

THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON
AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

MIDDLE EAST:
FOCUS IRAN



ROUNDTABLE REPORT

NEW YORK CITY

June 2, 2015

Our Mission

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) was founded in 1974 by Professor Hans J. Morgenthau and others. It is a nonprofit activist think tank dedicated to the resolution of conflicts that threaten U.S. interests. Toward that end, the NCAFP identifies, articulates, and helps advance American foreign policy interests from a nonpartisan perspective within the framework of political realism.

American foreign policy interests include:

- preserving and strengthening national security;
- supporting countries committed to the values and the practice of political, religious, and cultural pluralism;
- improving U.S. relations with the developed and developing worlds;
- advancing human rights;
- encouraging realistic arms control agreements;
- curbing the proliferation of nuclear and other unconventional weapons;
- promoting an open and global economy.

An important part of the activity of the NCAFP is Track I½ and Track II diplomacy. Such closed-door and off-the-record endeavors provide unique opportunities for senior U.S. and foreign officials, think tank experts, and scholars to engage in discussions designed to defuse conflict, build confidence, and resolve problems.

Believing that an informed public is vital to a democratic society, the National Committee offers educational programs that address security challenges facing the United States and publishes a variety of publications, including its bimonthly journal, *American Foreign Policy Interests*, that present keen analyses of all aspects of American foreign policy.



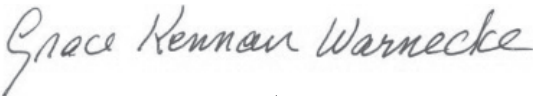
Dear Reader:

The lands from the Levant to the Hindu Kush are known as the cradle of civilization. However, recent events make one wonder if the cradle is cracking. The hubris of generations of European cartographers is coming home to roost. Some artificial borders are collapsing and religious schism in Islam has flared anew, abetted by the means of twenty-first-century technology.

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy's (NCAFP) Middle East roundtable, held on June 2, 2015 and featuring Middle East expert Amir Taheri, journalist Judith Miller and Professor Osama Abi-Mershed, concentrated on the historical roots of conflict in the Middle East, particularly important in this unstable time. Participants vigorously debated points of view on the upcoming Iran nuclear deal, among a host of other topics. Discussion was lively and reflected the concerns and interests of the participants. A summary of the proceedings follows here.

The NCAFP wants to thank all the speakers and conference participants for their informative presentations and thought-provoking ideas. In addition, the NCAFP would like to thank Mutual of America; Kenneth J. Bialkin, Esq.; The Eugenie Fromer Endowment; Mrs. Sheila Johnson Robbins, Ms. Nina Rosenwald; and the George D. Schwab Family Fund for their support. An especially warm thanks goes to Dr. George Schwab, President Emeritus of NCAFP, for organizing this program.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Grace Kennan Warnecke". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid and legible.

Grace Kennan Warnecke
Chairman of the Board
NCAFP

First Presenter

The so-called Islamic State is nothing new, either regionally or historically. With concepts and assumptions deeply rooted in Islam, such Islamic radicalism appears, and then disappears, only to reappear in a different form. Those opposing the militant and militaristic actions of radical Islam have used various tactics to subdue or contain it.

We're repeating some of the mistakes made in earlier centuries and would do well to consider the ideological basis of ISIS. The Quran is basically divided into two parts with two opposed worldviews. The earlier, written when Islam was extremely small and powerless, is compassionate and warns against worldliness; the latter, written when Islam had many adherents and considerable power, turns its attention to affairs of state—that is, of governance.

Islam's and the Quran's lack of certainty on how to live in the world as a good Muslim eventually led to schism—with the division into Sunni and Shia, with enmity between the two (and toward the West) still being acted out on today's world stage.

ISIS, for all its claims to purity, is without a doubt syncretic—borrowing from Western political thought, military tactics, legislative and organizational forms—even monetary concepts.

From the beginning of colonial incursions in the Middle East, the colonial powers and those conquered have been at cross-purposes—each unable to truly comprehend the other because their concepts of the world and the conclusions drawn about motivation and the results of actions were so different.

ISIS is gaining ground, successfully recruiting and we, who know the location of their strongholds, refuse to attack. And why do we refuse? Because we wage warfare with rules, observing The Hague and Geneva conventions—and they do not. In the Middle East and much of the Muslim world, political ideology and religion have converged. This convergence began with the Mongol invasion in the early thirteenth century. The invaders were so successful that Islam had to change focus to survive; accordingly, emphasis shifted and solidified on Muslim rulers who were successful in battle, not on those who faithfully followed original tenets. Those living in today's Middle East, while often opposing ISIS's tactics, still hold some sympathy for them. So, it's warfare with rules against warfare without rules. President Obama says we cannot bomb ISIS strongholds because of possible civilian casualties. ISIS ideology, however, is based on the concept of *tatarus*—which allows for the sacrifice of the innocent if it redounds to the glory of Islam. The ideological battle must be joined, not by the West, but from within the Middle East itself—most forcefully by the theologians.

The West, specifically the United States, is needed for military leadership—which is currently lacking.

Remember, the Arab Muslim world views other cultures and governments work through their own lens and draw conclusions accordingly. Their assumptions are not our assumptions. We must integrate into our dealings with the Muslim world and with ISIS that their worldview—their conceptions of cause and effect, of social and political organization—differs both in kind and in degree from those of the West and not talk past each other. Whatever understandings we do reach, strict attention must be given to making sure that all parties are in agreement on what is actually meant and what actions will actually be taken.

Question

1. About terminology. Is it fair to say that ISIS is primarily Sunni-based? If so, where do the Shia stand as far as Sunnis are concerned? If ISIS is Sunni-based, not all Sunnis favor ISIS. So everybody's against ISIS and the Shias are against the Sunni. How do you sort it out? Who knows who is for what and who wants what? What is the legitimacy of the claim of the so-called caliph in Benghazi to being the caliph? Could you fit that in to your structure?

Answer: Minorities are concerned about the theological roots of ISIS. They appear to be in one of the four schools of Sunnis—the Hanbali school, the smallest of the Sunni schools. Even within the Sunni world, theologically they are a very small minority. A small, organized, armed, motivated minority in almost any context can impose its will on the majority. So we cannot go by democratic rules of majority-minority. If free elections were held anywhere in the Muslim world, ISIS would gather maybe 10 percent of the votes—but this is neither here nor there.

Shiites, theoretically, are opposed to all forms of Sunnism. In terms of politics and confrontation with other civilizations, it really doesn't matter in the long run. Looking at the map of the Muslim world, it's all in green and you think it's all the same—it's not. There are hundreds of different kinds of Muslims; everyone thinking the other is a heretic. It doesn't matter. Always somebody comes with brutal force, seizes power, and the rest fall in line. At the moment, even the Shiites are not making a big propaganda war against ISIS because they think that ISIS is showing Islam as a winner and the triumph of Islam. Don't count much on this Shia-Sunni business.

Second Presenter

What of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the prospects for any kind of breakthrough? It's never going to happen.

The Middle East peace process is never going to die nor will it achieve anything—at least in the next two years of the Obama presidency. Another issue is the paralysis of the Palestinians. And, finally, regional trends.

No one is going to persuade American Jews that this administration has Israel's back. Although we continue to see extraordinary cooperation on the military-security side between Israel and the Pentagon, we don't see comparable closeness or even confluence of perception of interests on the political side between Israeli and American leaders.

Israelis are probably at least as divided as Americans around how to respond to the various aspects of the Middle East. However, I do think that Netanyahu's tenacious and largely successful pursuit of political goals is consistently underestimated by American analysts.

Let's look at the Palestinian side: Hamas and the PA are each struggling for supremacy. United Palestinian national movement? None. Before we talk about peace between Israelis and Palestinians, we should talk about peace within the Palestinian camp, which is unlikely. Currently, the Palestinians lack consensus even on that one thing that they all used to agree on: what a Palestinian state would more or less look like.

Hamas is under enormous pressure from ISIS. Hamas wants to take over Palestine; it wants to get rid of Abbas far more than it wants to get rid of Israel. What Hamas wants is the removal of economic pressures. Egypt and Israel are now squeezing Hamas. The Palestinians are not likely to get their act together.

Netanyahu is thinking about possible definitions of settlement borders or exchange for territory swap—not going to happen. Don't waste time on the French and their possible peace process or the UN resolutions—they are going nowhere.

The peace process: you can get in but you can never get out. It's just a pretense. What I really want to talk about are the regional factors because of their effect on the process.

The regional factors mitigate against any kind of breakthrough. The Middle East is disintegrating. ISIS now controls 50 percent of Syria. Should Assad go, which I believe would be a very dangerous outcome, ISIS will be able to claim Damascus as the center of their caliphate—a very, very serious development for the United States and its allies—and for Israel. And for the Palestinians.

The country most at risk at the moment, apart from those that have already virtually disintegrated, is Iraq. Libya has no people and lots and lots of oil resources that are being fought over by ISIS, a dozen different Islamic groups, a remnant of a government—which the West recognizes even though no one else does. Yemen—a complete catastrophe.

We have both a Gulf completely exposed and itself in play. The third Saudi dynasty understands that the Mideast is under the greatest threat ever; they're very worried about how to keep ISIS at bay and how they're going to survive.

With all the regional turmoil, Palestinian issues and problems fall off the radar; once again, Israel and Saudi Arabia find common ground: the need to stop an Iranian-U.S. deal. Iran has supported Hamas. I think we're in a years-long period of extraordinary instability. I ask the critics of Israel, given the turmoil in the Middle East: Why would you even think about making a deal on Palestine with a divided Palestinian entity and the prospect of Iranian hegemony assertiveness in the Middle East?

The Iran-U.S. nuclear deal is going to happen. Obama is absolutely committed to it, seeing it as a way of trying to contain Iran's nuclear program and to buy some time, to set back Iran's nuclear program, to stop proliferation in the Middle East. I think it's going to have the opposite effect.

What does a U.S.-Iranian deal mean? What does a nuclear deal mean for Israel? It buys some time.

With the region in such chaos, with so many fires burning, the Palestinian-Israeli issue has receded—the only place it has not receded is on the American campus and at the UN. I'm a pessimist about the region. I see ISIS as the immediate threat and an enemy in terms of homeland security, but Iran is an even greater and more tenacious and durable threat to U.S. interests in the region. Both must be contained. You can't focus on any of that if you're also trying to make peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

I'm amazed that we continue to talk about the peace process given what's happening in the region. If I were a Palestinian, I would get a job or a college education in any place outside of the region because things are looking very, very bleak. Many opportunities were made available to Arafat; those opportunities were rejected. Now the world has moved on, though not to a better place.

Questions

1. In 1995 I had the opportunity to talk to King Hussein extensively at a time of great tension between Israel and Jordan. He said that despite what was going on,

we are constantly in touch with the Israelis, and we do not want to have an independent Palestinian state. Imagine if a Palestinian state were to fall into the hands of extremists, it's not only going to destabilize Israel and Jordan, it's going to destabilize the entire region.

Answer: I really admired and miss King Hussein. Given the pressures Jordan is under, it's holding up pretty well. The present king is not his father. Jordan's survival at this point is a kind of minor desert miracle given the pressures of Iraq, the Palestinian internal mess, and the overwhelming population pressures. King Hussein's one mistake was his infatuation with Saddam Hussein; he really thought of Saddam Hussein as a kind of natural leader for the region. It was a miscalculation he made not once, but twice—and each time his country paid a very dear price.

2. What do you make of all this European sort of hanky-panky about recognizing a Palestinian state—is that harmful? Where does that fit in? It sounds as if you think this Iran deal might actually be a thing?

Answer: I'm not that worried about the European disinvestment and isolation movement, because they have their own problems. What we saw with the Polish elections, the rise of the right, was completely unanticipated. We're going to see this again and again throughout Europe. Problems include the lack of growth; Grexit now Brexit. France wants to play a role; fine, let them try. If I were Barack Obama, I would love to hand the Israeli-Palestine problem to the French.

I'm much more worried about the drift in the U.S. of the Democratic Party and the Democratic left. I'm more worried about young people who don't see a difference between Israel and the surrounding states. I'm much more focused on what I see on the campuses because that is the future. So I'm more worried about the trend I see in America than I am about Europe. I really do believe that Europeans are in for a very rough and dangerous time and it will absorb them.

The Iran deal. I thought the temporary agreement was a good deal; I think I've been proven right. Yes, they have cheated—the Iranians will always cheat if they can get away with it. But I think it has been successful in many respects.

We have a lot more information now about places we used to speculate about. We are also having conversations with a different range of Iranians than ever before. I would like to endorse a good nuclear deal. My concern is that the community in which I live, which is a non-proliferation world, is pretty evenly divided about the deal we see shaping up.

The French have said that they would not approve a deal that had military sites and other sensitive sites off the table. Inspectors would have to be able to go anywhere at any time under the advanced protocol that the Iranians would be required to sign. I have heard Vice President Biden say there would be no deal if military sites were not on the table.

The issue is how do you define a military site, what's the mechanism for securing access to this site? I will support this deal if I think it can be verified. I want to wait and see what this deal looks like. The pressure to denounce something we haven't seen strikes me as rather remarkable. This deal will *not* change Iranian behavior—we will have to continue to observe and counter Iranian moves in the region.

The Iranians still want to be a hegemon, to reclaim what they consider to be their natural place in the region. What I am expecting from the nuclear deal is the

purchase of ten years of non-progress. If we can get that, I think it's worth getting. If we can get that, I'm willing to do it provided such a deal can be verified. I'm just not certain, given what the ayatollah himself has said, that it's doable. This is a very dangerous negotiation for the United States because the Obama administration wants the deal so desperately. Why not just give this a try—if we can rest assured that this deal will not trigger exactly the opposite effect of what we are all aiming for.

People say that if we don't get a deal, we're going to have a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. I think even if we get a deal, we're likely to have that. Will the Saudi government listen to the U.S. regarding nuclear ambitions? They won't believe this administration. But we have a chance with the next. In the field of foreign policy, Barack Obama can do a lot of damage in the next two years—or could exercise greater leadership. That's what an arms race will depend on. But to try to buy some time for Iran, it's worth doing the deal if the price is not too high.

3. I'd like to press you on the difference between prohibition and verification. The deal, as I understand it, is that we will offer Iran the ability for 10 or 15 years to continue to work on developing a nuclear program, provided verification, inspection, and access are accorded the international community. I believe this is what the Obama administration is now putting forward. If it's verification you're seeking, verification that they're standing by their promise not to develop a bomb.

Verification will be unacceptable to most of the Arab world and most of the rest of the world—who want to develop their own nuclear access. Verification is going to keep the race going without control. I think verification is simply a ride into the sunset expecting the sun never to set. I beg to differ with the optimism you show that maybe the king will die, the dog will die, and maybe I'll teach the dog to speak. I think there is a naïveté in adopting the verification route because you cannot trust the Iranians to keep a promise and that's what verification would mean. That's why I respectfully think you've got the wrong idea.

Answer: I think we need to wait and see what this agreement looks like. I believe in inspections and know their limitations very well. If the Iranians continue to be members of IAEA, if they sign on to the advance protocol, it would be very, very hard for them to develop whole new facilities. It is almost impossible for any verification method to stop them from doing research that can be applied militarily to perfect warheads. I'm certainly not naïve about the Iranians. What about their biological weapons program, which everybody has forgotten about. The Iranians are brilliant biologists and chemists and they continue to do work in this area.

Here's where I disagree: the French did not say they would not accept verification. They said military sites had to be included in verification. Biden and the president have said the same thing. The ayatollah has said that. Now, it was interesting to me that the ayatollah said that because if it's a bargaining position, you probably wouldn't want the supreme leader to say it. When he said that, I realized that there's a hitch in these talks—something else is going on. They want something; I think they can get around it by how they define military sites or what they designate as military sites. This is not an insurmountable problem.

You cannot expect this agreement to mean that Iran will give up its nuclear aspirations. No arms control agreement does that. What does arms control do? A very limited and vital thing: buys time until the dog talks, the king dies, or the regime is changed. Many things can happen in the region in the next ten years.

Iran has a very polyglot population, with incredible internal pressures that they've

managed, unfortunately, far better than I thought they were going to. They've shown a remarkable pragmatism and ability to adapt. And we must do the same. Arms control can buy us some time if the agreement is verifiable.

Iran's rulers realize they have to make a huge concession to get some of the sanctions lifted. We have to remind ourselves in negotiations—and this is why I don't trust Obama's negotiating team—that they need this deal as much as, if not more, than we do. If we would tell ourselves that, we would be stronger negotiators than we are.

What is the alternative? Physically bombing Iran? That would give the regime, 70 percent of whose people want the government to go away and want the mullahs out of their lives, a legitimacy for the rest of our natural lives. A military strike on Iran would assure the survival of this regime whether or not it sets back their nuclear program. That's why I'm opposed to it. It's because it will not advance our goal of getting rid of the theocracy there.

4. Tony Blair resigned as supposed peacemaker and I saw him saying on British TV that he has managed to encourage a lot of investment in the Palestinian areas and the economy is doing well in the "occupied" territories. What is the situation there?

Answer: I don't know. I don't know what he's really referring to. The last time I was in Gaza it was a wreck. My understanding is it's pretty dire. The middle class—the privileged class was doing well. The only good news I've heard is from Rawabi—the Israelis turned on the water and those middle-class houses in a very beautifully planned community are being snapped up. People clearly have cash, but that's so Arab. The same thing happened in Jordan: people always buy apartments. I don't really know enough at this point because I haven't been back to the West Bank in a year.

First presenter: I hear conflicting reports, but it seems that they are not doing so badly in the West Bank—compared with other Arab countries economically speaking.

Answer (Second presenter): They don't measure themselves against other Arab countries, they measure themselves against Israel. The expectations are so great. My sense is that the water problems, the kleptocracy continues, the theft; apparently Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation continues but the key is economics. But politics often trump economics.

I admire Tony Blair, but I think his tenure in this job was beyond him. There was just too much going on in the region. His conflation of his private and his personal dealings was really unsavory and it didn't inspire confidence in the region. Blair is supposed to be advancing the peace process, but he's raising money for his private foundation from the Qataris. This is almost Arab-style politics. We've become Arabs. I think we should have different and better standards.

5. I feel we've lost sight in this discussion of the economic longer-term problems of OPEC. A number of these countries are running negative GNP, the price of oil at \$60–65. They need \$100 oil to break even. I think a lot of the political talk we're getting is they don't discuss this. I feel that they are going to shrink economically, become less important in the world. America, at any time they want to, can open the spigots and produce oil, let alone natural gas, which is going to be the future, any way you want to look at it, and solar as well. Could you comment on that?

Answer: Economics are key, but look at the region. I don't think what's really happening politically is a result of economic pressures. The price of oil is probably more important for Russia and Putin's prospects than the Saudis—who clearly could change it tomorrow if they wanted to. They choose not to because they are trying to achieve a different goal.

This is one of those instances where politics masquerading as religion has come to the fore. I see the region as in a kind of meltdown comparable to what happened to the caliphate after the collapse of Istanbul. I think we are in one of these huge transformational periods; I don't see half of these countries existing as we know them today in 10 years. These states seem very strong, but actually they're not. They are built on nothing.

When I think of how fast Libya disintegrated—in part because President Obama decided to step away; that is a prescription for absolute disaster in the region. What I see happening in the region is so transformational from a historic standpoint that I don't think a rise in the price of oil is going to save them or stabilize them.

6. We can get a settlement of a peace thing, we can buy 10 years. In 10 years, I think some of these countries are going to have major economic problems—which could cause war or other battles that we are not anticipating.

Answer: It's hard to see things getting much worse, but it's the Middle East so they probably will. The one I worry about right now is Syria. Nothing can be done about Iraq until some way is found to deal with the Syria problem and the ISIS problem in Syria. I also worry about Libya—all that space and all that oil. Who controls it will be important.

We haven't talked about Turkey. Strangely absent from the scene and very important economically, Turkey could be a much more assertive player than it has been in this whole drama, but it's been mired in internal problems. The role of Turkey is very important and very little explored by analysts. Erdogan is in trouble precisely because of economic reasons. We write about the politics, the repression, what's happening to women, what's happening to journalists—the real problem is their slowing economy, which we don't see any way to revive under the modern, enlightened, Obama-approved Islamist regime.

7. Could you comment on the Russian factor? They seem to be redefining their geopolitical interests in a very anti-American way; how is that playing out in the Middle East?

Answer: Putin's one foray, when it really mattered, was to immediately say to the Iranians, "Sure, we'll sell you S300s. No problem." Extremely unhelpful from someone the administration has bent over backwards to not antagonize precisely to get the Iranian deal. We've sacrificed Ukraine—pretty much made clear that we're not going to do anything. We love to personalize things: "The problem is Putin." I think the problem is probably that Putin reflects Russia. Once again, this is a historic play out of the huge psychological blow of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the defeat by the West. They refuse to accept that.

Russia is a third-rate country with thousands of nuclear weapons still and an ability to do enormous damage. I don't blame Obama for trying to massage and counter them. I blame him for how he's gone about it and the results. He's just not taken seriously by anybody—neither respected by friends nor feared by foes. A

very dangerous place for the United States to be. I suspect that the next president will move to change that. Because America's absence from the stage is just so destabilizing; it leads people to make miscalculations or calculations that prove correct.

Putin assessed what the United States and NATO would do about Ukraine and he was accurate. But the economic problems are so overwhelming there that eventually they are going to start to catch up with them. The sanctions policy over time has exerted enormous pressure. They want sanctions removed. That's the only lever we have at the moment.

We tend to think about the nuclear problem, talk about arms control as having been solved with the collapse of the Soviet Union. We've made tremendous progress. I worry far less than I did five or ten years ago about loose nukes, about loose materiel. A small investment in an arms control agreement with a very difficult partner has paid off big time.

Third Presenter

My brief talk is going to build in significant ways on our first presenter's observations.

One of the main differences of opinion about sectarian tensions in the Middle East is their origins: Are they ancient or contemporary? Some believe that the region's continuing sectarian polarization is a reigniting of a centuries-old conflict between Sunnism and Shiism. Others consider this polarization to be the by-product of very recent geopolitical concerns and calculations.

This debate has significant implications for how we understand the current regional context. But these two viewpoints should not be seen as mutually exclusive. I would like to suggest three talking points: 1) in its origins and essence, the Sunni-Shia divide is a political dispute; only over the course of centuries has each elaborated distinct theological and religious arguments to buttress their political positions and contentions; 2) the political claims separating Sunnis and Shias since the earliest days continue to exert a vital ideological pull and are informing and nurturing the current sectarian conflict; 3) that in historical terms, the recent round of intra-Muslim strife is not unprecedented; the current geopolitical context of the Middle East is showing parallels with past episodes in the region's history.

Some analysts consider the current conflict to be the "New Middle East Cold War"; I don't think this comparison is highly convincing. The first presenter's reference to the Mongols was germane—I think we have many stronger parallels with the context of the late-thirteenth century when the Muslim world underwent a very forceful Sunni resurgence—just as we're seeing today. That Sunni revival accomplished three things: 1) redrew the region's geopolitical map; 2) fundamentally transformed Islam's foundational concepts of political authority and legitimacy; 3) generated ideological arguments that continue to reverberate and operate.

The initial schism between Sunni and Shia Islam was not simply a quarrel about who was entitled to succeed the Prophet Mohammed—it actually led to very distinct political visions of Muslim polity. So, one school of thought, the majority tendency, acknowledged the uniqueness of Mohammed's leadership. He was the last messenger of God, personifying exemplary spiritual and moral qualities. He was both the religious and the political leader of the Muslim community, the *umma*. The term used was "imam." He was the imam of the Muslim *umma*. All his political successors,

however, were mere mortals. For their chosen title, his successors took *khalifat rasul Allah* (“caliph” derives from this title), the deputy of the messenger of God.

Members of this faction became known as the *ahl as-sunnah al-nabawiya*, the advocates of the prophetic tradition. The minority believed that to preserve Mohammed’s political vision, the mantle of authority had to pass to his immediate relatives—to his cousin and son-in-law, Ali Ibn Abi Talib. Members of this faction became known as the partisans of Ali, *shiat Ali*. It’s important to note that the imamate of the Shiites and the Sunnis does not designate the same executive political office.

The imamate tends to embody a maximalist concept of leadership, subsuming the political realm to ritual. The caliphate was strictly temporal, deriving its legitimacy from its adherence to the traditions, or the “Sunna,” of Mohammed. Here, the traditionalists prevailed, with Mohammed being succeeded by one of his companions, Abu Bakr, whose caliphate was recognized to the detriment of members of Mohammed’s family—specifically Ali. Ali’s partisans continued to contest the outcome and mobilized to restore the imamate to the house of Mohammed.

During the next generation, Ali and his descendants were systematically eliminated by Sunni factions; the murder of Hussein, Ali’s son, in October 680, marks the definitive break between Shiism and Sunnism.

As government repression continued to drive Shiite communities underground, it also pushed them into new political and theological orientations. The Shiite political and theological leaders had to resolve the following: If the presence of the imam was indispensable to the integrity of the divine plan, and yet government agents were eliminating every individual who claimed descent from Ali, then how was the long-term survival of the Shiite community to be assured? They eventually elaborated the doctrine of occultation—the imamate was suspended and the descendants of Mohammed went into occultation, ultimately to return as the awaited messiah on judgment day and establish true Islam and universal justice.

This doctrine of occultation had latent revolutionary potential because it conditioned the end of worldly suffering and justice on the anticipated return of the messiah and also called for moral and charismatic leadership that could transform any political grievance into a potent millenarian uprising. And so it did between the eighth and the tenth centuries, when the mobilizing power of Shiite concepts of social equity and justice was demonstrated on several occasions. The Shiites established several separate states.

Keep in mind that these alternative Shiite states challenged Sunni ideas of political authority. The ninth to the eleventh centuries were Shiite centuries, with Sunni political and religious power waning. When the Abuyyid dynasty captured Baghdad in 986, when the Fatimids of North Africa captured and conquered Egypt in 969, the days of the Sunni caliphate seemed numbered.

By 1000, the only remaining center of Sunni power was Cordoba in Spain. The caliph barely had authority in his own palace. Remember also that the Fatimids, aside from conquering Egypt (the wealthiest province), had conquered the Hijaz and Palestine. They, a Shiite dynasty, controlled the three holiest shrines of Islam: Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. Within two centuries, all of the dominant Shiite polities that extended from Egypt to Iran had been extinguished by a powerful Sunni resurgence initiated by latest converts to Islam—the Seljuk Turks of Central Asia.

Between 1054 and 1260, the Seljuks and their successor dynasties overthrew the Shiite imamates in Iran, Iraq, and Egypt, eliminated the Crusader states in Palestine and Syria, and decisively halted the Mongols' westward expansion.

What is the connection between these historical chapters and the current situation in the Middle East? How are the ideological references of history playing into the mindset of present-day inhabitants? Geopolitically, the Muslim world's fragmented landscape of the twelfth century is reflected in many of the region's current features—with Israel occupying the same space as the Crusader kingdoms and representing the same threat. Increasingly since 2003, the occupation of Iraq has been equated with the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258. The subjecting of Iraq to the benefit of Shiite communities has been compared with the Mongol destruction of Sunni supremacy, followed by Iran's increasing influence in the region—which is also evoking the days when those Shiite dynasties held sway over Iraq and the Persian Gulf.

We seem to be on the threshold of a second Sunni revival equal to the centuries-earlier one. The parallel context: political fragmentation, rising sectarian conflict, and foreign invasion and occupation. In this context have occurred important ideological and theological retrenchments within Sunni Islam, the repercussions of which can also be felt in the current conflicts in the region.

Following 1260, intellectual debates on the kind of political authority entitled to govern the Muslim *umma* shifted from the conventional theme of religious legitimacy to one of military efficacy and sanction by force. In the course of the twelfth century, Sunni theologians (specifically those belonging to the Hanbali school) and jurists argued that Muslim society owed its preservation not to the political and spiritual legitimacy of its rulers, but to their military prowess. They began to elaborate theories of political obedience that until then had been relatively alien to the Islamic rhetoric, justifying government based on military force and power. One of the more prominent jurists, Hanbali Ibn Taymiyyah (still highly influential in Salafi and Hanbali circles), claimed that the survival of Islam demanded strong and resolute, rather than upright and pious, leaders.

The term “sultan” begins a metamorphosis during this period. Up to this point, the sultan was the political subordinate of the caliph. He did not formulate policy; he only oversaw its implementation. The sultan did not fulfill any religious functions—he was primarily a military governor and tax collector. By the twelfth century, the sultan had effectively become superior to the caliph in political terms. Sunni jurists argued that the Muslim community could neither survive the Shiite challenges nor function adequately without the political will and the military protection of the sultan. Muslims, therefore, had to shift their allegiance and owe their greatest loyalty to the sultan, regardless of the manner in which the sultan had acceded to power.

Thus, sultans were allowed to arrogate to themselves the right to declare jihad. Until the twelfth century, the act of declaring a holy war was the exclusive prerogative of the caliph. The religious authorities of the day argued that in these times of great calamity for the Muslim world the effectiveness of the sultan in providing security trumped any significant concern about procedural legality or legitimacy.

I want to return to my opening point: that the current regional conflicts are not driven by fundamental and unchanging characteristics within Islamic culture and history. I have tried to show in this brief comparison that changing historical conditions can give rise to politically expedient interpretations that are well within the cultural and ideological parameters of Islamic history. I believe that contemporary scholars are overly indulging in simplistic cultural debates about what constitutes true

or false Islam or whether Islam has been hijacked by radical extremists.

If we return to these chapters on which some of these ideological interpretations are being justified, we should be able to find more material explanations to both understand the specific historical circumstance in which the Middle East finds itself and we could be more constructive and more effective in addressing these historical questions.

ISIS has been referring to the caliphate and the Persian imamate as modes of mobilizing power. What is so interesting is how the so-called caliph of ISIS has achieved legitimacy—the mechanism seems to be very similar to the context of the thirteenth century where as long as you're an effective military ruler, then nothing is heard about your theological efficiency or authenticity.

What's missing in Sunni Islam is the concept that these are constructs. That these are not something found within Islam—but by material condition. By political expedience maybe a theological challenge can be mounted to the claims of al-Baghdadi. Any challenge to this must come from within the Sunni establishment.

Questions

1. Egypt has always been so important historically for Islam. Yet we haven't really mentioned Egypt extensively in the context of the Israel-Palestinian situation. In the contemporary world, money seems to be more important than religious leadership. So, the Saudis and the Gulf area, even though they certainly don't have experience, the very small countries, they don't have populations. And yet they have ascended to an important position. So, how would you evaluate this within the larger perspective?

Is the question about the influence of the Gulf kingdoms?

Yes, as opposed to Egypt and the traditional authority.

Answer: I think Egypt has been pretty much sidelined over the last two years. Egypt's history is a crystallization of the whole secular movement in the Arab world—the “Arab Spring,” which has been marginalized, if not entirely deflated.

Egypt has now returned to an authoritarian regime with very local concerns; it is trying to create a bastion of authoritarianism against Libya, maybe against democracy in Tunisia, and playing a role of synchronizing with Israel a policy toward Palestinian militants—specifically Hamas.

At one point after 2010–2011, with the removal of Mubarak, the Arab world believed that Egypt was going to retake its historic position. Egypt has been sidelined from Arab politics with the Camp David accords; we did think after 2011 that the supremacy of this Arabist state, Egypt, would be reinforced. Did not happen. More important, the Gulf States have become the centers of the counterrevolution. We have individuals there with the GDP of a state influencing events and funding certain movements. Individuals are the bulwark against the counterrevolution, making sure that the hint of democratic aspirations are squelched—one of their means is through Islamist channels, funding the Muslim Brotherhood, etc. ISIS has been benefiting from some of these donations. Tunisia seems to be one country that we need to keep an eye on.

2. Regarding the development of law within Islam, do you see differences between the way the Sunnis and the Shiites treat sharia law?

Answer: Absolutely, but that's a very difficult question to answer in a short time. Shiism is really the fifth school of Muslim law after the Maliki, Hanbali, Shafa'i, and Hanafi. In Islamic law there are certain sources: the Quran and the Hadith and the Sunna. And Shiites, aside from Mohammed, and there's also the Sunna, or the traditions of the imams. Believe in the succession of twelve imams? You're of the Imami School. Believe in seven imams? You're of the Ismaili School. They're different ways of looking at precedent to adjudicate a contextual issue.

3. The National Committee has been toiling in these vineyards for many years. Many years ago the point was made that there has been no [equivalent to the Protestant] Reformation [within Islam]. Some of what you've talked about is tantamount to a reformation within the different areas of faith—or is that something that can and will ultimately happen? What are the prospects for a reformation?

Answer: Islam, like all other systems of belief, is not a closed system. It does not exist unchanging over time—throughout history it has been transformed by political and material considerations and contexts, whether geopolitical or economic or cultural.

I used the thirteenth century as an example of how Islamic thinking was transformed in order to address real concerns. For a reformation to happen, the material conditions—social, economic, cultural, educational, ideological—would all need to be conducive. One way to look at ISIS is that it is a creation of a particular context. Many consider ISIS to be a reformation movement and see it as the product of a particular context—which to me looks like the Muslim world in the thirteenth century. It yields political fragmentation, sectarian cleavages, foreign occupation and domination and invasions. If you think that reformation doesn't have to be liberal all the time—it could be a retrenchment.

4. Could you comment on the role of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood within ISIS? Are they involved, are they represented? Are their goals the same?

Answer: The Muslim Brotherhood's position has shifted post-Morsi. The Muslim Brotherhood is also a way for the Gulf States to support Islamist movements that are not as extreme as is ISIS. The group is being presented as a gentler Islamist organization compared with the extreme ISIS. The Muslim Brotherhood is not confined to Egypt—it's a worldwide movement, very strong in the United States and Europe. They want to appear to be like a social democracy is to communism.

It is an antechamber for those who want to become Islamists. They go there and it's a soft kind of Islam—and then they end up in ISIS. All five theologians of ISIS came from the Muslim Brotherhood. So, it's a factory that produces this kind of mindset.

5. If history is any guide, what is the fate of ISIS? To have traction and resonance, Sunni theological challenges are required. Is this just a question of the need for more time to pass or are other impediments in the way to a Sunni alternative theology? Saudi Arabia has enough money to easily finance clerics who could take on ISIS. Why isn't it happening?

Answer: A very difficult question. The Saudi authorities are going to rethink their support for ISIS. But that's all tied up with the regime in Damascus.

Is it possible to deal with ISIS without also dealing with the regime in Damascus? That's where the foreign policy of the United States is really inconsistent. The

fall of Damascus would be a terrible thing for the United States, but the perseverance of that regime in Damascus is also. And what of the role Hezbollah is playing in Damascus?

We have to see ISIS as three components working together. ISIS is currently in the process of state-making—redrawing the maps of the region and creating a state. With institutions, with currency, with postal—they also have foreign relations with some other countries. The Islamic State is being established; what the future holds is a military question.

ISIS is having a lot of success on the ground and has some popular support. There's also a lot of dissent and a lot of enmity toward ISIS—but those factions are not getting the support. Neither the U.S. nor Europe is doing a good job of supporting opponents of ISIS. Remember, ISIS ideology is based on the concept of *tatarus*—the sacrifice of innocent Muslim civilians is good if it redounds to the glory of Islam. The West and the Middle East have two different mindsets.

Why is the secular trend in Arab politics not getting any attention or support? Why was there no Marshall Plan to support the democratic movements, to counter all the money coming from the Gulf that went to the Islamist candidates?

All these issues are way beyond my pay grade, but if I had Barack Obama in the room today, I would say, “Someone should tell you what you’re up against because I have an idea that you have no idea what you’re up against.”

First Presenter: May I add something about ISIS. It has great appeal. First, it is something new—against all the other models that have failed. There is a lot of corruption and much resentment against repressive regimes. Now you have something different. ISIS has created a police, a religious police, *hasba*, which has the authority to make sure people behave.

In this capital of the caliph in Raqqa, nobody dares to steal; there is food security. Pure Islamic justice is applied almost immediately—Islam has no prisons. So you are hanged, fined, mutilated, or forgiven. That's the end of it.

So, there are no prisons, but justice and security. ISIS is eliminating religious minorities. The only minority group they have tolerated so far are the Druze in Syria.

A pure Mohammedan Middle East, empty of unbelievers and the infidel, is being created. And it gives you a new life. Who is going to fight that? All the Arab regimes appear no better than ISIS in the eyes of most Arabs.

Third Presenter: Specifically with ISIS in Iraq, there are remnants of the old Ba’ath regime; the disenfranchised Sunnis constitute a very significant component of ISIS. Their main concern is simply fighting the spread of Shiism and the Shiite influence in Iraq.

First Presenter: When I go to Iraq I see the contrast. The Shiite areas, Najaf, Karbala, Basra, and so on, have really booming economies. Iraq is the only country in the Middle East that has economic growth. There are a thousand new businesses registered every month with the Ministry of Trade.

The four Sunni provinces have nothing. Nobody has invested in them, nobody has given them anything. The salaries of the army that General Petraeus had raised were cut off by Maliki. All the officers Petraeus had put in place were

kicked out by Maliki's men. So, of course, Arab Sunnis are resentful—they not only did not get a fair deal, but, for the first time in the history of Iraq, they are second-class citizens and marginalized.

As for Syria, a Sunni-majority country, it is ruled by force by a small Alawite minority. So we shouldn't think that ISIS is achieving victories because of their military genius. There is a constituency for their message.

SECOND SESSION

First Presenter: We are going to talk about Yemen, which is now dominating much of the headlines in the Middle East because of the very peculiar war raging there.

Yemen is located on the great Arabian Peninsula, on the Indian Ocean between the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea and bound in the south by the Gulf of Aden. Yemen is a geographic expression—not the name of a specific people or nation. As a so-called nation-state—it is neither.

Yemen is roughly the size of France, divided into five different segments. Currently, Yemen includes the six southern Arabian sultanates that were colonized by the British, plus the port of Aden. They were turned into South Yemen—The People's Democratic Republic of South Yemen. The two Yemens then united, making one Yemen, but in 1994, they were separated—there was a civil war. The northern Yemenis won the civil war and managed to reunite Yemen.

When you travel in this vast territory, you very quickly find out that it's really nothing more than a geographic expression. In the northwest, the majority are Zaidi Shiites, so that part of Yemen has a consistency and a unity. They speak, more or less, the same form of Arabic, they share the same religious faith, and their economy has the same basis.

In the rest of Yemen, the majority is Shafa'i Sunni; then there are, of course, many Hindus brought over by the British during their empire; there are Buddhists. In the past five to six years, Iran and Saudi Arabia started to focus on Yemen.

The reason: Yemen's strategic location—it could threaten navigation in the Gulf of Aden, the most active part of the Indian Ocean in international trade. It is also close to two very important choke points: Bab al Mandab, which connects to the Red Sea and then through the Red Sea to the Suez Canal and, on the other side, through the Gulf of Hawf and the island of Socotra, from which the Strait of Hormuz, another choke point, could be threatened.

In the 1960s and 1970s, South Yemen became the base for a communist group trying to conquer the Sultanate of Oman and make its way up to Ras Mosandum via the Strait of Hormuz on the Persian Gulf. Iran had to send an army to help crush this rebellion. When the United States normalized relations with China, the Chinese stopped helping the South Yemenis, who were these revolutionaries, and the whole thing collapsed. Then Iran started patronizing the president of Yemen, who was assassinated. His successor was also assassinated. The third, Ali Abdullah Salah, did manage to stabilize Yemen. For the first time, Yemen had a measure of stability and economic development. Of course, there was a lot of corruption, but the corruption was nothing comparable to that in other Arab countries. Ali Abdullah Salah also succeeded in resolving the long dispute with Saudi Arabia over their border by signing a treaty that, in effect, handed over the land the Saudis already occupied to

them. President Salah established relations with the United States and the Americans started pouring lots of money into Yemen in the name of fighting al-Qaeda. The United States at least contributed to an economic boom in Yemen.

The Saudis hoped to find a direct route to the Gulf of Aden thus avoiding the use of the Strait of Hormuz, which could be controlled by Iran very quickly and stop the export of Saudi oil altogether. The Saudi crown prince and the minister of defense decided to run oil pipelines from the Saudi oil fields through one of the southeastern Yemeni provinces. Accordingly, the Saudis encouraged the southern rebellion against President Salah, leading to a mini-civil war that Salah won because the United States refused to support the Saudis.

Then the Iranians jumped in—in the name of Shiite solidarity—and started establishing a network of influence in the Zaidi community in Yemen. Under the shah, Iran had been very involved in Yemen. The new Iranian regime revived an old scheme from the shah's time to establish a very strong Iranian presence in Yemen.

Yemen is the poorest Arab country in terms of GDP, but it's a curious country. All males from twelve upwards are all armed. They all walk as if they owned the world. They are very strong people because they were never dominated by anybody and they don't want anything from life except a plant called *qat*—a mildly narcotic thing. In the afternoon, they go in a room and they chew and they are happy. So, who wants money, who wants industry, who wants anything?

Qat has destroyed Yemeni agriculture. Yemen is on the edge of famine. So, you have two regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, getting involved in a war with no objective.

I recently asked Saudi leaders. "What is your objective?" They don't know. The same with the Iranians. You can't rule Yemen because everybody is armed and will kill you. Steal something in Yemen? Nothing to steal. Why would you go there? It's a huge mystery. Perhaps it is hubris. The Saudis saying, "This is my backyard, the Iranians should not intervene." The Iranians saying, "Historically, Yemen was our friend, we must be there."

We have this war that has the Saudis bombing Yemen but what do you bomb? Yemen has nothing to bomb. Iran, however, is trying to train a kind of alternative army for Yemen in the form of Hezbollah to repeat the Lebanese scenario. Lebanon is very small, Yemen is not. Lebanon is accessible to Iran through Syria, can be supplied and so on. Yemen is huge. If pro-Iranian fighters go to fight, they will get lost.

So, the Lebanon scheme of creating a state within a state won't work in Yemen. Yemen has 30 million poor, hungry people whom you cannot feed because you don't have any logistics. If you cannot supply your supporters, how do you send guns to them?

The present rulers of Iran don't understand that imperialism, like any other game in the world, has its own rules. If you don't know these rules, don't play. The Saudis cannot say, "Sorry we bombed you" and just forget about it and go away. They don't want to lose face. Iran can't do anything. The most they could do was to persuade Vladimir Putin to receive a delegation of the Houthi rebels of Yemen.

The pity of it all is that the United Nations, which was running the show in Yemen and the formula they had employed, was a good formula—for power sharing, for economic development, etc. Then the whole thing collapsed because

the United States just forgot about it—closing its embassy, repatriating its diplomats. A vacuum was created that nobody can fill except the major powers led by the United States. And, at the moment, it's not there.

So Yemen could face famine. Yemen could be divided into five, six different areas, at the moment there are five armed groups or factions controlling the different parts of the country. Or it could become like a big Somalia; of course, Somalia is next door, so you're in this whole part of the Indian Ocean becoming a pirate coastline.

Shipping, oil tankers, and other transport lines could be threatened. If you control the Gulf of Aden and the island of Socotra, in the context of adversarial relations, you could make life very difficult for your adversaries.

So, Yemen could become a festering sore in the whole of the peninsula. And there are the Somali pirates. Suddenly, you'll have something that can run out of anybody's control for many, many years—with people who are steeped in the culture of guerrilla warfare and who are very good fighters—they could make a lot of trouble.

Questions

1. What are the rules of imperialism?

Answer: For empires to come into being, they need to have a very established demography. Because you need to export population. The Iranian population is in decline. So, the first condition doesn't exist. The Iranian population is in decline despite the government's efforts in the past two years.

An empire exports capital and imports raw material. Yemen's only raw material is *qat*—you can't import anything from them and it doesn't have a market to import anything from Iran because Iran has nothing to export except oil. So that condition doesn't exist.

For a modern empire the sine qua non is a blue-water navy that can project power. Only the United States and Britain have a blue-water navy.

Finally, you need a very strong cultural message. For example, the main force of U.S. imperialism now is American culture—rock 'n' roll and hamburger and jeans and all the things of American technology. And Iran has nothing to offer in that sense. So, it would be best for the Iranian government to not entertain imperial dreams for the time being.

2. Could Iran possibly be wanting to export its own sort of tentacle geographic power around the oil fields and also to possibly have control of the Bab al Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz the way that China is trying to control the choke point in the South China Sea? Possibly with the Houthis as a proxy?

Answer: They may have the ambition, but you need to have some presence there. The Houthis can't control Yemen because they don't have the manpower. They could control, say, North Yemen, and maybe the Port of Hudaydah, the Port of Mokha, but that's all.

3. Is it the case that it's in the interest of the United States to curb Iran's path to a nuclear weapon? What are the considerations in your view? To attack now? If military intervention is inevitable, how would that be perceived in the region? What would be the reasons for and the reasons against?

Answer: One of the tactics the Obama administration has used is to reduce the choice between doing nothing and full-scale military war. Nobody wants full-scale military war.

What I am saying is go back to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Why don't you start by applying that? The UN is involved with Iran and there are a whole series of other treaties: the Nuclear Security Treaty, nuclear inspection treaties, the protocols.

About inspection—Iran is doing a song and dance about that, but U.S. sites, British sites are inspected all the time. This is standard operating procedure.

I heard that Henry Kissinger said that an agreement with Iran is necessary to persuade Iran to apply the NPT. This is unworkable; how can you negotiate case by case?

Iran is a signatory of NPT. It violated it. For years, it denied such violation. In 2002, they said, "We're sorry, we won't do it again." The IAEA said, "OK, you have to do these things to build confidence and trust." And they did those things for two years and then they just forget about it.

The choice is not let's go and invade Iran. Let's force Iran to abide by its signature, by international treaty. Or leave the NPT altogether.

Iran has created a surrealistic situation: the United States is negotiating and begging for special treatment for one of the signatories of the NPT. So they committed a crime, admitted to having committed a crime, and were condemned by the UN Security Council and the board of governors of the IAEA—suddenly, Iran wants to change the rules of the game altogether. When you ask President Obama, "Why did you look at it this way?" he replies, "I don't want to invade Iran."

Nobody asked you to invade Iran. It's not a question of invading Iran, it is a question of forcing Iran to choose whether it wants to be a member of the international community or not.

Iran is treated as if they are setting the tune. This is a very dangerous thing. But Americans are masters of turning the irrelevant into the main issue. For example, this bill, or whatever it is, a resolution passed by the Senate, but the president could veto it. What they don't realize is that what the U.S. and Iran are discussing is *not* a treaty between the U.S. and Iran. What they are doing now is working on a scheme devised to achieve three objectives: 1. Dupe and neutralize the U.S. Senate; 2. Make Netanyahu look ridiculous; 3. Present President Obama as a great peacemaker.

So the plan: Draft a lengthy (120–130 pages) UN resolution—so long that nobody will know what the whole thing is about.

Russia and the United States will jointly sponsor this resolution. No one will veto it, it is passed. What is the U.S. Senate going to do? It's not a treaty between the U.S. and a foreign country. It doesn't have to go to the Senate. The only thing is that the U.S. Senate would be able to pressure the administration to do this and/or that.

4. The argument that you've been making—apply it to the state of Israel. Does Netanyahu think that any deal that is arranged will threaten the security of Israel? What do you think are the realistic options?

Answer: Israel can, of course, bomb Iran, but what's the good of it without U.S. support, without international support? You bomb it, they rebuild it. Israel bombed Saddam Hussein's nuclear center and he started rebuilding it.

Fourth Presenter

I'm going to speak about the social damages visited on the Iranian people by the Khomeinist regime.

One of the things that the Iranian government has done from the very beginning has been to psychologically break down the will of the people. They have not been very successful. The Khomeinist regime by no means considers itself a nation-state. It's more a cause. It will never, especially now that ISIS is around, give in to any kind of a deal because they would lose face.

However, as these negotiations have been going on in Iran, a lot of Iranians are basically in the dark. So whatever they have been hearing through the grapevine or what the regime feeds them, a sort of excitement had been building up among Iranians inside Iran.

Forty-two percent of Iranians live on less than \$1 a day, that's 37 million people. Between 17 and 22 percent of Iranians suffer from extreme psychological disorders—which basically creates violent tendencies.

A major negative for Iran is the brain drain to the West. The more affluent get out and establish themselves elsewhere. Others claim refugee status and are granted asylum in various countries.

Inside Iran really horrific acts are taking place and nobody is paying attention. First: drug addiction. Iran shares a huge border with Afghanistan. Hezbollah is one of the biggest transporters of heroin worldwide; they are now connected to the narco-terrorists of Mexico

Before the revolution, Iran had methadone clinics; those have long been wiped out. The Khomeinist regime basically wants people to become disabled in a sense. So, now it's not only heroin, it's crystal meth. Giant parts of Tehran are given over to drugs—women, children, people of all ages and social conditions have basically become addicts.

The thing is that back in 2003, two brothers started this needle exchange program, they created triangular clinics. The Iranian regime arrested the brothers in 2008, shut down the clinics, and put the brothers in prison.

Second: AIDS is another rampant problem in Iran. We have 250 cases of full-blown AIDS reported every week. Iran is the third-highest AIDS country in the world. The disease has spread and many of those who are affected are also in prison.

Third: Prostitution. Women who have master's degrees cannot find jobs because many government offices are not hiring women. The private companies that do have women are pressured. So, basically what you have are educated women who are prostitutes, poor women who are prostitutes. Such prostitution is supported by the concept of temporary "marriages"—which can last anywhere from 1 hour to 99 years.

Question

1. Would you comment on the Islamic concept of temporary marriage?

Answer: It has nothing to do with the institution of marriage. What we're looking at is the desperation of the Iranian people. The next speaker will address the violent human rights abuses, the executions. The Khomeinist regime does everything it can to break down the psychological strength of the people. I do want to point out that the Iranian people continued to fight and continued to stand up to these guys and do whatever they can to respond.

Fifth Presenter

I witnessed the mass killings of Iranian military personnel and the heads of the Iranian regime under the shah. Now I work with Iranian refugees in Turkey, Iraq, Greece, Cyprus, and other countries. In working and helping Iranian refugees, I became aware of the systematic terror, torture, and abuse methods used by the Iranian regime to hunt down anyone practicing freedom of speech, expression, and assembly. I spoke with those who had been raped, crippled, shot, maimed by prison guards.

One refugee was a young Kurdish man who had been distributing pamphlets for the Kurdish Democratic Party. He was captured by the Revolutionary Guard and tortured. They broke all the bones in his left hand, shattered the bones in his right leg. His torture included sodomy by objects. When I met him in Turkey, he had significant disabilities, both mental and physical.

What I'm going to talk about is human rights violations in Iran. The Islamic Republic violates the rights of its citizens with a two-pronged assault. First, its judicial system utilizes revolutionary courts linked to interrogators in the interest of national security and eliminating any threat to the regime; predetermined sentences are dictated to the judges—clerics who studied Islamic sharia law. Second, government policies and police state practices are aimed at controlling and curtailing all aspects of citizens' free speech, expression, association, and freedom of movement. Women are attacked for showing their hair under their scarves. Police crack down on dress code violations, behavioral transgressions, such as public displays of affection. Sex reassignment operations as a cure for identified transsexuals and homosexuals. Prison sentences for Facebook postings and for participating in gatherings against the death penalty, limited economic opportunities for women and their segregation in the workplace.

The UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran has reported on human rights violations in Iran; the government's complete unaccountability, lack of transparency, and no fair trial standards.

Many executions go unreported—executions in public and by hanging. This has a very dehumanizing effect on those witnessing the execution. Also it is cruel, inhumane, and degrading.

The special rapporteur points to non-compliance of national laws with the government's international obligations. Iran has ratified five international human rights conventions and adheres to none. The Iranian judiciary imposes the death penalty even for crimes not described as "more serious" under international human rights law. The special rapporteur calls on the government to adhere to rule of law, investigate citizens' complaints, and bring human rights violators to justice. The independence of lawyers is also under attack and is being severely compromised. And the country's Bar Association has been gutted and made powerless.

An independent bar association and the ability to practice law independently provide indispensable advantages to the protection of human rights and access to

justice. Lacking these, all Iranian citizens are deprived of the right to fair trial, the right to counsel and a defense—all of which safeguard the public's human rights in the judicial process.

Questions

1. To what degree is there any will to fight among people?

Answer: None, not while there is Obama around. Because the Iranian people are now quite clear that Obama is not going, doesn't have it in him. He has said that the military option was off the table.

Now he's giving back all of the frozen assets of the Iranian people to the Khomeinist regime. If Iran makes any more headway in Iraq, they'll have the Iraqi oil fields. They don't have any refineries in Iran, but they don't care because they are being given back 80 billion dollars—which belongs to the Iranian people.

2. What do you think the mood is? Would you characterize it as desperation or resignation or indifference or what?

Answer: It's not indifference—more desperation and resignation.

First Presenter

As we come out of this session, we have a picture of the region in turmoil, suffering from a number of fault lines. The share of bad news is bigger this year than last year. But there is still some good news. People who are resisting in all the countries, people are fighting in all the countries.

Possibly the Muslim world must pass through this civil war of ideas before it can solve its problems. As long as the Muslim world has not solved problems within itself, it cannot solve the problems with anybody outside. So, improved relations between the United States and Iran are not going to happen unless relations improve between the Iranian government and the Iranian people.

Improved relations between Israel and the Palestinians? First improved relations are needed between the Palestinians themselves. More Palestinians are in Hamas' jail than in Israel's jail because they belong to the wrong party. The so-called president of the Palestinian Authority cannot even go to Gaza; his own house has been seized, confiscated by Hamas. So maybe the people of the region require that outsiders not side with the enemies of the people. Nobody is asking for an American invasion of the region or a military intervention as President Obama is always presenting to the American public.

What people are saying is, "OK, don't side with the most reactionary, the most brutal, and the most corrupt forces in the region. Support those who are fighting for democracy, support those who are fighting for human rights, in other words be true to your own values."



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