAMI KHOURI: There were several factors that made the Tunisian transition successful where others didn't happen. First of all, the nature of the civil society in Tunisia, the nature of labor unions and other

movements, who could play a very powerful catalytic and mediating role among the different political groups. Second was the army in Tunisia did not play a political role, unlike, say, [Egypt](#) and other Arab countries. Third, Tunisia is a small country, relatively homogeneous. Fourth, there was a Muslim Brotherhood leadership, the [Ennahda party](#), that was far more realistic and pragmatic than the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, for instance. Fifth, it is a country that had a relatively good secular tradition going back to the 1950s. All of these factors came together and allowed the Tunisians to make the transition.

There were a couple of touchy moments when opposition people were being killed, when terror attacks were taking place. But it was the critical role of the armed forces to stay out of politics and for the civil society to take the lead in negotiating a transition process, and the Muslim Brothers accepting to go along with it, even though they won a plurality in the election. Those three things together are why Tunisia was able to succeed while other Arab countries were not.

JOANNE MYERS: In the few minutes that we have left, could we just talk about [Syria](#) and the [Vienna conference](#) and just see where that is now, because for the first time 17 countries came together and five of the most important ones were there. But one of the most important components of the agreement so far is that they don't know what to do about [Assad](#). So how do you see this playing out, if we can't have a good exit strategy for Assad? Is there a political solution to ending the conflict in Syria?

RAMI KHOURI: It's hard to tell right now if there will be a peaceful political transition or if the fighting in Syria will have to continue to a point where one side beats the other or one side is exhausted and the other side wins.

The reality right now is that the external drivers of the fighting in Syria, the many different conflicts in Syria that are going on—some are local, some are regional, some are global—the [external drivers](#), mainly the [United States](#), [Russia](#), [Iran](#), and [Saudi Arabia](#)—these four powers, with others, but these four particularly, are spending much more time fomenting war than making peace.

But I think we have reached a critical moment where these four powers have recognized that they are not actually gaining anything anymore from the war, that there is a stalemate, that the opposition and Assad are pretty much even—now Assad is a little stronger with the Russian and Iranian and Hezbollah aid, but, even with that, the opposition is still very strong. ISIS has emerged, which scares and threatens everybody.

So I think the external powers that are funding and arming and driving the war have realized that they are really just destroying the region and threatening the rest of the world—with refugees; with possibly more terrorism, as we've seen recently; maybe with weapons of mass destruction if some of these people get some of these bad things.

So the critical moment now is a realization by the external powers who drive the war that the war actually is hurting them more than it is helping them, and therefore they are starting to look at how can you get a ceasefire, returning some refugees, and then a political transition.

The timetable and the elements that came out of the Vienna meeting were very impressive. But it was, as I wrote in a recent column, a wonderful play without actors or a stage, but as a play it's just terrific, it's perfect. If you can get the actors to buy into it, the people on the ground in Syria, it might work.

A critical issue is the fate of Assad. It's not just Assad; it's Assad and his ruling clique, the [family](#), the Alawite-dominated group of people around him, who are not all Alawites, but the minority family-based, security-anchored rule, which is the tradition in virtually the entire Arab world since the 1970s, since the early 1970s. That's when his father [Hafez al-Assad](#) came into power.

All of the Arab countries were either monarchies, in which you had family rule, which was broadly seen to be legitimate; in most Arab countries, the monarchies are seen to be legitimate. People want more human rights and more participation, but people were not challenging the monarchies too much. But in all the other Arab countries you had family-run, military-based rule.

When you go across the Arab world, who ran these countries? The Assad family, the [Gaddafi](#) family, [Ali Abdullah Saleh](#) in Yemen, [Omar al-Bashir](#) in Sudan, [Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali](#) in Tunisia, [Abdelaziz Bouteflika](#) and the army in Algeria—the president of Algeria can barely breathe, and he is still in theory in charge, and he was just [reelected](#); he could barely get the vote into the box but he was reelected.

So what we are seeing is this is part of the problem. We've had these 40–50 years. It's really since the mid-1970s, when the family-run security state—[Saddam Hussein](#), the Assads, the others—when this kind of rule captured the Arab states as power, Citizens were turned into consumers, and a developmental state that had existed from the 1920s to the 1980s, national development states in the Arab world, turned into family-run security states or police states. That was the critical transition, from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, and ever since, we've had this phenomenon.

So it's not only Bashar al-Assad, but it's the concept of a family-run, militarily-based, non-accountable, unelected government that is accountable to the consent of the governed, of its own citizens. Tunisia is the only place that has started to move in that direction.

Assad is a symbol of this problem. I think the Russians and the Iranians, in particular, are perfectly willing to have a different leader, and even a power-sharing system, as long as they maintain some links to the Syrian state. This is one of the great unknown factors.

I believe that a majority of Syrians don't want the system to stay like it is. They want a transition to something more participatory, more pluralistic, more democratic, more humane. The minority Alawites, who have had disproportionate power, will continue to play a role in some kind of power-sharing system.

You are likely to see in Libya and Yemen and Iraq and in Syria significant decentralization as one of the responses to the unsustainable, unsatisfying last half-century of top-heavy, family-run, militarily-based rule. But we'll have to see, because in the end it's only the Arab citizen who has the legitimacy, the moral authority, and ultimately the power to make these decisions.

Questions

QUESTION: Susan Woodward at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Can you tell us what you think is going to happen in Lebanon?

RAMI KHOURI: Lebanon is different from the rest of the Arab world. It did not have a centralized, top-heavy, family-run political system. It had a centralized, top-heavy political system run by 18 families, which is the 18 confessional groups that make up the political power-sharing process in Lebanon.

The problems in Lebanon are not oppression by the state. They are corruption, inefficiency, an uncaring sense of privilege by the elite. We saw this with the [garbage crisis](#), which is still going on now. For four or five months now, there has been garbage and all kinds of terrible problems and they haven't even come up with a plan to fix it, a realistic plan, that's also not based on massive structural corruption, where all these different ruling elites share in the money.

So the problem in Lebanon is that this system has to be radically changed. The Lebanese agreed in

the [Taif Accord](#) after the end of the [civil war](#) to change the system, to reduce the role of sectarian religious groups, but they have never actually implemented it. I don't see any sign that that is going to happen.

There are two things that have to change in the region for Lebanon's system to structurally change. The Iranian-Western conflict, the Iranian-Arab conflict, the Iranian-Israeli conflict, the three conflicts with Iran, need to be resolved; and then the Arab-Israeli conflict needs to be resolved. The first one is being resolved slowly, the Iranian problem with other people. The Arab-Israeli conflict is going to take more time. When those two things are done, Lebanon can then realistically hope for a transition.

So I would expect it to stay more or less like it is. But I would add Lebanon is the place where Arab individuals have the most freedom to achieve their full potential as human beings. And, despite all of these problems I mentioned, Lebanon has the best publishing houses, the best research universities, the best human technical talent, the best artistic theaters and writing and journalism. Anything that requires indigenous human talent is done better in Lebanon than in any other Arab country.

You have great things in other Arab countries, but you don't have a wide range of human beings who are allowed by their own society to develop their full human potential in every field of human life, which is creative, cultural, political, technical, economic. Unfortunately, they also develop their full potential in corruption and sometimes criminality [Laughter], but that's the price of freedom.

QUESTIONER: I wasn't precise enough. I actually meant because of the Syrian influx [inaudible].

RAMI KHOURI: That has added one more element to a difficult situation. But the Lebanese system dealt with it in the typical incompetent fashion that it has done before. The government has no real policy for the refugees. They have left it to the society and the free market. They have left it for the international donors and the UN.

There is a problem from the refugees in structural and logistical terms. That is being managed. The bigger problem is that Hezbollah is now fighting in Syria and there may be spillover from that. We have had already [spillover](#) in terms of [terror attacks](#). But that's an old problem. It's not something that started with the war, these tensions between Lebanon and Syria. There is also no sign of that changing any time soon.

QUESTION: Warren Hoge, International Peace Institute.

Rami, how important is it to maintain national borders, many of which, as you know, were [drawn up](#) in Europe by Europeans 100 years ago? Or would it be more realistic to let Yemen go north and south, let Libya go east and west, let Syria go three ways, which of course then presumes the creation of the state of Kurdistan?

RAMI KHOURI: The issue of borders again is one that really the people of these countries are the ones that have to make those decisions ultimately. The borders were created by Europeans largely. Some of them were drawn up by local people. Some Arab countries, by the way, were created in the same way that the Islamic State was created, which is marauding desert warriors conquering territory and creating a state. This happened in several instances across the Arab world. The Arab-Israeli conflict had elements of this as well.

The issue of ethnicity arises where you have [Wahhabis](#), where you have the Islamic State, where you have people in different Arab countries saying, "We want an Alawite state" or "We want a Berber state." Some people have also challenged the Israelis asking for a Jewish state.

So this issue of single-ethnic, single-religion states is a challenge to the whole region. If you start

dividing up these countries into little ethnic states or religious states, it's probably going to create more problems in the future.

My sense, having spent my whole adult life, the last 50 years or so, in the Middle East, is that countries like Syria, like Iraq, like Libya, like Yemen, basically are willing to stay as they are, as single countries, but they would like more decentralized power, more local autonomy, cultural rights, so people like the Amazigh, the Berbers, others, would like to have their ability to express their identity—the Kurds, for instance.

But ultimately, none of these borders are sacred. I have no problems if—the South Sudanese already [broke away](#) from Sudan three and a half, four years ago and created their own country, which is a [big mess](#) now for other reasons. But if there is a peaceful, democratic, political process by which some people say "Let's divide Syria into three countries," and that's what they want, and it can be done logistically, then they should have the right to do it.

The world cheered when Czechoslovakia [became](#) two countries and Yugoslavia [became](#) five countries. People were happy when those borders were erased. They were happy because the erasing of those borders broke down the Soviet police state system and allowed the people to define themselves. I think we should apply that same principle to people in the Arab world if they want to do this and it can be done peacefully and democratically.

QUESTION: Allen Young.

If you were invited to the White House and [Barack Obama](#) said, "Now, please tell me what policies you think the U.S. government should adopt," what would you tell him?

RAMI KHOURI: Well, the first thing I would do is what most American officials do, is say, "I'm not a government person. Set up a consulting company and hire me to write a big report for you." [Laughter]

The second thing I would do is I would tell him the single most important principle that has to be applied for any foreign country to be involved in our Arab region, or any region of the world, is a principle that asks three questions:

- Is the intervention—whether it's military, economic, political, diplomatic, whatever—legitimate? And legitimacy has two poles: international law on legitimacy, and legitimacy in the eyes of the people in their country. So is the intervention legitimate?
- Second of all, what are the means that are going to be used, and are these means efficacious, will they get the job done? So is military means the best way to address al-Qaeda, or do you use political, economic, social, and other things?
- The third thing: What are the consequences?

So the legitimacy, the efficiency, and the consequences of your actions as a country intervening in the Middle East—you have to answer those three questions before you do anything.

The United States didn't ask any of those questions before it started the [war on terror](#) after al-Qaeda, unfortunately, and most Arab countries didn't ask the same questions when they joined the United States and others in the war on terror.

So what I would tell Obama is: first of all, whatever you do, ask these questions; and second of all, to be aware that for the last approximately 2,500 years, [since Alexander the Great](#), Western military forces coming into the Middle East to reshape the Middle East according to Western values has only

created chaos and long-term suffering for the Middle East and often for Western countries.

So to make militarism the last resort, not the first resort. But recognize that sometimes you have to use military force, but it's only effective when it's used with political, social, economic, and diplomatic actions and in a collective manner. I would tell him: Look at what [George Bush](#) did in the war on terror and do virtually the opposite of what he did, and use a more sophisticated approach, multilateral, political, economic, and military force absolutely, but do it in a way that addresses the root causes rather than an emotional response to the surface manifestations of emotional anger.

QUESTION: Thank you for your presentation. Omar El Okdah coming from the International Peace Institute. Two quick questions.

My first question is regarding the argument you made that ISIS is not particularly worse than many of the other Arab regimes.

RAMI KHOURI: No. It is worse, but it is not qualitatively that different. It is far more extreme.

QUESTIONER: I think the best evidence for that actually is the fact that the refugees who are fleeing are fleeing Assad-related violence not ISIS territories. This is a fact that is often not interpreted or not portrayed in the media. They are fleeing the Assad-related conflict, not ISIS.

So my question is: In light of [what just happened in Paris](#), how do you see the situation playing out for the refugees who are going to Europe?

My second question is about the point you made that ISIS emerged from the ashes of the invasion of Iraq. As a student of history, I am also a student of counterfactual history. Let's assume that the invasion had not happened. I think it's fair to say that there would have been an Arab Spring in Iraq, but is it inconceivable that there would be an ISIS today?

RAMI KHOURI: Well, on the second one, it's so hypothetical that it's hard to really say anything useful. But I'll give it a shot. This is America. It's a free country. You can say anything you want. [Laughter]

JOANNE MYERS: That's right.

RAMI KHOURI: If Iraq had not been invaded and the [chaos](#) there had not happened, you probably would not have had the emergence of ISIS in the way that it emerged. But if you go back over the previous 25 years or so, you see these trends that I described of mass discontent, vulnerability, fear, existential helplessness and hopelessness, leading people to do radical and dangerous things.

We saw uprisings against different Arab countries. We saw militant movements in different countries, [people killing Sadat](#), people trying to kill the Syrians, people using military force in the Sinai in Egypt. So all the signs were there that something very bad was going to happen.

It turned out that most of this pressure channeled itself into the uprisings in 2010-2011. So I would say that we probably would have seen some extremist manifestation of the sense of hopelessness that people had.

I forgot to mention this before in my answer. I have to give you two statistics which help explain this.

Why are people so desperate? Why are they so willing to do crazy things, like swim to Europe or go to Europe by boat or join ISIS or do whatever they have to do to live? In the Arab world today, there are about 25 million children of primary and secondary school—25 million. Think of what 25 million is. Twenty-five million kids who are out of school; they've just dropped out of school or they never went to school.

The other bad news is that of the kids in school, in primary and secondary school, all over the Arab world, about 45 percent, almost half of them, don't know how to read and write and don't know how to do basic numeracy. They don't have functional literacy or numeracy. And they are in school, and most of them are going to drop out. Even if they graduate, they are going to graduate with no capacity to do anything in life.

The third issue is a consequence of these facts: 65 percent of new entrants to the labor market in Egypt, mostly young kids—some finished high school; most of them didn't—65 percent go into the informal economy. What does the informal economy mean? It means they can clean car windows, they can sweep somebody's doorstep, they can carry sacks of potatoes in the market, they can wash dishes in a restaurant. They have no health insurance, no minimum pay, no working hours, no social security, no protection of any kind. They are abused, they are exploited, they are underpaid, they work 10-12 hours a day to make \$4 or \$5, just to take that money home and let their family make it through another day.

This is a reality that defines tens of millions of people in the Arab world. It is precisely this sense—what drove the uprisings and what drives the fighting, what drives the creation of ISIS, is the growing sense among tens of millions of people in the Arab world that there is no chance that they are ever going to escape this promise of lifetime poverty, vulnerability, helplessness, marginalization. This is the big driver. I mentioned earlier that people lost the hope about 10-15 years ago—a lot of people lost the hope that their lives were ever going to improve, no matter what they did. And even if they went to school and they got out of school, they weren't going to be able to do anything other than to be poor and exploited, ill, not having access to clean water, not being able to get married.

Those driving forces are what have brought us to this situation. So they would have manifested themselves somehow.

The refugee issue—there are really three dimensions to the refugee issue.

The easiest one is the immediate humanitarian response, easy in the sense that it is a mechanical process: you give people food, you give them shelter, you take care of them in camps and resettlement areas, you absorb them into countries. That's one thing.

The second issue is more complex, which is the legal and political rights of refugees. Under prevailing international law and conventions about the status of a refugee or somebody seeking sanctuary or—what do they call it?

JOANNE MYERS: Asylum.

RAMI KHOURI: —when you go to another country. There are legal ways to do that. The Turks have come up with a very good new definition of temporary asylum for refugees. So you don't hear a lot of problems of refugees in Turkey. This is the second issue.

The third issue is the more complicated, which is to stop the flow of refugees by dealing with the problems in their home countries.

Those three things have to be tackled simultaneously. If you do only one of them, you are not going to solve the problem. Once this starts—and it has—this flow is probably going to increase. We know from the Palestine situation, we know from the Iraq situation, long-term refugeehood is only a force for radicalization and extremism and problems all over the region.

QUESTION: Sondra Stein. I have two questions.

How much do you think Saudi Arabia and the Wahhabi religion have contributed to this?

The other one is, how much in civil society in the Arab countries are people talking about your ideas of change? Is it a few isolated people? Is there really some movement to move in the direction you describe?

RAMI KHOURI: Well, the second question first. I think the vast majority of people in the Arab world—and we know this from evidence; this isn't just me saying nice things in Manhattan—survey evidence from Gallup, from the [Arab Center](#) in Doha, from [Zogby](#), going back 20 years—and it's all available online; go look at the survey evidence that's available from the [Arab Barometer](#) surveys—very serious polling all across the Arab world has shown us for the last 20 years or so, which is from when we have polling, that the values of the vast majority of people in the Arab world, who are mostly Muslim, about 95 percent Muslim, are values that seek justice, stability, mercy, equality, opportunity, participation, accountability; democracy, if you want to call it that. The values that people have in them and want to see implemented are very similar to your values and European values and global values. They have just never been given the opportunity to implement them in any way.

We saw what happened with the uprisings. When they were given a chance in Tunisia, in Egypt, in [Libya](#), they immediately ran out and 90 percent of the people voted and they created 95 political parties. There was a thirst for participation, for accountability, for citizen rights. Only the Tunisians broke through.

Studies have been done by American scholars that look at Arab values versus the values of other people around the world. They show that the values of Arabs and Muslims and the values of Americans are very, very close. There are a couple of areas where they diverge—women's status is one of them; the role of religion in public life is another one.

Muslims in the Arab world, the majority of Arabs, want their public life to be influenced by religious values. And what do they mean by religious values? They mean justice, equality, etc. But they don't want religious people to rule them. They don't want to be ruled like Iran. They don't want theocracy. They want a participatory society in which the fundamental Muslim values, which are the Abrahamic values, are manifested in society.

So there's no problem with those values. The problem is that people just have never been given a chance to implement them. We saw what happened when they were given the chance: they tried seriously.

People talk about this all the time. But one day they will be able to implement them, we hope, in other countries.

The Saudi Wahhabi question is an important issue which people talk about all the time in the region. But it is not talked about too much in public because most people want to get contracts from the Saudis or jobs from the Saudis or they want to sell them something. The Saudis have a lot of money. They also have a lot of moral force, being the guardians of Sunni Islam and the holy places of Islam. They and Al-Azhar in Egypt are the two centers of serious religious legitimacy or moral leadership, or whatever we want to call it.

But Wahhabi influence has been the problem clearly for many years in funding and promoting a harsh form of Islam. I don't think the Saudis would willingly promote things like al-Qaeda and ISIS. I'm sure they wouldn't. Anybody who knows the Saudis and the [leadership](#), even if they might criticize them for promoting too much fundamentalist, hard Islam of the Wahhabi variety, would not accuse the Saudis of deliberately promoting the kind of criminal activity that ISIS does.

But ISIS and al-Qaeda and others are a function of a trend in society that has partly been promoted or pushed by the kind of Wahhabi teachings in schools and mosques. They have been funding these all

over the region, in Pakistan and all over the Islamic world, for 40-50 years. So I would say there is an indirect problem of the relationship of Wahhabi dissemination with the tough Islamic response.

Remember, their religion is the only thing that Muslims have in the Arab world to respond to their discontent. It's the same as black people in the United States in the 1950s—they had nowhere else to go but the churches. They couldn't go to the law, they couldn't go to elections, they couldn't go to the press, they couldn't go to civil society. They had no rights. They could only go to the churches, and that's where the [Civil Rights Movement](#) was incubated, mobilized, organized, and implemented. They were lucky to have good leaders in the civil rights movement. And the system in the United States was a system that responded. When people challenged black segregation in the courts, they won cases, and finally the national leadership responded.

In the Arab world we don't have that process. The only breakthrough we had was when tens of millions of people went out onto the streets in peaceful demonstrations five years ago to start the process of change, which only completed itself in Tunisia.

But it's important to remember that Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, and Libya, all four, started very serious constitutional transitions with incredibly vibrant debates about really important issues.

Only the Tunisians broke through. But if you go back and look at what happened in 2011 and 2012, there was massive participation in many Arab countries seeking political reform and change.

JOANNE MYERS: I think we'll take three questions together because we are short of time.

QUESTION: My name is Marie and I'm studying international studies.

What do you think should be the proper strategy to deal with ISIS and how long do you think it will take?

QUESTION: Do you think that ISIS will try to expand or try to take over North and Eastern Africa?

QUESTION: My question is, do you think Iran will let Assad go and settle with somebody else in power?

RAMI KHOURI: I think the Iranians will let go of Assad personally if they find that a transition can happen in Syria that maintains for them some link with groups in Syria that are sufficient to respond to their needs, which is to maintain links with Hezbollah in Lebanon and to maintain some influence in the Arab world.

This is an area that is very hotly contested and debated all over the region—"What do the Iranians want; what are they aiming for; are they a threat to the Arab world?"

I think the answer is yes, they will. They are not wedded to Assad, the person. It's their strategic interest that they want.

The links to Syria and to Hezbollah are the only two real gains that the [Iranian Revolution](#) made that continue until today, from 1979 until today. They don't want to lose those gains as much as they can.

The question about ISIS, what should be done to defeat it? I answered it sort of before. You need military action, clearly, to contain them in the short run. But it has to be done by people in the region as well as foreign powers. Now you have the Russians and the Americans and the French actively involved, foreign air forces. The Iranians are on the ground. Hezbollah is on the ground. You need to get other groups—Turks, Jordanians, Saudis. You need to get a serious land army working together somehow to break up this small, little ruling power that they have created in what they call the Islamic

State. That's the easy part.

The hard part is if you don't address these underlying drivers that I talked about, which is mass citizen discontent and distortion and helplessness—if you don't address that, something worse than ISIS is going to come up after five or 10 years.

We have seen this before. When the Muslim Brothers started growing in the 1970s, they were addressing the same issues—corruption; abuse of power; lack of citizen rights; privileged, opportunistic rule by families. They started talking about these things in the 1970s, I remember, all over the region. The world didn't pay attention. The Arab leaders didn't pay attention. What did we get? We got a violent form of Muslim Brothers who killed Sadat and did some other things in [Algeria](#), and they were put down.

And then what happened when they were not listened to? We got al-Qaeda. What happened when al-Qaeda was not defeated, was hit back militarily, but the underlying issues that it raised were not addressed? We got ISIS. So if you just hit the surface manifestation, the symptoms, of a problem, without addressing the root causes, the problem will assert itself in some way.

What was the third question?

QUESTION: I wondered if you think that ISIS will try and take over Eastern and North Africa, to expand their area?

RAMI KHOURI: If ISIS will spread.

They want to spread. Their motto is that they are persisting and they are spreading. They want to expand. They claim that they are creating a caliphate for all Muslims all over the world. They see themselves as the Islamic State is the core of a messianic, apocalyptic process that will bring on the end of the world, to return the [Mahdi](#), the Messiah figure, who will usher in an eternal period of justice and peace and goodwill on Earth. Abrahamic and Jewish and Christian theology has the same idea. They all borrow from each other.

They see the Islamic State as just the beginning of an expanding process. I think they're delusional, and most Muslims think they're delusional, they're criminals. But they have been able to attract enough people to hold this little piece of land.

But they will be defeated very quickly. I don't have any doubt that they will be defeated. They can be easily defeated once you get the local people on the ground with the foreign armies working together, which hasn't happened.

Why it hasn't happened is actually the question we should be asking. Why is it that the Arab countries and Turkey and Iran have not worked together more effectively to defeat them? Is it incompetence? Is it collusion? Is it that they see that maybe it's in their interests? Assad certainly sees it in his interest to allow ISIS to grow. He let out a lot of people from prison who then went into the leadership of ISIS. Why are the local countries not working together? This is the big question. And these are local countries that are client states of the United States, most of them.

So there are some serious questions that countries in the region as well as abroad—these questions have to be answered.

They want to expand. But I don't think they will. They have small, little affiliate groups that have set up shop. But where do they set up shop? Only where there's chaos and zones of ungovernability—Mali, Yemen, Pakistan border, Syria and Iraq after the war, isolated areas of northeast Lebanon. Only when there is warfare, chaos, no government, no order, that's when they move in and set up shop.

Why do they do that? Because they go to those areas and say, "We're going to bring you order. We're going to bring you bakeries that are open every day. We're going to create jobs. We're going to create stability and justice." And desperate people buy this message.

So this is predominantly not a religious movement. It is predominantly a political movement, a crude, evil political movement, but a political movement that uses religious vocabulary to push its case.

There is a core of ISIS members who are devout Muslims. I have no doubt about that. They really are devout Muslims. They honestly believe they are creating the perfect Islamic society of justice and brotherhood and peace, etc. But the vast majority of ISIS supporters are not driven by theological righteousness. They are driven by a whole range of material and practical issues, resentments, political revenge, and a craving for what they don't have—security, order, justice, predictability, water every day, electricity every day, jobs, education for their kids, hospital care, an opportunity to develop their society according to their values—all of the things that people do not have in their lives in many Arab countries. In desperation, they see this as being offered by the Islamic State.

The few nutcases who come from Belgium and the United States and Canada and Germany who go to join the Islamic State, these are psychologically disturbed people who would have in other times joined a cult or a motorcycle gang. But they now go and join the Islamic State.

Seriously, if I was leading a country, I would not want these people coming from overseas to join my country. These are people who have real problems and they find escape—the cruel irony of the Islamic State is that it offers itself and is perceived by many desperate people to be an answer to all their problems, to be heaven on earth, to be a perfect society.

And you not only go and live in the Islamic State and start a new life; you take on a new name. All of the people who go to join ISIS have new names—[Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#), Abu-this, Abu-that—and they take on a new name to signify they've got a new life, they can start over again. Most of them are escaping severe problems, severe stresses. Some of the people who come from the West are running away from the police or family problems or they're loners who have no friends and they're bullied and they go to the Islamic State, they become Muslims, and life is perfect.

These are credible reasons. I'm not saying that these are all unrealistic reasons. For the people who go do this, they are starting life over again, and it's very appealing.

So the issue is not what is ISIS. The issue is, why are conditions so difficult in prevailing Arab societies, and some Western societies where Arabs are not assimilated or are abused or whatever?

We see the response. Look at the governors in the United States saying "We don't want any Muslims, we don't want refugees."

Why are these conditions allowed to get so bad that something like the Islamic State is the response?

JOANNE MYERS: On that million-dollar question, I want to thank you so much for answering so many of the questions.

Audio

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