

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

FROM BEIRUT TO BAGHDAD: THE REGIONAL IMPACT OF SYRIAN  
CONFLICT

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706 Duke Street, Suite 100  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
Phone (703) 519-7180 Fax (703) 519-7190

PARTICIPANTS:

**Moderator:**

SALAMN SHAIKH  
Director, Brookings Doha Center

**Panelists:**

JOSEPH BAHOUT  
Professor of Middle East Studies, Institut  
d'Etudes Politiques de Paris;  
Senior Fellow, Académie  
Diplomatique Internationale

ABDULRAZZAQ RAHEEM JEDI  
Professor, College of Islamic Science,  
University of Baghdad

CHARLES LISTER  
Visiting Fellow, Brookings Doha Center

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. SHAIKH: Again, good evening. It's my great pleasure to welcome you all, some old friends, distinguished ambassadors to the Brookings Doha Center again, for, I'm sure you'll agree, is another very interesting discussion on one of the hot topics at play. We've called it "From Beirut to Baghdad: The Regional Impact of the Syrian Conflict". By its nature we'll be discussing of course Syria, but also, the effects of this conflict on the neighborhood around it, particularly with our distinguished guests on Lebanon and Iraq. In this respect, it gives me great pleasure to introduce to you the three great panelists we have with us today. To my left, first left, of course is Dr. Professor Joseph Bahout. He's of course Professor of Middle East Studies, Senior Fellow at the Académie Diplomatique Internationale. He also serves as a permanent consultant for the policy planning unit of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He has many other distinguished current fellowships and, but I would mention that he was

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educated both at the American University of Beirut and at Singapore where he did his Ph.D., and he's published two books on Syria and Lebanon in addition, of course, to his numerous articles and chapters and works on Middle East politics, and is currently writing a book on Lebanon's post war political reconstruction and Lebanese Syrian relations. Joseph, I threaten to get you here at some point. You're different. It's really a pleasure to have you here.

DR. BAHOUT: My pleasure, thank you.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you. Next in the middle, is Dr. Abdulrazzaq Raheem Jedi. I'm sure many of you would already know him for his public profile. He's a member of the preparatory committee of the Dignity Block and prominent spokesman across Iraq's six protesting provinces, and leading figure of the sahad al es vala karam. The Pride and Dignity square in Nunvar province. He has a Ph.D. in Islamic Science from the University of Baghdad, and a Ph.D. in political science from The Hague University. Dr. Abdulrazzaq, we're very grateful for you to having

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made the trip from Iraq and from Erbil in particular.

Thank you for coming.

DR. ABDULRAZZAQ: (In Arabic)

MR. SHAIKH: And certainly not least, a pleasure to introduce to you, Dr. Charles Lister, a visiting fellow here at the Brookings Doha Center. He's formerly head of Middle East and North Asia IHS Jane's Terrorism and Security Center, where he focused on sub-state security threats in the Middle East. Charles' current research here assesses the state of insurgency in Syria, particularly the growth of Salafi and Jihadist groups, and he's also currently authoring a book -- "The Jihadist Insurgency in Syria". I should also add, soon to be published is a paper from this center on the growing -- that Charles is writing -- on the growing complexity of the insurgency and the opposition in Syria, which we hope will be released by the end of the month. Thanks for making it from across the corridor, Charles.

Before we start our discussion, maybe I can just sort of set the scene for a minute or two. Of

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course, the regional impact to the Syrian conflict is multi-faceted and multi-layered and extremely serious, in fact, with people talking figures, talking about 150, 170 thousand Syrians dead -- that in itself is a catastrophe. The number may be much higher. Soon, the refugee numbers are likely to surpass Afghanistan in terms of the total number of refugees in the world. And in Lebanon, there is the highest per capita concentration of refugees anywhere in the world in recent history, which is Syrian refugees, and half of those in need of aid inside, and half of them are children. Of the one million registered refugees, remember Mr. Yafyah, who came across in early April into Lebanon, who was the one millionth registered refugee. And as I said, half of those are children.

Just to illustrate the point, in Lebanon, in April 2012, there were only 18,000 registered Syrian refugees. And in April 2013, only a year ago, there were about 250,000. Now we're talking one million. Of course, Joseph, you will speak particularly to that. In Lebanon itself, where I just returned from,

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we do have now a government led by (inaudible), which is formed after a ten month deadlock. I guess that's a useful anecdote to -- the threats that it faces, internal as well as external. And of course you have presidential elections, which have to be held no later than May the 25th. So we look forward to your comments on that as well as the Syrian issue. And then of course, with regards to Iraq, you are seeing soon, on April the 30th, the first parliamentary elections since the U.S. withdrawal on April the 30th, as I said, with many wondering whether Nouri al-Maliki will win and by what margin, and what government will be formed, and whether he will be the next Prime Minister.

Of course, and the backdrop to this, we have a rising number of Iraqi's killed more often than not, not really covered in the news at all. Already last year, I think we have figures which are not since a few years, since 2007, 2008, where we have more than 10,000 killed. And already this year, we probably have more than three and a half thousand. This month

alone, you've had already in the first 14 days, about four, five hundred Iraqi's that have been killed in ensuing violence. And in this respect, we look forward particularly to the comments of Dr. Abdulrazzaq. And in Syria itself, of course, the situation is complex and getting more and more complex. Whether you can talk about a central authority and whether you can talk about somebody's winning or not, is something I guess is highly debatable, especially when one looks at how is this wonderful country going to come out of the nightmare that it's currently in. It's something I know that all of you will talk about. How we're going to do this is -- I will ask each of our guests to speak for a few minutes just to make some opening remarks to frame the discussion and make the points that they think are the most important at the outset. And then we'll have a Q&A between ourselves, and then I'll open up the floor, so you'll get plenty of opportunity in the last 20 to 30 minutes to ask questions as well. So without further ado, Professor Joseph, please.

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DR. BAHOUT: Thank you Salman. Thank you to your institution. I'm very happy and honored to be here. It's my first trip to Doha to Qatar. I hope it won't be the last, to Brookings also. If I have to very briefly summarize the Lebanese landscape in the wake of the Syrian crisis, I would focus on two or three points. First of all, an introductory remark, which I think is very important and that links us to Iraq also. I think the factors of crisis in Lebanon that are today completely inflamed by this Syrian issue, were there before Syria erupted, and this, I think, something important to notice. The crisis in fact in Lebanon, the cleavage which is today very acute and very grave, in fact has been opened at least in 2005, with the assassination of Rafic Hariri and the crisis that ensued. And even if we can trace it back to before we can say that it was open at the end of the -- let's say the nineties and specifically with the Iraq war in 2003. So this is to be kept in mind maybe in the discussion afterwards.

The Syrian crisis have put a lot of fuel on  
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the Lebanese fire, on the dormant Lebanese fire, at least through I think, if I have to single them out -- three factors, or three parameters. I would say the first one very quickly is -- and all of them are in fact, flows that are inside and outside Lebanon, towards Syria and from Syria. You have first of all the flow which is not very much seen and talked about, which is the flow of money -- the financial flow, i.e. the escape of capital by the Syrian nomenclatura to the Lebanese banking system and a lot of money going to the Syrian insurgency through Lebanon. Why is it a problem? Because I think it is becoming to become -- it is beginning to become a point which is very highlighted by the international community and the international agencies because of laundering, because of other issues also, and this stress will be probably visible on the macro level of the economy in Lebanon. This is a very hidden factor, I won't talk too much about it.

The second one is the one you mentioned, which is the refugee crisis, and besides the

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humanitarian appalling aspect of it -- it's really appalling without entering into details. You've mentioned some figures that are already in fact, behind of us. We have cross the threshold of one million, two hundred thousand refugees last week, in a country where, I should remind, where the number of habitants is at maximum four millions, meaning that in fact one third of the Lebanese -- of the people living on Lebanese soil, are refugees. It is visible very very vividly. Seventy percent of these people are women and children living in very poor, very low sanitary and humanitarian conditions. So it is a humanitarian time bomb, but given the Lebanese fabric, and we will talk about that probably later on, they are also a political and a security time bomb, because these people are from a given, let's say, sectarian, ethnic political coloration and they are in a country where these equilibriums are very touchy and very sensitive and it really bears the risk of breaking these equilibriums. I don't really exclude the day, quite close, where we will have clashes probably

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between these people and forces underground in Lebanon, be them Hezbollah or others.

Having mentioned Hezbollah, this is the third parameter of the Lebanese crisis, which is completely fueled by Syria. Of course, we had flows of many fighters from all kinds, from Lebanon to Syria, Jihadis wanting to help the rebellion, people from the FSA sometimes seeking refuge in Lebanese villages on the border. But I think in scale and in nature, it cannot be compared to the heavyweight of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria. It's no secret now to talk about roughly maybe 40,000 -- I'm sorry to say -- but Shia fighters in Syria, from Iraq, from Yemen, from Lebanon, from elsewhere. I think that the conservative figures for Hezbollah in Syria are around or between 5,000 and 7,000, which is enormous. It is enormous in number and it is very grave in nature and in political nature.

And this is the second probably, point I would like to highlight, which is in fact, this enigma for many Lebanese observers or observers of Lebanese

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politics. Why did Hezbollah choose to go all this way in the Syrian issue? Why did they choose to, in fact, completely entangle its fate, and I underline the word fate, existentially, to the Syrian regime, to an extent where today the survival of the Syrian regime has become an existential, let's say, stake for Hezbollah, and the fall of the Syrian regime will also be maybe an existential, let us say, factor for Hezbollah. Meaning that for the adversaries of Hezbollah in Lebanon, that were political adversaries, the issue has become also existential, meaning that their survivability in Lebanon passes through the fall, or the non-survivability of the Syrian regime, which is, in fact, tying Lebanon and Syria in matters that are much beyond, and much further than the mere political or the mere strategic. It has become existential, and I think this is the most crucial factor to be discussed.

The third point very quickly is that all this, which I have described, is occurring and you mentioned also, you alluded to it -- in a series of

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political vacuums in Lebanon, you mentioned the miraculous formation of the government lately, but we forget that we have a parliament that has been prolonged a few months ago. We don't have legislative election and we can't have them under the prevalent conditions. The commander in chief of the Army is today prolonged. His mandate is over. He is maintained in quite an exceptional manner. And we will have in May, June and probably with a vacuum period, a presidential election which is very problematic and difficult. Here also, increasingly this presidential election is becoming organically, if not existentially tied to the Syrian crisis. I think that June, July is a crucial period for Lebanon, but it is also, and I have to remind it, for Syria. It is the end of the chemical weapon issue. It is the reelection, probably triumphalist or not, of Bashar al-Assad at the head of the country. It is also the end of the period of negotiation between the U.S., the western community and Iran over its nuclear file, so it has also to do with Hezbollah. This brings me to

my conclusion for now, at least. I don't want to leave the floor before saying that, in fact, why is Lebanon today so much in danger? In a country where in fact, precariousness has become a structural given -- I mean it's not new -- Lebanon has always been on the brink, but why today, is it more grave and more urgent than ever? I think because the usual safety nets of Lebanon, which are too traditionally, very serious eroded and under pressure, under strain.

The first one is the Lebanese army; the second one is the regional umbrella. The Lebanese army, a very quick word -- to say that it is first technically overstretched, exhausted, because it is running after several insecurity issues and places that are erupting here and there, but also, and I think this is one side effect of the Hezbollah issue in Syria, the army is losing gradually its neutral perception or the perception of its neutrality by Lebanese forces, by political and paramilitary Lebanese forces, i.e. it is perceived dragged to the side of Hezbollah. And sometimes to the side of

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Hezbollah in Syria, protecting the action in Syria, which is in fact, to put my feet in the plate, if I may, is in fact causing a lot of Sunni -- let's say resentment, towards the military institution which is something Lebanon has lived, in the seventies, at the eve of the war.

The second factor is the regional umbrella. So far every time Lebanon was at the brink or about to jump in the brink, the regional, let's say, conundrum or the regional safety net, was there to prevent Lebanon from falling. Just to give an example -- the Taif Agreement, the Doha Agreement -- we are in Qatar today -- where all regional settlements, even at minimal, that prevented Lebanon from rifting away into an open crisis. This time, given the Syrian situation, given the cold war over Syria, given the vivid clash and conflict between Iran, the gulf states, the inter-Arab tensions -- I don't want to get into details here in Doha -- are also weighing on the Lebanese stability and I think that all this is in fact boding very bad for the future of that country,

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especially if, and probably this will be the case -- the Lebanese are unable to take the hot potato into their hands. I'll stop at this point and probably will get back to these points in the Q&A. Thank you.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you very much. In fact, before I let you go, ask you a couple of quick questions, before we move onto Iraq. One of course you mentioned, towards the end -- the Lebanese army and the erosion of that and you can put that in connection with your second part as well, in terms of the danger of the erosion of the post Taif institutions that were created. But specifically on the Lebanese army and Hezbollah -- now of course France and Saudi Arabia have committed to supplying and strengthening this national institution. How is that going to work, given what you just said?

DR. BAHOUT: As you said, Salman, in fact, the late visit of Francois Hollande to Saudi Arabia, which in fact was following very closely visit of President Michel Sleiman to Saudi Arabia, concluded to the necessity of strengthening the Lebanese army, and

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Saudi Arabia puts three billion dollars, which is in Lebanese terms, a huge amount, to buy weapons and equipment and etcetera provided they are French, to the Lebanese army. Now of course, when we first heard about the news, what I said -- i.e. the Lebanese -- the political nature of the Lebanese army and it's, let's say, the strings that are attached to the Lebanese army since the end of the way, since the Taif agreement that in fact have transformed more or less the Lebanese army into a body which is coordinating very much with the Syrian mukhabarat and the Syrian apparatus, as long as Syria was present in Beirut, and with Hezbollah as long as Hezbollah was the main resistance operative in the south of Lebanon. So this is the Lebanese army's constraint usually in Lebanon. So when the Saudi - French decision was taken, there was a lot of, let's say suspicion and let's say, fear, in Lebanon that this would in fact pull the Lebanese army into the other direction, and puts it into probably an unlivable for itself, tension and etcetera. So far, luckily --

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MR. SHAIKH: As Sunni militia?

DR. BAHOUT: Or at least to put heavy strings or to attach heavy strings on that, maybe for instance, to prevent Hezbollah from crossing the border, etcetera, to clash with Hezbollah at some points. Luckily so far -- but the luckily is in itself paradoxically in fact -- we haven't seen these strings under motion. So the army is not, unless, until today at least, commanded or demanded to do so. But however, I think that the questions that are looming over the (inaudible) institution, especially, and here I link it to something else -- especially that the commander in chief of the army is one of the main figures that is a potential, maybe outsider for the presidential election. So I think the Lebanese army is becoming more and more a political player, which is in fact not something very well, or very well seen, or very well crafted, in a country where the army is one of the few institutions which is supposed to be neutral. So the army is under a lot of strains and tensions, and under a lot of constraints, which in

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fact also bodes bad for the future of the country.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you. You and I can go on all night, but let's move on, and we'll come back to these very interesting points that you've raised. Dr. Abdulrazzaq, if I could ask you please to make sure remarks.

DR. ABDULRAZZAQ: (In Arabic). In the name of God, the most compassionate, the most merciful, thank you very much Mr. Salman al-Shaikh, and thank you also -- my thanks to the Brookings Center at Doha, because they want to give the opportunity to the voice of Iraqis that is not being heard outside Iraq. We know of the hegemony of the state's media, so the voice of the Mujahideen, of the tribes -- there is a kind of a gray area in the position, especially vis a vis what has taken place in the Anbar province. So I'm going to talk about two issues. The first issue is the position of Sunni Arabs after the occupation, and the second point, their situation after the demonstrations and protestations and the second point is the relationship of -- and the link between the

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Iraqi government and Syria. Everybody knows that Sunni Arabs, after the occupation of Iraq, they have been targeted by, even by the countries that have occupied Iraq. I think this is a project, because they say that Sunni Arabs only constitute 17 percent and this is what Bush has said during the beginning of the occupation. And as I said, so since the beginning of the occupation, Arab Sunnis have been targeted and after the occupation the Arab Sunnis, they refused everything -- not they refused for the sake of refusing, but they wanted to tell the world and they wanted to deliver their message to the world and tell the world -- we do not refuse to participate in the political scene, we do not refuse that, but we are ready to participate in politics, if the politics that you are going to participate in is going to be in keeping with the size of Sunnis in Iraq. And this is the demands still by the Iraqi Sunnis, and they want to have a census to take place in Iraq and that would be observed by the international community. They want the census would take into account the memorandum of

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understanding between the United Nations and Iraq, and also the changes that have taken place in Iraq and we have now in excess of five million that have migrated from a country outside of Iraq into Iraq during the previous regime. And the second thing, and would like the sect too to be taken into account, so if you want us to participate in politics, you have to accept the results of the census. So this is one of the conditions, so Sunni Arabs have been marginalized, isolated, have been killed, on the basis of the fact that they are Sunnis, and we were on the brink of a war, a civil war, after the explosion of the two cobas in Samara, and would like also to thank all the countries who have hosted the different Iraqis -- Syria, Jordan and so on and so forth. Things remain stable until 2011, after the occupying forces left Iraq and when the current governments came into power we have started seeing a marginalization process of Sunnis and also the targeting of Tariq al-Hashimi and after that, al-isabeel was also targeted, and this was the first spark that has led to the intifada that is

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taking place now in Iraq. This is the situation of Sunni Arabs in Iraq. After this intifada we were expecting that the Iraqi government will respond to the demands which are 13 demands. These are 13 constitutional demands and they have been adopted and all the time the prime minister in different occasions, he says, these are legitimate demands and he is going to execute them but on the ground we haven't seen anything. So this is the situation of Sunni Arabs prior to the demonstrations, and after that. And the relationship between the Iraqi government and the Syrian regime, before the Syrian revolution, the Iraqi government used to look at the Syrian regime as a source of agony and difficulty so, and they were saying that they're going to sue the regime into international courts because it is jeopardizing security and safety in Iraq. But after the Syrian revolution, things have changed altogether. The Iraqi government has changed altogether its policy towards Syria. And Iraq has become the incubator of this regime. And what is the reason behind that? The

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reason is that after Iraq, the Iraqi government felt that the revolution in Syria, if it succeeds, it is going to impact not only the situation in Syria, but it's going to also impact the situation in Iraq. And this was stated by one of the officials in Iraq when he said the revolution in Syria can move to Iraq and we're going to defend this revolution in Karbala and Baghdad. So this means that there is a link between what has taken place in Iraq and a relationship between has taken place in Iraq and in Syria. Now we're in Anbar province and after the demonstrations, protestations have been diffused, now what we see is there is a kind of distortion of what the Anbar people are doing, so -- and the government claims that they have sent their military to the Anbar province in order to combat terrorism and also to combat Daish, but I live in Anbar, and I have come from Anbar, and yes, via Erbil, but I have lived the revolution more than two weeks in Anbar. So I'm going to tell you what is taking place in Anbar. It is not as the government claims. It is a self-defense operation led

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by the people of Anbar because they felt that the military is behaving negatively against their own belongings, about their land and everything. So why Anbar has been targeted and not the other six provinces? Why have the other provinces been secluded and not been targeted? Because it is a place where Sunnis live, and if they put an end to the revolution of people in Anbar, so the rest of the people in Anbar are going to give in because they would have -- and they are going to surrender because they are going to lose their leadership. So as for Daish and for me to clarify the picture to you, and I hope that I would be able to deliver what I'm saying to the whole world -- as for Daish, I would like to recognize, yes there are terrorists, and there is Daish, but everybody knows that since between 2007 and 2008, who confronted terrorism? Who confronted terrorism in the different provinces of Iraq? After the Americans and the Iraqi military was not able to do so, it is the leaders of the Anbars, the sheikhs of Anbars, and that's what has made the Iraq stable between 2007 and 2012. It is the

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people of Anbar who confronted terrorism. So how can we call them terrorists? So after they confronted the terrorism, terrorism remained in places in the deserts, especially on the borders with Syria, and everybody knows an incident took place in which many of the military have been assassinated and killed and, but in the wink of an eye, the battle was taken from Horan to Haranbar Valley, so and to the Anbar. And Anbar has become a stronghold for terrorists. So how was the government to transfer a battlefield from one place, which is very far away, to Anbar. So the objective is to make the world think that the military has come to Anbar to confront terrorism. After the military has entered Anbar, the people of Anbar confronted the military and they were able to achieve great results in the first three days, and on the fourth day, we have noticed that great powers with heavy weapons have entered the al-Anbar and so we were wondering how were they able to enter Ramadi? How were they able to enter with these numerous people? How were they able, if the military has come to

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confront terrorism? I always say, either it is a concoction between the Iraqi military and -- or it is a lie that they are claiming that they say they are trying to confront terrorism. So how can people of the province confront this power that the military cannot confront?

After that the Islamic state and Iraq (inaudible) entered. But I will tell you honestly, what's happening in Anbar and in Fallujah is not a battle between the armed forces and Daish -- it is between the armed forces and the people of Anbar who are defending themselves. As for Daish, I say that if the Iraqi army is there to fight terrorism and to annul Daish, then I say they should leave Anbar and the people of Anbar would be able to neutralize this group and to really defend themselves. But using them as an alibi for the armed forces to stay, no -- I say that this is a pretext for the armed forces to stay in al-Anbar. And as everyone knows, either there is this (inaudible) between damsels and the group or because simply they are not defending themselves. This is

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what's happening in Anbar in my opinion.

Now I ask the question, what about what's happening in Anbar and how do we tie it to the elections -- upcoming elections. We all know that on December 30th, these events started in Anbar. Why -- why this date in particular? Why this timing? It is because the fact that when the government realized that Sunni, and people of Anbar would actually take part in the upcoming elections, in a way that was effective and efficient, for them to get (inaudible) presentation, they started this operation in Anbar, an operation that is actually being expanded now. But since December until this very day, I can tell you the scale of it is going wider and wider in Salah-ad-Din and Babylon, so the scope of the operation is going wider in order not to allow the Sunni of these areas to take part in the elections. Because should they participate effectively and really, means that they will be represented genuinely and this means that the whole world will know who these people are and what they represent in Iraq. Sunni in Iraq, and I don't

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really want to touch on that, but let me say this one word -- Sunni in Iraq are on equal footage. They are as much in size with the Arab Shia, but if we were to add the Kurds, and we know that Kurds are Sunni of course, 100 percent Sunni -- it means that Sunni in Iraq would reach a person vantage that varies between 68 and 70 percent. They are the majority. This is what the government is scared of and they started this operation in order not to allow Sunni to take part in the elections. And we have called -- actually we have asked to postpone elections until things are back to normality in these provinces, but the government is determined because it knows that should elections be held now, in good security and stability circumstances, it means that the Sunni will be the wider voice in Iraq. I'll leave it there. Thank you.

MR. SHAIKH: Right at the end, you've asked to postpone elections. If the elections go ahead, will you still do what you can to take part as a community?

DR. ABDULRAZZAQ: (In Arabic) My answer is  
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yes. I am with taking part and participating in the elections. Should this participation take place in normality -- I mean by that, when security is okay, but having elections and participating under the current circumstances in the provinces, I think that this participation will be in vain. It would be useless. This is my position. And I accord upon the Secretary General of the United Nations, on one of the TV cameras, I said -- if the international community is really serious and wants stability in Iraq, the international community should intervene right now, either with an initiative or at least by putting pressure on the government in order to stop the random bombing in the provinces of Anbar and the different Sunni provinces until the upcoming elections.

SPEAKER: One further quick question. You mentioned the Daish -- you mentioned your stance against them and that the Sunni community itself is best place to fight against terrorism. How do you explain the strength of Daish across the border in Syria? And the links there between Daish and Syria

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and Iraq and the communities there?

DR. ABDULRAZZAQ: (In Arabic) My friend, you are speaking of Daish. I think that Daish is really the product, is an Iranian and Iraqi product. The people of Anbar can fight Daish -- why? Because Daish is all about those who support it, or its incubator. Now if you saying that the Anbar people are Daish because of the incubator, this is first of all not true and then, when the Iraqi forces leave, the combatants in Anbar will leave and then you will see that Daish are only a handful. We're talking about only a few hundreds. It's not true what they say that there are thousands and thousands. Now, because of the current circumstances, Daish is really loud and the regionalities in Anbar province. And the second question, you asked about how you link it to Syria? Yes, yes, yes. How to link it to Syria, right -- and Iraq? Okay, everyone knows that the revolution in Syria and the intifada in Iraq in Anbar is one that is confessional I would say, but the Sunni in both countries. And we know that these movements

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tried to show that they represent the confession -- the sect -- I mean by that the Sunni. And here, these movements and since they started, in my opinion, anyway, maybe yes, they want to defend us, but really on the ground they are really far away from the targets and the ambitions of the Sunni. I'm saying that they claim representing the Sunnis but there is of course the relationship between Daish and Iraq and Daish and Syria. But on the ground, then again, look at what these groups are doing in Syria. Look at what they are doing in Iraq and really, if they're doing that, if it's true what they're doing, I can tell you that Sunnis would just deny the fact that those groups represent them, whether they claim defending the Sunni rights, whether they are doing that genuinely and authentically or not. And that's why I say once again, these ties between Daish and Iraq and Daish and Syria greatly depend on an incubator. I believe that the more the incubator strengthens them, they will be stronger in both countries and if the incubator is weaker then they will be weaker in both countries. I

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call upon the Iraqi government and I say, if you want to really fight Daish, you have to strengthen the people. You should stop bombing civilians in Anbar and you should stop really these crimes. Let me tell you in Anbar and in the Sunni provinces, you see crimes. A few days ago, seven bodies were burned in (inaudible) and a week ago, ten days ago, they were burned and were alive -- seven people who were still alive in Buharesh in Jala province -- so seven Sunnis were burned and five students leaving the school were killed. They were civilians. They didn't have -- they only had their books and their pens. They were killed simply because their names were Abubached and Ahmed, so Sunni names. I say to the international community, you want to fight Daish; you need to take, to keep in mind the rights of the Sunnis in Iraq and in Syria. When those people feel that their rights are promoted and fostered and strengthened, when they don't feel oppressed, then Daish will no longer exist. They will never be an incubator for such an extremist group.

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MR. SHAIKH: Thank you very much, for also very clearly stating the linkages, but also how so many in the Syrian or Iraqi communities have actually died fighting against extremes. Charles, please.

MR. LISTER: Thank you. So I have the unenviable task of talking about what Salman called an incredibly complex conflict in around five minutes. So the essential point I --

MR. SHAIKH: It will get more complex otherwise.

MR. LISTER: As we go. The essential point I would like to make in the points that I will cover now, is that the conflict in Syria has reached a state of total stalemate, despite the fact that military positions in various areas of the country go to and fro between the opposition and the government, taken together as a whole the conflict isn't really moving that much anymore. And the consequence of that is that the spillover we have already seen and has already been in place for 18 months at least, I suggest will certainly be around for a long time to

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come. So the first point I'll touch on is essentially this state of stalemate.

The real turning point came in early June 2013, when the Syrian military, supported very strongly by Hezbollah from Lebanon, took the town of al-Pazar in (inaudible) near the Lebanese border. That incident, with hindsight, represented the first perfect example of the Syrian military's ability to coordinate extraordinarily closely with sub-state paramilitary groups, most obviously in this case, Hezbollah. This has been a very conscious effort by the Syrian military to devolve more to a series of regional militias. And the consequence of that is that we're seeing a militarization of the Syrian Arab army and that has actually, surprisingly, allowed the military to sustain the kind of gains it has made in the last year or so, leading up to this point, the Syrian military has now pretty much seized control and has maintained control of the key highway, all the way up from Damascus up towards Aleppo, but most importantly into Tartus and Atakia, the key Alawite

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heartlands in Syria. There's been a very significant development, albeit that it came about by devolution by the Syrian military. On the other side, the opposition has suffered significantly from disunity and an inability on the military side to represent a cohesive united organization and as a result of that, it hasn't been able to sustain the kind of gains it made, it was making, in late 2012 and early 2013. So that combined leaves us in a relative state of stalemate now, which I predict will likely continue in the months and even years to come.

The second main point is, we've also seen concurrently the establishment of a war economy in Syria, whereby both the opposition and the government has elements within both parties, have now become dependent on the conflict, and particularly the decision makers on a local and provincial level. And in this respect, I'm speaking more from a military point of view than a political but it is arguably as significant on the political side, within this Syrian government. So on the side of the government; we have

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seen a massive expansion of the type of pre-existing corruption that was around in the hands of military commanders prior to the revolution. So we're in a situation now where military commanders -- Syrian Arab army military commanders are making millions of U.S. dollars a year through kidnapping for ransom, often within the pro-government areas, so there has been kidnapping for ransoms of Alawite civilians in Tartus and Atakia, all the way since late 2011. And significant amounts of money are changing hands. In addition to that, there's been a significant expansion of illicit black market business -- business trading, again by, largely in control of Syrian government military commanders and in addition to that, perhaps the most disturbing aspect, is business made out of looting of seized anti-government areas of the country. The most famous example of that is the building of a new souk in Hun city called Souk Asouna which essentially represents an area where the Syrian military and pro-government militias bring the looted belongings and furniture and jewelry from civilians'

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houses that they have recently seized in Han's governor and then sell it to Alawite civilians. It's a money making business.

On the opposition side, we've perhaps seen an even more significant exchange and acquisition of money. A very recent economic study of opposition control of oil wells in Syria concluded that as combined, Syrian opposition rebel forces are making approximately 50 million U.S. dollars a month from crudely refining oil and exporting it predominantly to Turkey. Fifty million dollars a month, and that's in the hands of armed -- predominantly armed insurgent groups and some tribal leaders in (inaudible). To add to that, what we've heard about Daish, the Islamic states in Iraq and (inaudible), they currently control enough flour mills in the northeast of the country to provide flour for one million people a day, and they're selling it at subsidized prices, because it's a method that they use to maintain some level of civilian acceptance, not support. And in other areas, less obviously financial, there are for example, 34

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checkpoints on the main road between Aleppo city and the Turkish border. Every single one of those checkpoints takes a toll. And every single one of those checkpoints is controlled by an armed group who roam a certain local area. So that's again, significant amounts of money changing hands. And (inaudible), a prominent member of the Islamic front coalition, which controls the major baba salaam, a Turkey, takes approximately -- the most recent account I managed to find, one thousand U.S. dollars per commercial truck crossing the border, either way. And most of those trucks are humanitarian aid trucks. So that's somewhat of a horrific irony to the fact that they are charging money in order to help their own civilians. So the basic point in terms of war economy is changing hands and is bolstering the strength of pro-government and anti-government military commanders across the country, so much so that their interests now lie in sustaining the conflict. And we've seen examples of major rebel offensives on military bases that have been prolonged so that certain rebel

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commanders could receive more money and more weaponry from their external backers before the battle finished. They've prolonged the battle on purpose to get more money and more weapons. So I expect that war economy is significant now, and it will continue to be so in the future. And it will prolong the stalemate that we're already in.

The third point is the issue of weapons proliferation and this specifically relates to the issue of violent spillover into Syria's neighbors. A huge amount of weaponry has entered Syria in the last two and a half, three years. A lot of the focus and attention is given to weapons seized within the country during rebel operations. But an equally significant amount of weapons, particularly in the capability that these weapons provide, is being provided from outside of the country, by external backers to the opposition. These weapons range up to very recently, we've just discovered the arrival of U.S. manufactured anti-tank guided missiles in three governors of the country. It's the first time such



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significant American manufactured weapons have arrived in the country. And they will obviously have a significant impact on the local battlefield. But it's more than feasible that some of these kinds of weapons will cross borders. And they already have. A famous example is, early 2013, Saudi Arabia financed the provision of several shipments of Croatian sophisticated weaponry to free Syrian army units in southern Syria. Within a month, some of those weapons had changed hands and were being used by (inaudible), the official al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. And today, some of those weapons are in Iraq, being used by Daish. So these weapons cross borders frequently. They're sold; they're used to make money, as well as being useful on the battlefield.

And the final point I'll make before concluding is the issue of extremists, which is of course, the one that gains the most media attention. Daish, or as the Islamist state in Iraq in al-shaam, has established, had established a very significant foothold in Syria prior to opening of the front

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against it by a coalition of moderate and Salafist militants in Syria in January this year. As a result of that, Daish now represents a heavily isolated organization in Syria. It has barely managed to retain the support of any single other rebel organization in the country. And whilst that is a beneficial thing for Syria, it also raises in my view some significant potential dangers to the future. ISIS is concurrently representing itself as an alternative -- a second generation alternative to al-Qaeda. And it is attracting quiet support from elements within existing al-Qaeda organizations elsewhere in the world that also are the non al-Qaeda jihadist organizations. The feasibility that ISIS could choose to carry out an attack further abroad at this point seems far more feasible than it did prior to its isolation in Syria, particularly with regards to its predictable need to prove itself and to fulfill its objective of being the better party in comparison to al-Qaeda. And then, that brings us on to al-Qaeda, (inaudible), the official affiliate in Syria.

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As a result of its opposition to ISIS, a successful opposition, and it's pragmatic, relatively and surprisingly behavior on the ground in Syria, (inaudible) has actually enjoys surprisingly large amount of popular support within the anti-government civilian population, which has allowed it to establish a fairly concrete foothold across Syria. As a result of that, we've seen -- I'll be quick -- we've seen the arrival of at least, and publicly known -- I've identified six senior al-Qaeda commanders who have personal confidants of Osama bin Laden, they have decades of experience within al-Qaeda central. They have all arrived in Syria in the last six months, and they're establishing base areas in the north of the country, and this is what the United States has picked up on in the last three months or so, when they've been suggesting that they are picking up on suggestions that al-Qaeda and not Daish, is planning attacks on the west. Now I'm skeptical as to whether or not they're doing that, because it's not in their interest at this point and it doesn't fit within their

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modus operandi, but I wouldn't discount it as a possibility in the future. So I hope that wasn't too detailed or too complex or too quick. But those are four issues I think that will prove to sustain the stalemate that we're in but also, most importantly, for this discussion -- that will result in continued and perhaps escalated spillover abroad.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you Charles. That was great. You described the system of checkpoints even on the government side as part of a sort of general disintegration of a situation both on the -- not just on the fragmented opposition side, but also within the government side and certainly that's what I heard in Lebanon and just a couple of days ago from people coming across from Syria itself. Let me ask you, and one particular story I heard is that to go seven kilometers, you had to go through seven different checkpoints, manned by seven different brigades or armies connected to the government, some of whom don't like each other, and are part of the corruption battle that is taking place behind the scenes. But let me

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ask you, in that environment, there's a lot talked about in terms of the international humanitarian effort. How does one -- or how on the ground is the effort to bring in aid and to just sustain life happening? Or is it -- are we seeing a gradual erosion of human kind and well-being and the kind of incidences of disease and hunger and other things that we thought we'd never see in a place like Syria?

MR. LISTER: Well, if you're talking specifically about the government side of things, then the main issue you're looking at is what you've mentioned and what I mentioned before -- a sort of militarization of the Syrian military. So there being frequent incidences of U.N. agencies trying to bring aid across the border, primarily original incidences with Jordan, but they're now happening across the Turkish border -- the first attempt was the most famous of those, which was just about a month ago. They will go to one Syrian army checkpoint, which follows the orders of the government from Damascus which says let them through. And then

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they'll go to the second checkpoint, and the checkpoint there is controlled by another commander who perhaps doesn't quite like the idea of providing aid to anti-government areas, so he stonewalls the convoy. It's stopped. He says, well, you know, I need to sort out some paperwork with Damascus and then the U.N. has to turn back because of security concerns. So it's widely known that Syrian military commanders are not universally loyal to the government in Damascus. And that causes significant amounts of problems. All humanitarian aid, directed through U.N. agencies has to get the approval of the government in Damascus. And therefore, then, the government in Damascus provides the instructions to the certain checkpoints or commanders of provincial level military leadership, that this convoy, this aid, should be allowed through. But it doesn't really work anymore because of how the Syrian army has devolved into a kind of -- dozens and dozens and dozens of militias across the country. On the opposition side, it's equally as much the case. In northern Syria, which is

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predominantly controlled, or at least along the border, predominantly controlled by the opposition, aid agencies rely, in my experience, on maintaining contact with the armed groups themselves -- with the opposition. And there are many aid agencies who rely on personal relationships that are created between leaders of all kinds of groups. And the U.N. itself has said that it's had to deal with (inaudible), al-Qaeda in the past, in order to be able to pass through checkpoints. It's just a fact of the matter of the way that conflict works -- is that if you're going to get aid to civilians, and there are 35 checkpoints along a 20 mile stretch of road, you're going to have to deal with a wide array of actors. Some of them you probably would rather deal with, but humanitarian aid is perhaps more important than some other concerns.

MR. SHAIKH: And one quick question though, it requires a thesis -- is the -- on military side, and here, Joseph, feel free to jump in as well, the gains that the Syrian regime has made with the help of Hezbollah in particular, on fortifying to a certain

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degree, the Lebanese Syrian border. Is that a launching pad for -- you talk about a long term stalemate, but could that not be a launching pad for a greater success?

MR. LISTER: I'm skeptical still. I mean, as Sir Joseph said, the Hezbollah forces, the conservative estimates are about five, six, seven thousand, in the country and we're already seeing really, inclinations that Hezbollah is stretched thin enough in Syria already. So they have actually now evolved their tactics and strategy in Syria. They have now started carrying out covert targeted operations, as opposed to ordinary orthodox military movements. And that's a telltale sign of the fact that they don't have the capability to go further into Syria. And the Syrian Arab army doesn't either. And that's been very clear. The main weakness, the precise reason why the Syrian army devolved and created the national defense forces, civilian paramilitary force. The precise reason for that was they have an inherent manpower problem. They, at the



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start of the conflict, the Syrian army composed approximately 220,000 personnel. But as a result of the fact that much of that was Sunni conscript, the military chose not to deploy the predominantly Sunni units of the military and instead, they kept them in their bases. So the forces you hear about making gains in Syria, are predominantly Alawite, core Alawite units of the military, being backed by paramilitary militia groups -- some foreign, mostly Shia, and then also a few Alawite. So that manpower problem makes it extremely unlikely that the Syrian army has any capacity to move into the northeast or any further.

MR. SHAIKH: Joseph, just in the same realm, but slightly different. Are we hearing that, and in this environment of different militaries, that in fact Hezbollah may not be as autonomous or as engaged in certain areas, even within the Syrian theater, meaning, there have been disagreements, or is that wrong? Are there stories of disagreement between Hezbollah and its allies in the Syrian government and

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army?

DR. BAHOUT: First, it's very difficult in fact to know factually exactly what's happening on these levels. We hear a lot of stories about that and you can guess that these things happen naturally. When you have the diverse military and paramilitary forces on the ground, on a field, you always have such things, especially on duration, I mean, if things last. Now lately, these rumors have gone very much increasingly. Lately we have heard about even an officer in the republican guard, shooting an officer in Hezbollah, people in Hezbollah withdrawing from a battle in the vicinity of Lepor or something like that. These things are very difficult to know. But at least what we know is that there is an increasing resentment in some segments of the Syrian military, sometimes Alawite, sometimes not, but in terms of jealousy and a bit of resentment of being commanded by people they used to despise in the past. For the Syrian army, Lebanese, even Hezbollah, are not people who have to -- who are entitled to give them orders,

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or to manage or to monitor battles, which is in fact the case. I think also that, and I would really prolong what Charles has said -- I think that the -- this is why this story of Assad winning again that you see in the western press, in the mainstream press, is something a bit laughable, because Assad has reached in fact the core of what he can drive into -- his society, his supportive society. The 60, 70, 80 thousand people -- he cannot go further than that. He has also reached the climax in terms of Shia fighters from abroad -- 30,000 and etcetera. So what I think, at best, what the Assad regime can now make, is secure what we could call useful Syria -- i.e. the central Syria around Damascus, the M5 highway, the Huntz area, Hama and the Alawi hinterland. This is I think the battle of Lattakia on the coast, in the north, was a crucial game changer. It has stopped now, but I think that this is a red light, which is somewhere and I think that for now at least, especially if Aleppo is still under attack by the rebellion successfully these last days -- I think that the regime will have to

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accept for a while at least, to go without or to make without or to live without what he considers, or what it considers, as useless Syria, i.e. everything that is eastward of Hunz, Hama and etcetera. Now the question remains, what will be the fate of these regions? Will they be a kind of swamp within which Daish fights with other rebellious factions? Will it be unified under any berated area, management and governance? I think these are the questions that the western community should also focus on if it has to secure the "liberated areas" or what we can consider as liberated areas. So I think this is the military picture. I think that this is why the stalemate situation, although we have movements here and there, is today, the most probable situation for the month to come.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you. Well we've gone into some detail. I want to come back up again, a little bit higher altitude. Of course, there are many, many of us, your selves included, warning of the unintended consequences of the Syrian conflict

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continuing to spill out of control and its regional affects. Unfortunately though, it doesn't seem as if that has given enough impetus to really move to resolve the conflict. More, perhaps to manage some of its affects. In fact, I hear and I'm sure you do, from Syrians themselves, a belief more and more, that the disintegration of the Syrian state is in some regional or international actors interests. I ask you Joseph, on this in particular. Whose interest would it be or is this just a theory too far?

DR. BAHOUT: So first, if we put the conspiracy theories that are very fashionable in this region aside, of the outside powers wanting to break up the region under sectarian or ethnic lines and etcetera, if you put that aside, the dynamics of the conflict are by themselves enough worrying on this level. Now who is potentially beneficiary of that and who is potentially harmed by that? I think the harmed part is more numerous than the beneficiaries. At least, I would see at least two or three -- Turkey, which we didn't mention. Turkey is very much afraid

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of a prolongation of this stalemate and then the growing fragmentation of Syria, because it would open up the Pandora Box, not only on the Kurdish level, as we often mention, but even on the Alawi/Alavi level, i.e. the war in Scandaroun, this famous stretch of land which is in fact very problematic for Turkey. Jordan is -- and we haven't mentioned Jordan also in this talk. Jordan is also very threatened by that. It is already threatened by the very high burden -- heavy burden of refugees, but also because of the nexus between these refugees, the Palestinian population in Jordan and the Islamist component of Jordan, so the kingdom I think is very worried about that. Iraq is a specific case, maybe like Lebanon because it is not a unified polity, so anyone could have different views on Syria, but I think the common ground is that for sure, if Syria breaks up, at least informally, Lebanon and Iraq will not be spared by that movement and by that dynamics. I can't see Lebanon, for instance, remaining abey of any further Syrian fragmentation, be it formalized or not

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formalized. Now remains the elephant in the room, as we often said. As you often say in such sessions, which is Israel, in fact. And I think here, maybe other colleagues have remarks on that, but I think that we are beginning to see at least the germs of a shift in the Israeli position towards Syria. So far, Israel could have probably considered that what's happening in Syria is not very much important for Israel's security, as long as it's confined to Syria. Maybe we can maybe suspect a kind of -- I don't know, joy or etcetera, to see this country sinking into a kind of prolonged disorder. However, lately, the activity and activism of Hezbollah on the Golan border -- we have had four incidents in the last three months, which is very interesting. And also, the recurrent discourse by Hezbollah that it will ultimately use the Golan Heights as a resistance launch pad against Israel probably could begin to change the Israeli calculus towards something which is so far unknown and new. What is less unknown is that we are beginning to see at least in the south of

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Syria, the crafting of a kind of buffer zone, which in fact is using the tribal structure, maybe some other areas in (inaudible) region and in the (inaudible) region, in order to maybe neutralize or cauterize the Israeli territory towards the Syrian volcano, which doesn't mean that there is a solution for Syria, but at least that everyone in the region is beginning to think about, let us say, harsh ways to manage its own security towards a volcano which is perceived as here to last and here to be prolonged for maybe a decade.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you, and thank you for mentioning of course, Turkey and Jordan, two countries very much involved and in carrying a heavy burden, and in different ways. And of course with Israel, some would say what you said would add to that, if for them, the perception is that the big winner, or the winner could be Hezbollah and Iran, out of what's coming out of Syria. They may well be more ready to act, to protect whatever their red lines are. Of course, the one country, and here I come to you Dr. Abdulrazzaq, and Joseph and Charles, jump in as

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well -- Iran. And in terms of Iran's interests, Dr. Razzaq, surely it's not in Iran's interests that Syria breaks up, Iraq breaks up, Lebanon gets inflicted by the same problems. Would you agree with that or not?

DR. ABDULRAZZAQ: Of course. When we posed the regional projects a year ago, we were sure that's the Baghdad government would not realize this demand because it is not in their interest and not in the interest of Iran, for the Sunni people to have their own region, because that would mean that this region would not be under its authority and will. That is why we say, the region is an objective for us, that you would like to achieve and realize. And we are not going -- we'll not be able to achieve it through the constitutional tools that will go into talk not only about the Sunni region but we're going to talk about an Anbar region and this is going to be in keeping with the constitution. We are sure that the Iraqi governance is not going to respond because Iraq, its objective is to have hegemony over Iran and also to make Iraq a Shiite country. But we, with the will of

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God, the Sunnis are going to continue our resistance as long as we are alive, we refuse that Iraq becomes a Shiite country and we're going to continue concerting our efforts with the international community to concert our rights, and if this doesn't happen, we're going to continue. I talked ten days ago that in the past we were calling for having a region. Now we are calling for self-determination because the central government cannot give us this right and we have no option but to call for the right of self-determination. Joseph, the same as (In Arabic)

MR. SHAIKH: It's part of the solution and it needs to be involved and engaged in these discussions in a way which hitherto hasn't happened.

DR. BAHOUT: Two things -- first, I am not so sure -- I wouldn't be so sure that in fact, in all cases, Iran has a vested interest in preserving at least Syria's unity and other, I mean Iraq and Lebanon's unity. It has now, by now, if it can, at least keep the status quo politically as it is, i.e., a Syria that is a unified Syria, a centralized Syria,

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which is aligned on Iran, yes. It is preferable to a broken up Syria. A unified or more or less unified Iraq which is aligned on Tehran's view, yes, of course, it's better, and the same for Lebanon. However, in terms of plan B's. If these unified and centralized states are not able to remain in the orbit of Iran's strategy, grand strategy, I think that at that moment, the vision of Iran towards these countries can change. At least on Syria, if we go back to what Charles Lister was saying -- if you accept the hypothesis that in fact you have today a paramilitary force which is the national defense force which is fully crafted and trained and nourished by Iran and by the (inaudible) force, you can make the conclusion or the hypothesis that this is a plan B force for the day, the central regime falls down in Syria, you will have to manage a kind of endless chaos in Syria in order to keep Iran as a major player on that ground.

Now it brings us to the second point. To make Iran a major player in a chaotic Syria, Lebanon,

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Iraq, for some time, means that in fact, all this is to be put in the shade of the very tough negotiation between Iran and western community -- Iran and gulf states, not only over the nuclear issue, but over in fact Iran's position if not hegemony in the region. So I think this is a grand game we are living. Iran has several options, probably others have several options. But I think that unfortunately or not, Iran has a kind of advantage in having already crafted some of the options and having the cards to play them.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you for anticipating something I was going to ask you. You've already answered it in that point of contact. Okay, let's throw open to you, the audience. You've listened very patiently. If you could just please make sure you tell us your name and any affiliation that would help all of us here as well. Who would like to start?

SPEAKER: Hello? All right, can you hear me?

MR. SHAIKH: Sorry. I think you're good.

SPEAKER: Okay, thank you very much for this

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most informative presentation, set of presentations.

MR. SHAIKH: Can we turn the level up please, at the mike?

SPEAKER: Thank you. My question is, I hear a tone especially coming from Iraq, on the Iraq side, towards sectarianizing the issues. And even the gentleman from Lebanon -- I felt there was this spirit. Do you feel that this actually would prevent a resolution, would prolong the struggle? Is it part of the solution to switch to -- in the city for example, like having a say for everyone, democracy, whatever, as opposed to the regional sectorianization and we want Anbar and actually getting the issues of Iraq entangled in the issues of -- is it important this kind of thinking, going to make things much worse and destabilize the entire region? Thank you.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you for your question. Dr. Abdulrazzaq, let's start with you.

DR. BAHOUT: Thank you very much. Everybody knows, I've been asked this question last week by one of the journalists and I said, we hope that we would

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be able to live in a unified Iraq in which everybody shares the bread and the water equally. And that to be governed and ruled by just a ruler, be it Kurdish or a Shiite or a Christian or a Sunni -- we would like all components of society to be equally dealt with and to have the rights and to be ruled by a just ruler. But on the ground, is that feasible? Can it be achieved after the occupation of Iraq? This has become something which is really far-fetched. After this gap, between the main two components of the Iraqi people -- the Shiites and the Sunni -- for us to have a unified Iraq, we hope so, but on the ground we think it is not possible.

DR. BAHOUT: Maybe more or less the same answer, but the quick answer would have been yes, of course, it would have been preferable, but the reality is not like that. I'm not crafting reality. I'm just analyzing reality. I'm just looking at it as it is. Now, of course, the Syrian issue is an issue of, like any other evolution in the Arab Spring -- it's the evolution of the Syrian's society against an

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authoritarian regime. Now it has taken some accents and some shades and etcetera, because Syria has a particular sociology. The problem which you are discussing here, by the way, is the spillovers of Syria on its neighbors, but also the projection of some of its neighbors on Syria, because of their power play regionally. So this is where probably we are out of the rosy, quote unquote -- it's very paradoxically to say rosy -- picture that would have been of a unified Syrian society against a harmful regime and etcetera. This is a priori to reality but today we are discussing something which is much more entangled, much less -- much more gloomy, which is in fact partly having to do with the Sunni Shia struggle in the region, which is not in fact a religious struggle or a (inaudible) struggle, but a struggle of power sharing and geopolitics, covered and veiled by these accents, and also other interests like, for instance, when you mentioned Israel and what remains of the Arab-Israeli conflict, overlapping with these Arab revolutions. So reality is much more complex, yes. I would have hoped

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that all these categories were not chosen by us, but unfortunately we are forced to use them because reality is forcing us to use them. I don't know if I answered you.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you. And Charles, just, on the ground, in Syria, I'm one of those who believes the regime has been the principal sectarian actor, but, of course, you now have damaging sectarian overtones, including amongst the fighting groups. Is that about accurate, or is that overplayed?

MR. LISTER: The sectarian overtone within the opposition?

MR. SHAIKH: Yes.

MR. LISTER: I think there is, but I have a suspicion that very often, with the exception of those groups who find themselves on the extreme end of the ideological spectrum, that sectarian rhetoric is rhetoric. It's used to frame the conflict in a way that secures recruitment, secures loyalty, secures continued sentiment and objectives in terms of a continued battle against the Alawites, for example, in

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Syria. And that frame of reference is extremely valuable for the opposition, even -- like it or not -- the free Syrian army and many of the key individuals that the west has entertained all throughout Europe and the United States, have frequently used highly sectarian rhetoric when referring to the enemy. But I'm not convinced they actually mean it. It's just a very useful frame of reference, that makes sense in terms of the conflict and the context they find themselves in.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you. The lady here.

SPEAKER: (In Arabic). You said the relation between the Hezbollah and Iran and Syria is existential. I understand the relation between Iran and Hezbollah is existential and is strategic but couldn't we consider the relation between Hezbollah and Syria more esthetic and Iran and Syria more esthetic, so could we imagine a shift in alliances, especially if there is an (inaudible) between Iran and the west?

DR. BAHOUT: May I? So, in fact, you are

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right not to correct what I said, but in fact, to render more accurate what I said. In fact, in the beginning, the nature of the relation between Hezbollah and the Damascus regime was not supposed to be existential, and it was not. However, the question and it is still for me at least, and several observers of Lebanese politics, an enigma -- why has Hezbollah chosen willingly to transform this relation into an existential relation? And this is a choice? Now what's the part of Iranian constraint in that choice, is something to be further inquired by researchers and etcetera, but even (inaudible) himself has said lately that with what you are doing in Syria is existential for us. In the beginning of the struggle in Syria, of the revolution in Syria, several people would have bet that probably Hezbollah and maybe Iran, would have managed to let's say, prepare a kind of soft landing in preparation for a change -- an orderly change in Syria, whereby they would have kept some serious guys with the new regime in Syria. So the question is, why did they choose to back the security solution of the

Assad regime? Probably to give it some blood and flesh also, and to what extent in fact they feel they can manage all the options and the scenarios that this crisis will give? This is where I think it is existential. Unfortunately, it has become existential. It has to do with the question of before. Unfortunately, it has become existential. Now of course, it can go out of this existential, let's say, character, but it would take very much from Hezbollah at least, and from others, in order to de-existentialize this issue. And so far, the level of entanglement, the level of mobilization, be it discursive and sometimes with strong confessional and religious undertone, to mobilize forces to fight in Syria is not occurring well for this kind of de-escalation and this exit from the existential character of the struggle. And this is why, I'm very worried about Lebanon, because when you have -- the moment you have chosen to render this kind of tie, existential, you are also tying the fate of Lebanon and the Lebanese fabric to a struggle which is not, in

fact, Lebanese in the first place.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you. Please.

SPEAKER: My name is Justin. What impact do you think a change in the Iraq physical scene, so for example, as a result of the elections which means there isn't a third Melachi term, what effect would that have on Syria?

MR. SHAIKH: A -- not a third Melachi term or, a Melachi term?

SPEAKER: So if we don't have a continuation, the state is closed. So if an anti-Melachi alliance manages to secure a majority in the parliament after the elections, whatever that looks like, what could that mean in terms of spillover for Syria?

DR. ABDULRAZZAQ: Can you please rephrase the question, or repeat it please? I didn't really get it, so if you could repeat it please?

SPEAKER: I guess I was unclear. If there is a change in the Iraqi government, if Melachi doesn't have a third term, if we have (inaudible) or

someone else as prime minister, what would that mean to Syria, and of course to Iraq.

DR. ABDULRAZZAQ: Actually, we are certain that should the current (inaudible) in Iraq change and Melachi not get to a third term, I think that this will impact not only the situation in Iraq but in the whole region, because al-Melachi has spent 8 years in power and everyone is aware of the policy of Melachi, via his own people and the region. As I said earlier al-Melachi, before the Syrian revolution had a very critical position against the Syrian regime. He even said that he would want that file to be before the security council as being a terrorist and that in 2009, there was an incident and the Syrian regime was accused of that. All of a sudden, you see Melachi becoming an ally of the Syrian regime, so it is clear that he failed and all his policies throughout the eight years, and I believe that should there be any change in Iraq right now, regardless who that person is, Sunni, Shia, Arab, Kurd, I believe that such a change would impact greatly the security inside of

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Iraq and also the region and of course, the situation in Syria, and the region in general. And that's why we say we want any prime minister but not al-Melachi. Why? Maybe we are asked the question? Yes, it might be someone from the same group, and they might have the same policy. We say no, it's not the same, because when al-Melachi deviated, when he drifted from the common rules in Iraq, anyone who's going to come after him would know that he is observed by the people and he would not be able to repeat what Melachi did.

MR. SHAIKH: I'll take one final question if anyone has one.

SPEAKER: We all talked about --

MR. SHAIKH: Your name please.

SPEAKER: My name is (inaudible). What could be possible game changers and in crediting this question, could the settlement of this Iranian nuclear issue be a game changer? Thank you.

MR. SHAIKH: It's a nice way to finish -- to try to focus a little bit on a positive game changer. And could the -- as the gentleman said -- could a new

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deal on the Iranian nuclear issue be a catalyst for that? Who would like to take that?

MR. LISTER: I can talk about game changers in the country. Certainly I think, if you're looking at just the Syrian conflict in isolation, and the internal dynamics of the conflict, a lot is being said about the provision of man pads, or shoulder fired anti-aircraft missiles -- those would have a very significant impact on the opposition's ability to counter the military's main advantage still, which is its air power. You've frequently seen the evolution in terms of the development of a barrel bomb for example, was both evidence of the fact that the Syrian military was devolving again, like I was talking about, about the army, but also evolving.

The barrel bomb has, you know, in a brutal manner, been remarkably successful, so in terms of achieving the army's objectives of population displacement and seizing territory they're after. So man pads would be extremely significant. But my line always on this subject is they will change hands, and

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they will end up outside of Syria, which would be a very significant concern, I think on that subject.

Another potential game changer would be an increase in infighting within the pro-government military structure. Like Joseph said, we've already seen indications of that happening. The first sort of direct relative of Bashar al-Assad to be killed in the conflict just took place about three or four weeks ago, and the rumors are still ongoing that he wasn't killed by the opposition, that he was killed by his own men, or a competitor is Lattakia, and there have been plenty more other small examples of an unwillingness of certain militia groups to follow the command of the military and vice versa. And should that devolve further to the extent that the military proves incapable of sustaining unified force against the opposition, then that could also be potentially significant.

MR. SHAIKH: I'll come just between -- on the barrel bomb, by the way, if there's one symbol of the depravity and barbarity of this conflict, rolling

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barrels -- TNT barrels out of helicopters onto civilian areas has got to be a definition of that and even filling it with toxic gases such as chlorine. Anyway, Joseph, I'll give the last word to you.

DR. BAHOUT: Just a quick quote on the Iranian issue as a game changer. I would say yes and no. In fact, it depends on the nature of the linkage between the nuclear issue per se and what we could consider as the grand bargain between Iran and the region and Iran and the west. If there is no strong linkage in fact, between the Iranian treaty as such and the rest of the issues, I think that on the contrary, it would ease and probably ease the margin on maneuver of Iran in the region, at least financially and etcetera, to support the Assad regime and to continue refusing a political solution, which is that perceives as unfavorable to it.

However, if the nuclear deal opens ways of amending Iranian behavior in the region, Iraq and Syria and etcetera -- but also opens the ways for the doors for a staunch and general rapprochement between

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Iran and the gulf states -- with Saudi Arabia in the beginning, yes, I think that this could be the beginning of something probably new on Syria and other issues of the region. But this is a bit far-fetched for now.

And if you have to see empirically what's happening in Syria since President Johani is in power, in fact we haven't seen the slices change in Iranian behavior on Syria. So let's hope that the nuclear deal would open the kind of grand bargain in the region that Putin meant and integrate Iran more positively in its behaviors towards defies of the region.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you for finishing on that more positive note. Many would say of course, it depends on the nature of the exact deal, whether it really is a good deal or not. I would say we've been treated to a very good, very expert, and very insightful and informative briefing from all three of our guests.

I was in a Western capital, I won't name you

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which one, but they told me they just delivered the news to their foreign minister that this conflict is likely to go on for another five, ten years. And he said, unfortunately, this is -- it wasn't taken very well, but something very increasingly being realized.

If that is the case, and if the international community continues to feel that it can't do more than try to manage the effects of this conflict, it might be the kind of scenarios -- the more pessimistic ones that you've talked about, that may well prevail in those years, from the Mediterranean to the Gulf waters -- a series of atomized broken up zones, that take in a number of countries with -- of course, with devastating consequences for Syria itself, but also for the entire neighborhood, and maybe a continuation of a -- what one of our scholars, Greg Gause, III, talks about a Middle East cold war, which is fought out in these weak and fragile states, particularly from Beirut to Baghdad. We hope not.

Thank you very much for coming. I invite

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you to some refreshments in the (inaudible) next door.

All I want to say now is please put your hands  
together to thank our three guests.

\* \* \* \* \*

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