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BROOKINGS DOHA CENTER

SYRIA AND IRAQ:
THE FUTURE PROSPECTS OF JIHADISM

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. BARAKAT: Good evening. I am the director of research at the Brookings Doha Center and I have the honor of moderating tonight's panel on the issue of Syria and Iraq and the future prospects of jihadism in the region.

Ladies and gentlemen, first of all, I'd like to draw your attention to the fact that this session is being screened live on Al-Jazeera Mubasher and I'd like to take the opportunity to welcome those viewers at home who are following us tonight and also to suggest that for those who are interested they can email us or maybe on the Facebook page send some questions and I will do my best to field those questions amongst our panelists.

This is part of our series that's focused on policy discussions. We, every week, sometimes every other week, we choose a theme that is topical to the region. We invite some of the most knowledgeable around this particular theme, and we put them in direct contact with you, the audience, both in this

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room and online. And for tonight I have the honor of welcoming three extremely distinguished and knowledgeable individuals around the issue of Iraq, Syria, and the rise of jihad, whom I will introduce in a minute.

In our region, we have seen quite a lot of violence over the last three and a half years. What started at the time as the Arab Spring with a lot of hope and potential has unfortunately ended up, particularly in Syria, in a civil war that is damaging to all sides. It has also led to the total destruction of forms of governance in certain parts of Syria, Northern Iraq, and elsewhere, and has given rise to jihadi movements. And tonight, through our panelists, we are hoping to understand better the history behind these movements, the way they evolved, where they stand today, what is being done about it, what can be done in the future.

Joining us tonight -- I'm going to start also in alphabetical order if you allow me -- our first panelist is Mr. Bilal Abdul Kareem. Bilal Abdul

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Kareem grew up in New York where he wrote and performed stage plays before converting to Islam in the mid 1990s. After a brief period studying in Khartoum, Bilal moved to Egypt where he began his study of Arabic and (inaudible) and took a role presenting on Al Huda TV in a program called Solutions.

More recently, Bilal traveled to Northern Syria around 2012, I think, where he extensively documented the activities of armed Islamist groups and particularly foreign fighters engaged in the Syrian conflict, and he did this on behalf of some of the mainstream media outlets. His experience in Syria has offered him a unique perspective, which he hopes to use to encourage greater dialogue and engagement between the West and the Muslim world.

Immediately to my left we have Mr. Richard Barrett. Richard is a senior vice president of the Soufan Group, which is a New York-based security intelligence firm and Richard has formerly worked as the director of global counterterrorism operations at

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the British Secret Intelligence Service, both before and after September 11th.

From March 2004 until January 2003, Richard headed the United Nations monitoring team focused on al-Qaeda and the Taliban. He's a recognized expert on violent extremism and the measures that can be taken to countering it. While at the United Nations, Mr. Barrett also helped found the very important component, and that is the United Nations Counterterrorism Implementation Taskforce. Welcome, Richard.

To the far left we have our very own Charles Lister. Charles is a visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center where he's working on understanding the state of conflict and insurgency in Syria with a particular focus on the growth and evolution of Salafi and jihadi groups. He's also managing a broader process of engagement with some Syrian groups, part of a track two diplomacy facilitated by the Brookings Doha Center.

Prior to joining the Brookings, Charles was
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the head of the MENA section at Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center in London. And I should add that Charles, now, is undertaking an in depth analysis of the Islamic state and is about to publish a paper in a couple of weeks profiling the movement.

The way we intend to do this tonight is that we're going to try and limit it to an hour and a half and as I said at the beginning, the objective, really, is to get you to engage with our panelists, so I will start by addressing one question to each of the panelists and give them about five to seven minutes to respond, and then we'll open the floor to the audience and I hope by then, if we have received any questions online, we'll be able also to field them to you.

So, if I may start with Richard, if you could please just give us a general idea of the rise of jihadism in Syria and Iraq over the last few years. What does it actually mean? The roots for the movement, where did it come from? How has it evolved over the last few -- two and a half years, but in particular over the last few months that it's become

DOHA-2014/10/29

public news now that the whole media is focused on the subject?

MR. BARRETT: Sure. Thank you very much and thank you for the introduction, Sultan.

Well, you're right, the movement has become very prominent in the last few months, of course, well, really since June, since the Islamic state, so-called, took over Mosul and then subsequently, of course, with the international response to that.

But I think it's important to remember that the roots of the so-called Islamic state go back to at least the 1990s when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a well-known Jordanian sort of petty criminal who became very much enamored of this whole idea of fighting to secure some sort of new state, some sort of new world order, something that was based on religion but certainly not religious, I mean, that he claimed it was coming out of Islam but of course it had very little to do with Islam, and Abu Musab went to Afghanistan in the '90s and he didn't actually get on particularly well with al-Qaeda leadership at that time, Osama bin Laden,

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Ayman al-Zawahiri, and founded his own training camp in Herat, in the west of Afghanistan, and significantly established a movement which he called Jund al-Sham, the Army of the Levant, and this was essentially his disagreement with al-Qaeda in that al-Qaeda said, no, no, this is a global issue, we have to attack the far enemy mainly meaning, of course, the United States, where as Abu Musab said, no, no, no, we have to attack the local enemy, which are the rulers of the Arab states, the Muslim majority states.

So, anyway, 2001 happened, he got pushed out, he went to Northern Iraq, kept on going, kept on recruiting a few people, 2003 came, of course gave him a big opportunity, and he'd already established a sufficiently strong organization that in 2003 he was able to launch three very significant attacks, one on the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf, one on the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad, and one on the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad. So, he immediately established himself as a real force for the opposition to the American invasion.

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And then in 2004, he actually joined al-Qaeda because al-Qaeda saw that they were really missing out in not having an established branch in Iraq, which was then, of course, the most important front for what they call jihad. I try to avoid the use of that word, but as it's in the title, I will. And they negotiated a (inaudible) and then agreed, Abu Musab thought, well, that will get me more recruits, that will get me more money, it will establish my presence here better, so they agreed to this sort of marriage of convenience, if you like.

And things went on relatively well, he did quite well though he had big arguments with Ayman al-Zawahiri, in particular, al-Qaeda, and in 2006 he was killed. After that, Ayman al-Zawahiri tried to establish al-Qaeda's control over this branch -- this troublesome branch -- by appointing an Egyptian friend of his who was Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, Abu Hamza al-Masri, who took over, but of course there was a lot of criticism of al-Qaeda in Iraq being actually not very Iraqi, so they joined him with various other groups

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and then Omar al-Baghdadi, who was an Iraqi, was sort of the titular head and, in fact, quite an effective head to a certain extent, but the movement was under a tremendous amount of pressure and really wasn't able to do very much more than the sort of bombings and everything that happened with unfortunate regularity in Baghdad.

But then 2011, and things changed really dramatically with the Syrian uprising where the initial outlook of -- sorry, I should say that Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir both got killed in 2010 -- in the middle of 2010, but then Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was appointed leader and initially he did not think that the Syrian uprising was a useful event for him because it distracted people from their main objective, which was Iraq -- which was to do things in Iraq, but he eventually agreed that Abu Muhammad al-Julani, a Syrian member of the group, along with about eight other Syrian members of the group should go over to Northern Syria and try and establish something there, see how they got on, and of course in a way the

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rest is history because they did immensely well, they attracted a lot of resources, huge amount of recruits from outside the country, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi said, hang on a minute, we're missing something here, so by 2012, he thought, I had better -- or 2013, really -- I had better claim this movement as my own. So, he said, actually, Julani is my guy, his group is my group, and we now call it Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

And Julani, by that time, had got to thinking, well, why should I join with you, you know, and Zawahiri also was thinking, well, do we really want that, do we want it all under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and they had a big fight and by 2014, almost a year later, in fact, by about April 2014 -- sorry, February 2014, Zawahiri said, I cannot reconcile these two groups and therefore we'll say that Jabhat al-Nusra is a Syrian affiliate and the Islamic State of Iraq is a Iraqi affiliate.

But he didn't take account of the fact that the Iraqi affiliate would do so tremendously well in

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getting territory in Iraq, and of course the capture of Mosul in June really turned the tables and made the Islamic state of Iraq and Al-Sham much more powerful than Jabhat al-Nusra. And so, although the battle continues, it's ISIS, the Islamic State, so-called, that really dominates our attention right now though Jabhat al-Nusra of course is still a very powerful group and still the al-Qaeda affiliate.

So, I think that that's probably longer than my allotted time, but what I think the main lessons out of that are -- two -- first of all, that the Islamic state is still very locally focused whereas al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra are more globally focused, and the second is that the differences between them are much more apparent than real, in other words, their differences are tactics and leadership but they're not differences in objective.

MR. BARAKAT: Great. Thank you so much. And I'll move on to Charles, if I may. The Islamic state spread in an astonishingly short period of time and managed to capture a huge amount of land over

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relatively few weeks and establish itself as a state and has started its own systems of governance and so on. How is that possible in that particular part of the world? And how is it, do you think, being financed?

MR. LISTER: Well, it's a very big question. It's possible largely as a result of the fact that the Islamic State, for such a long period of time, has dominated its internal structures by carrying out very, very methodical strategies and going back in some of the timeline that Richard has discussed, going all the way back to 2010, the Islamic state had internally, and then increasingly publicly explained one year strategies, and each one of these strategies, as the 12 month periods progressed up until June 2014 when the Islamic state captured Mosul -- each one of those 12-month strategies methodically built the group towards an organization that was capable of conquering territory, but not just conquering territory, but controlling it and governing it.

And so, in a sense, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,

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after taking power in 2010, managed a re-energization of the organization but also a professionalization of the Islamic State as an organization, and it is that. It is a terrorist group, but it is an organization. It has numerous fronts and bureaus for political affairs, economic affairs, social affairs, tribal engagement, military strategy, et cetera, et cetera.

So, he built a very professional organization, which militarily was being led increasingly by former Ba'athist military officers, so they were militarily experienced individuals directing offensive operations.

I suppose the big -- the most significant tactic employed by the Islamic state in the months and years prior to the big offensives that we've seen this year was a very concerted campaign of intimidation targeting security forces and government officials across Sunni areas of Iraq, and this goes back all the way to 2010, 2011, and this campaign of intimidation provided the Islamic state with huge amounts of leverage over society and over their control and their

DOHA-2014/10/29

ability to exploit societal frustration with political failure in Baghdad, with a widespread perception amongst the Sunni community of oppression and a lack of representation in the government in Baghdad, and in a sense, that's where we found ourselves in May and June 2014, or in fact, earlier, in January 2014, Islamic state really began its big offensive operations with an explicit intention of controlling territory, and that was in Eastern Iraq in Anbar government, and that took the world by surprise and in many respects that should have been a big of a forewarning for what was coming several months later when they took the city of Mosul.

And, of course, Mosul, for a very long time, had been the Islamic State's capital of influence, so in May and June, for example, 2014, the Islamic State's extent of leverage of society meant that they were taking in approximately \$12 million a month in extortion fees from across the city alone and that, in a sense, demonstrated their ability to not only know the population, but to control it, and so that has led

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to a number of American officials famously saying that the government controlled Mosul in the day and the Islamic State was very much in control overnight.

And it's that kind of societal control and knowledge and leverage that allowed it to conquer territory in Iraq. And, of course, the story is somewhat different in Syria, the Islamic State, right from the very start when they began to emerge as an independent unit in Syria in mid- to late-2013, presented themselves as an independent organization. They, unlike Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, were less -- far less interested, if not not interested at all, with cooperating with other opposition factions and in a sense that allowed them some kind of very valuable independence, they didn't have to rely on allies to make progress.

So, throughout late 2013 they began to conquer territory across Northern and Eastern Syria in opposition to the interests of Syrian opposition groups at that time, and that, of course, led to what happened in January this year when a vast majority of

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the free Syrian army forces launched very significant offensive operations against Islamic State control across Northern Syria and over a period of months by about mid-March, Islamic State was forced to withdraw from pretty vast sways of Northwestern Syria.

So, it shows that their extent of military supremacy and professionalism, it's not totally undefeatable, though in fact, I think in many respects, they totally overstretched throughout 2013 and early 2014 in terms of their capacity to sustainably control territory.

Now, in terms of the financial question, there's been a huge amount written in the media and an awful lot spoken internationally about the Islamic State's control of oil. Certainly, two or three months ago the Islamic state was capable of earning -- the estimates vary -- approximately \$1 to 3 million a day through the control of oil and mostly in Syria and in parts of Iraq, and that was significantly sustaining their operations, but there are many other areas that the Islamic State uses to earn money to

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this day and those include, very -- as I explained in the case of Mosul -- very intricate operations of extortion and also official taxation in areas under their control. For example, I mentioned Mosul was raking in approximately \$12 million a day in around June 2012 -- 2014, excuse me -- but still to this day, Ar-Raqqah, which is in Syria -- in Northeastern Syria, that's the official Islamic State capital, that's still raking in the organization about \$6 to 7 million a day.

And so we're talking about significant amounts of money not just coming from oil. They sell -- they steal and sell artifacts and antiques across the black market, they provide various other services. They take in Zakat charity donations every Friday. There are many other areas in which the Islamic State earns their money, but in terms of the sustainability, it's a very difficult question to answer.

Of course, one of the big new dynamics we've seen lately is the international intervention and the launching of airstrikes in Iraq and also in Syria, and

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what has been particularly interesting recently has been that these strikes have targeted Islamic State-controlled oil refineries, makeshift oil refineries in Eastern Syria, and unfortunately, the strategy behind this, in my view, is misled. The oil earns the Islamic State money and it gives them leverage over populations, but the targeting of the oil itself means that the Islamic State will almost certainly be able to blame the international community for the Islamic State's failure -- future failure to provide oil and gasoline and fuel for families during the winter, which is obviously only weeks away.

And I've spoken with a vast amount of Syrian opposition groups recently and almost unanimously they have agreed on that point, that in many respects the targeting of the oil at the source will prove to be a significant failure in the international coalition's attempt to cut off ISIS oil financing.

Now, on the other hand, if you give me one or two more minutes, the element of international support provided to ISIS has also attracted a lot of

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attention in Western media, but in many respects it's actually extremely misleading. Going all the way back to 2004 to 2005, the Islamic State and its various predecessor organizations made a very conscious attempt to be financially self-sufficient.

And so, all the way, going back to proven figures seized by the American military in 2005 and up to this current day, the Islamic State is probably only relying on about 5 percent of its income from external sources and external donors and so to this day, the element of external financial contributions toward the Islamic State is relatively inconsequential. But if the international community does succeed in cutting off its internal sources of finance, these external donors will become more important and that, I believe, is why the international community is very keenly seeking out some of these donors across the Middle Eastern region to try and cut off the potential for those donors to provide a long-term source of sustainability for the Islamic State and their operations in both Syria and

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Iraq.

So, it's an unclear question and an awful lot in terms of their sustainability depends on how the international coalition acts and also the extent to which local actors are provided the opportunity and the additional support to fight against the Islamic State and its control of territory. And the most unfortunate thing is, so far, in my view, the international community's strategy in Syria and Iraq is far too counterterrorism focused. There's an awful lot of spoken objectives of, you know, we need to roll back the Islamic State, we need to put moderate forces in Syria back into power.

But at the moment, those forces are being almost entirely ignored and air strikes will only minimally contain the Islamic State in today's current conditions.

MR. BARAKAT: Thank you so much, Charles. Let's keep focus on the Islamic State, and clearly finance helps, but obviously they are powered by something much more stronger than just finance. You

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all remember the days when we used to say the Taliban are motivated by the \$200 a month that they were getting. Now, is that the real issue or is it more ideological? And earlier Richard kind of alluded to the word jihad and said, maybe I'm not sure if we should use jihad.

Now I'd like to ask you, Bilal, because you have a particular knowledge of the situation, you've spent a lot of time with some of these fighters, you've shared with them a lot of experiences. What actually drives them? What is the ideological component, if you like, the essence of what makes them sacrifice themselves, in some cases, travel all the way from the West, Northern Europe, from Europe and North America to come to Syria to die, basically?

MR. ABDUL KAREEM: Mujahidin fighters -- and I'm going to use this term loosely -- Mujahidin fighters, not just in the Islamic State, but first I'm going to talk about them in general, they are just like the people of the UK. Can we say that everyone in the UK is the same? No. It's not realistic.

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Could we say that the 350 million people in America are the same? No, that's not realistic either because you have different types, different motivations and such like that.

But there is an underlying factor amongst all of these fighters and I would say 98 percent of them, it revolves around two issues. Issue number one is that they are very motivated to establish an Islamic state. An Islamic State is going to carry different connotations depending on who you talk to, but the end goal for all of these fighters is that they want to establish the Quran and the Sunnah as the foremost or the only legislation for their society.

Now, after having said that, having reached this goal, this is where the issues start to differ. Jabhat al-Nusra was very successful in the early stages because they really had a real lock on understanding the people. They had many Syrians within their ranks and that helped out tremendously. ISIS didn't do so good early on or even, you know, past early on because they didn't have that Syrian

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element and they just didn't know how to deal with the Syrian people. They didn't get on with them very well and that led to some issues, and we'll talk about more of that in a second.

In terms of their motivation, the second issue is -- in the Syrian territories, is to help the Syrian people. This is something that I think is really overlooked by a lot of people now. We're speaking in general, Mujahidin fighters in general, that they watch what's advertised on the 6:00 o'clock news. People are being killed, barrel bombs, and all of this is quite unsettling to see people in this condition, particularly when you find 20 to 25 year olds who are unhappy with their circumstances -- and we'll talk more about that in a second -- and they actually have an opportunity to help someone. And this is what's motivating most of them.

Some people are feeling like Mujahidin fighters from across Europe or the U.S. or Canada, they go to these territories because they want to spread terror and give currency to their anger. This

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is totally incorrect and false. They go there because they want to help the people, they go there because they want to see the oppression being taken off their backs.

Now, once they get there, depending on who you are with would depend upon some of the ideology and the methodology that you may fall -- that you might actually end up falling into. So, when you have these fighters who have legitimate -- legitimate grievances -- legitimate grievances -- and they go over to this place and to other places around the world, Afghanistan, Mali, and places like this, and all, they've got legitimate grievances that are not being addressed, actually they're being marginalized.

You do not find people who would give their lives, leave their homes, join into fighting brigades except if they have very strong motivation to do that -- very strong motivation to do that. So, we have to ask ourselves -- and this is a question I think is not being asked -- what is motivating these people? What is it that's causing somebody to leave the UK, he's

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got a decent place to live, food on the table, and he goes to Syria to fight? Now, if he was a true terrorist, it would be easy just to put a bomb in Tesco, or it would be easy to put a bomb in a gas station or something like that. That's easy. Why would they go to Syria to fight a proper military?

And I think this is not being explored and this is what's happening where we're having this clash of civilization and I believe, after having spent extensive time with them, both on camera and off camera and discussing all types of issues, if we go back to 2013, there was a lot of talk that the Syrian regime might fall. It wasn't an issue of six months, one year, it was one month, a couple of weeks. This is what the talk was. This was before the split with Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS.

So, everybody began to sit around and talk. Well, what do you think we should do after we finish, after we march to Damascus? And what was first and foremost is Israel. Second, what was on the list, was Lebanon if the Hezbollah fighters decide to help

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Bashar. Blowback to the UK, blowback to America, to Canada and such like that, it actually never came up, it wasn't even a topic that was discussed.

But then earlier this year something changed. The UK had an idea that, hey, these guys are going to become radicalized and they're going to come back to our lands and they're going to want to wage a jihad. I believe that they tried to fix a problem that factually they didn't have, and this turned some of the fighters' attentions, I believe, towards other things.

So, if you look at blowback -- blowback is only prevalent from territories where there's international intervention -- I'll say this again -- blowback is only an issue when there are regions and territories where there is international intervention. So, when there's international intervention, you've got to worry about, is there going to be an Afghan who's going to come to my country, who's going to be upset because we've launched quite a few missiles in his territory? Possibly. Is there going to be

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someone from Mali who's going to come? Possibly. These are issues that you have to worry about when you're intervening in other peoples' affairs. When you are not intervening into other peoples' affairs, the blowback possibility is significantly lessened.

So, I haven't been following the time. Like my mother, I kind of go on and on and on -- but I'm going to try to rein myself in and I'm going to wrap this up by saying, if we are going to be serious, and I'm speaking particularly to people like you, and to people like you, and to some of the people here who have circles of influence -- if we're going to be serious about heading off this clash of civilizations, we are going to have to change our strategy. Everything that has been done on the "War on Terror" since September 11th has done nothing except bolster the forces against Western interests, if that's what they're after, but I kind of have my doubts that that's what they're after.

So, you've got to look at the facts here.

Whatever we're doing, obviously it's not working,

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obviously it's not working, obviously it's not working. Did I say that? Obviously, it's not working.

So, if this is really what the different powers are after, that's going to have to be relooked at, and likewise, I want to give everybody an opportunity to -- a window to look into how these Mujahidin fighters think. They think very much like you have Western powers and you have democracy. So, there is a small percentage of them -- a small percentage of them -- who say that all people in Western democracies are a target because with their votes they empowered these people, like Obama, and therefore they bomb our lands.

And then there's the other side of it that says, well, what is the sin of the people who voted for Obama? He promised to close Guantanamo. He didn't do it. He promised changes that he would make in his foreign policy. He didn't do it. So, what was the sin of the other people who voted for him and they were deceived by him, so therefore they could not be

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legitimate targets.

Now, when the bombs start to fall, all of the sudden now the moderate voices don't have a voice anymore. And only the "radical voices" take over. I'm not sure if that's being properly communicated to the powers that be, so therefore we've got this thing where this side is saying, we're going to send our suicide bombers to deal with you, and this side is saying, we're going to send our F-16s to deal with you, and to be honest with you, we're all caught in the middle because I don't have the bullet proof limousine that Obama does. I have the same ears but not the same, you know, limousine.

So, I'm going to wrap that up by saying, if we're serious about the future, there's got to be some changes in strategy

MR. BARAKAT: Thank you so much. If you'll allow me to go back to Richard. Now, it's not working, according to Bilal. It is self-financing, as Charles is suggesting, more or less. There is some external element, but the majority of the money is

coming from inside, they have the infrastructure to sustain themselves, and we seem to be doing the same mistakes through the current campaign.

Nevertheless, now we're in a position where there's a large coalition, many Muslim and Arab countries are a party to this. Where do we head from here? We haven't heard anything about a future vision after the bombing if we are able to (inaudible) the Islamic State. Something else is going to take place and that thing is going to happen, that vision is not there.

What do you think? Are we -- is there a chance of winning this in this particular campaign or should we be looking for a different strategy?

MR. BARRETT: Right. Well, I would agree with the fundamental premise put forth by Bilal that we need a different strategy. We shouldn't be fighting the same war 13 years in a row. We should be moving along since 2001.

But let's look at some of the other factors. There are push factors and pull factors for people

DOHA-2014/10/29

joining the Islamic State, and if there are 30,000, let's say, roughly fighters -- actual active fighters in the Islamic State and perhaps about half of them are foreigners, and perhaps about half of those are from regional countries, you know, then we're looking essentially, in my view, at a regional problem, not necessarily an indigenous problem in Iraq. And the people who are coming are pushed by their sense of disaffection, the lack of good Western policy towards Syria, for example, wanting to provide humanitarian assistance, wanting a sense of belonging, of identity. I think that's very important indeed.

But there are also factors on the ground which are allowing the Islamic State to thrive, and that is that they are filling something which is not in a space which isn't really occupied. There's a lack of governance, a lack of reliable justice, a lack of equal opportunity, all these sorts of things, and a fundamental divide in the region between people who would support, say, Sunnis versus Shia or once sort of government against another sort of government, you

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DOHA-2014/10/29

know, these sorts of divides which really not only undermine the idea of vision and leadership, which is what you're saying quite rightly, but actually underground in the local villages and the small towns, makes people either part of the establishment or the enemy of the establishment. There's not very much ground in between.

So, I'm saying that if you solve that problem of absence, which comes down, in my view, to regional policies, vision, leadership, projection of something which is forward-looking rather than saying, okay, let's bomb the hell out of them and move back to what we had before, that is not attractive to most people to go back to what they had before.

How far back? Is it back when we had power or back when you had power or back when somebody else altogether had power? It's not a good thing to project and to recruit people to your (inaudible). So, how do we get out of that? Well, I think that you need to start with lots of stiff brooms to brush away preconceptions about the nation state, about

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boundaries, about the inviability of boundaries and so on, and you have to start again with new ideas of identity. It's not that you're just part of a clan or part of a tribe or part of an ethnic group or part of a faith or whatever, you know, it's more how do you survive within this particular space in all the imperfections that exist there? And that is almost impossible, of course, to do because, you know, who's going to say, okay, let's start again with a clean slate? Nobody's going to do that. So, it's not practical to look at it that way.

But if you have an ad campaign, which may be quite effective in destroying or knocking back the Islamic State into areas, you know, where it's sort of less important, if you like to the future of the country, and there's nothing to take its place, I think you're -- what I understand in your question -- happens, that something even worse may come along or it may just (inaudible). I don't think that it's a solution.

So, there have to be some basic

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understandings, regionally, first and foremost, but supported internationally, as to how the future is going to look and that means, really, the regional countries, and in particular I would say Saudi, Iran, Turkey, Qatar, maybe Egypt, although Egypt has marginalized itself for the moment, getting together to say, are the threats that are being posed by the Islamic State just about rivalries and our various ascendancies, you know, who's competing with who within that space of Iraq/Syria, or are they so serious that they affect our own internal stability ourselves? And until, I think, those states say actually they are affecting our own internal stability, then there will be a temptation just to let it all sort of carry on in that Iraqi/Syrian space, and I'm saying -- come back to what I was trying to say before is that you can't see that space as just being, well, that's Iraq and that's Syria, this is where the border is, been there since 2016, whatever, we just sort of push it back together again. Have to think beyond that.

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DOHA-2014/10/29

MR. BARAKAT: There's an issue that is often sort of papered over and it's the sectarian dimension of this that people feel the campaign is targeting only one side of extremism, that is the Sunni extremism at the moment. What about the other forms of extremism, the Shia, the ones that backed by Iran and other groups in Iraq and operating in Syria and so on? Do you have a take on that issue? Is the campaign being done in a balanced way that's going to address those two groups or is the idea to sort of deal with it, one side for now and then look at the other side later?

MR. ABDUL KAREEM: Well, I think, first of all, I want to talk briefly about extremists. Everyone who is in the Syrian and Iraqi territories who are fighting are not extremists. As we may have mentioned earlier, some of them have very, very noble goals. There's no question about it, the Syrian people were under lots of pressure. Additionally, the Iraqi people had quite a few issues as well, under the Malaki leadership, Shia death squads and such like

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DOHA-2014/10/29

that, and then the Sunni and then the Shia and then the Sunni and so on and so forth.

So, some people, a lot of them are not actually extremists or I don't believe them to be extreme. They are defending, and they feel like they're defending themselves being that there hasn't emerged a true leadership it's been this perpetual cycle of violence, and until there emerges a real leadership, then that's going to remain there and that's going to be the problem.

But now, in terms of the bombing campaign - - the bombing campaign is serving to do one thing, to bolster the numbers of the Islamic State. So many of the fighters from groups, or some of them, from the Jabhat al-Nusras and from some of the other independent groups who were not really sold on the ISIS model, as soon as the rockets and bombs started to fall from the alliance, they said, you know, if you want to know who's on the truth, then just look where the arrows are going, like Ali bin Abi Talib said, and this is some of the thinking and the logic that they

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use, that being that they're being attacked in this particular way, then we have to respond to this Western aggression, so it bolsters their numbers.

So, this -- you know, just to treat this issue with more bombs has, as you can see, does it look -- if anybody here looks at Kobani, would anybody think that a group would be able to withstand that level of bombardment except that they have serious numbers? Where are these numbers coming from? They didn't have these numbers just a few months ago.

So, obviously something is going on there. As for the Shia side, there are grievances that they have. They have legit grievances. However, those bombs are not falling in their territories right now. They're falling on the other territories, and I'd like to wrap this thing up by saying, as long as those bombs are going to be falling on the Islamic State, who have killed lots of people, but certainly not on the level of Bashar al-Assad, it's a very, very hard sell that you would tell the people, look, guys, just take it easy, everything's going to be okay, because

DOHA-2014/10/29

they've totally forgotten the man who's responsible for 250,000 deaths, and went to the people that are responsible for 10,000 deaths. You're going to have to really question the sincerity of this campaign. I know I do.

MR. BARAKAT: Thank you very much. I'll open now the floor for questions and the way we do it is we'll take three or four questions at a time and then I come back for more questions. Please. If you could please introduce yourself as you speak.

QUESTIONER: My name is (inaudible) and I'm from Al-Jazeera English.

MR. BARAKAT: Sorry, the gentleman here in the front.

QUESTIONER: (Speaking in Arabic.)
(Inaudible) -- for the Syrians. The Syrians, as it was said, they do not need help, they do not need aid, they need to solve their problems on the ground for them to be able to go back to their country, to their homeland, because they need such humanitarian aid. We never needed help before then, but now I would like to

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DOHA-2014/10/29

thank the Brookings Center for paying attention to this issue. I do not know whether you have tackled this issue before and this is maybe a second session.

MR. BARAKAT: (Through translator.) Your idea is clear. We're going to pose other questions to other speakers. Thank you. Please.

QUESTIONER: I have two questions, one is from (inaudible) said that the operations were actually provoking extremism among the jihadis and the (inaudible), I just wanted to raise the question the bombings have not started before the beheadings, the beheadings were probably a tipping point and I just wanted to hear your opinion on what was actually at the core of the beheadings. You said you'd been on the ground talking to these people, can you elaborate on why this decision was made to move forward with these -- of the western hostages.

And my second question is for (inaudible), what do you make of the focus of all these -- the attention of the international media on the air strikes of the coalition on Kobani? Because when you

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DOHA-2014/10/29

look at the town itself, it doesn't seem to have any strategic importance compared to other places that are controlled by ISIS or that are being besieged by ISIS? Thank you.

MR. BARAKAT: Thank you. We'll take one more question.

QUESTIONER: (Speaking in Arabic.)

(Inaudible) from Center of the Historical Studies. Thank you very much. I thank Doha Center, Brookings Center for organizing this important event, which is about a very important theme, the topic that is shaking the region all over and is attracting the attention of the international community and the public opinion and all the media who have nothing to talk about but ISIS.

In fact, I will speak about some of the points in a rapid way only saying that -- referring to the roots of the conflict, what's called this clash of civilizations has several symptoms, but historically speaking, the region is (inaudible) civilization at a clash for decades. The (inaudible) the region went

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into a sort of political conflict between the West and the culture of the region. Then this thing developed into a military confrontation after the first and second Gulf Wars and the third one, now we are facing a third aspect, which is called the maximum of civilization clash, which is well seen through the international reactions and the think tanks reactions about their vision on this topic and the proof is that we are here tonight to discuss this topic, which looking forward, it is something that requires a fast solution. Mr. Richard says that we are looking for a solution.

So, I think we should begin from this point and say that (inaudible) in an interview on al-Jazeera said, we came to the region to put an end to the rule of the Sunnis in Iraq, for which continues more than 1,000 years. In fact, it was 1,400 years. This is a big surgery and I would like to tell to Mr. (inaudible) that his surgery has failed and this has a lot of consequences and repercussions and what we are facing now is a corpse that has some life in it and

DOHA-2014/10/29

what we need -- the surgeon tell us what can we do with this corpse, which has little life left in it. Maybe there are other reactions -- there will be other (inaudible) of this corpse or this dead body is revived and can come back to life.

Back to Bremer when he can't -- the so-called Sunni minority. I find in this paper, which is from a very distinguished center, but I have some reservations about this, because the Sunnis in Iraq are the majority. As Bremer said, Iraq is Sunni (inaudible), so not speaking from a sectarian point of view but from academic point of view and historical point of view. So, somebody is called by other names and the region is called by other names, and when the West does not expect its engagements after (inaudible) that these are safe and recognize borders. So, how can Iraq be divided now and be ruled by militias that go beyond the borders and the international cover.

Another point is the vital sphere, as far as the (inaudible) is important that the international forces have controlling life in general -- the world

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will know that Iran, the Shiite Iran and the Kurds have the free hand and the (inaudible), well, that's not a lot for the Sunnis so they don't have a vital space to live in. This is one of the biggest reasons or strongest reasons that push people to extremism and into clashes and not reconciliation. There are other points that I have --

MR. BARAKAT: Thank you, thank you. We want to give time to other colleagues to answer. What we're dealing with is merely the symptoms of a much deeper problem in this region. It has to do with the Sunni/Shia divide and the perceptions that exist that were (inaudible) eloquently by our colleague here. It has to do with the dictatorial regimes that dominated the region for a long time, absence of freedom, et cetera, and it has to do with the failure of state to govern. And here we are going after the symptoms of this, that we are running after those few thousand fighters using a huge campaign, a lot of weapons, a lot of money, and so on.

What can be done about those root causes?

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And this is a question to the three of you. I'm happy to hear from anyone.

MR. LISTER: I'll start by saying more than anything, I think, current policy, as has been said, has been dominated by short-termist thinking, which I think translates into attacking the symptoms rather than the underlying foundation of these problems, and I think it's clear to many people, perhaps less so to policy makers or maybe it's proving harder to turn this into policy, but the immediate solution and the long-term solution is clearly -- in terms of fighting back against extremism, is to coordinate with local actors and use local actors. Local actors are the solution to this. It's not going to be solved from the outside and there are very clear examples in Syria and Iraq, they are very different examples, but it's both extremely clear that there are a vast number of local societal organizations, armed groups, tribes, community groups, et cetera, et cetera, who are perfectly capable of pushing back against extremists, but they need the support, they need the assistance.

DOHA-2014/10/29

I think this is extremely clear in Syria, but it's also the case in Iraq, although it's somewhat more complicated.

And in a sense, that does also feed in to your original question, Sultan, earlier about the role of the Shia militias, for example, in Iraq and in Syria. It's a quite underplayed aspect but it's perhaps just as significant in terms of reinforcing a perception of sectarian dynamics in both countries and the fact that, for example, I saw yesterday, Qasem Soleimani, who's managing essentially Iran's outreach and support of many of the Shia Iranian supported militias in Iraq was deployed with a Shia militia yesterday south of Baghdad, which captured an apparent Islamic State fighter and towed him around on the back of a truck for half an hour, and so this is ignored, but acts like that, and these spread like wildfire across social media, reinforce the very perceptions that we need to be fighting against, and the fact that in Iraq and in Syria the United States and its various allies are perceived, rightly or wrongly, as

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coordinating actions with Iran and the fact that then a very senior Iranian official is pictured at the scene of something like that yesterday is deeply, deeply damaging to trying to sow the seeds of a non-sectarian future in both countries.

And I agree of course. When I speak with Syrians and Iraqis, they say, but my country is not sectarian, and of course that's true, but there are actors who are creating this perception of sectarianism and reinforcing that on a day-to-day basis and there does need to be an acceptance that that is the case and it needs to be solved and only local actors can do that.

MR. BARAKAT: Thank you so much. Richard, the issue of Kobani, what is the strategic importance of this small town? And if I may add to your question, more so from the Islamic State perspective, why are they so keen to get in in this particular town?

MR. BARRETT: Yes. The Islamic State military tactics are quite interesting because very

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often they act strategically and seem quite sensible and other times they seem very silly in dissipating their forces, moving them around to lots of different fronts and so on, and their main military commander, who seems to be the best they have, is the Chechen, Omar al-Shishani, who would not go near Kobani, he's been very active around Ambar and in fact they made a lot of advances around Ambar, but Kobani, that was part of a strategy that the Islamic State seemed to be pursuing to control all the border along with Turkey and to get supplies and manpower and move people across the border themselves, but also to deny that opportunity to rivals. And then Kobani suddenly took off as sort of a big issue and then it became, well, we're not going to be seen to lose this battle. And then on the other side, the Kurds didn't want to be seen to lose this battle. Then the Islamic State, in my view, saw the advantage of putting Turkey in this very difficult position, because these are not Kurds like in the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq that Turkey supports. These are much more PKK type Kurds,

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which Turkey does not support.

So, immediately ISIS, because they're not stupid, saw that this would put pressure on the coalition, particularly one of the main partners, Turkey. And then, of course, the Americans came in with air strikes around Kobani and then it became an issue of, well, can the Americans, this great power, this international superpower, beat us, the Islamic State, with just a few fighters fighting in Kobani? Can they or can't they? You know, we still play off that from the Hill and stuff like that. Maybe we take it on occasionally, but we get back.

So, now all sorts of different factors come in to influence this fight over, as you say, a really completely insignificant part of territory.

MR. BARAKAT: Thank you. That's very interesting. Bilal, talking about the issue of factors influencing action, the question was raised about the beheadings and the way they were portrayed on media. It does, maybe, in some peoples' mind, it brings into question the sincerity of the response and

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more so the will to find and to address those root causes that have created this phenomenon. What's your view on this?

MR. ABDUL KAREEM: Well, firstly, we have to look at Alan Henning, Jim Foley, John Cantlie, all of these prisoners had been imprisoned for many months, none of them were new, yet there was no beheading or even appearance on any video of any kind until August 12th, August the 12th, James Foley appeared in a video in which he was threatening -- he was threatened by the man with the knife and the -- and everybody remembers that.

But what date did the coalition bombing begin? August the 8th. Other prisoners from the French prisoners and other than that had come into their clutches, if you want to call it that, and they were released or ransoms were paid and so on and so forth, but these were different, and we can't ignore the fact that it was the 12th, four days after the coalition bombings began, that they appeared next to the guy that had the knife. We can't pretend that

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happened by chance, because it didn't.

Too often we would like to write these things off by just saying that these are extremists, and I do believe that ISIS, they are extremists, but we just want to write this off as if, you know, they've got some wild ideas of something like that, but this is not the case. Much of this is based upon actions, perceived actions, aggressions that have taken place against them.

If we just look at Canada, and I'll be very brief with this, Canada, earlier this last week, I believe it was, there was a Muslim, new Muslim who took action and killed a couple of Canadian soldiers. Now, the first thing that happened is the Prime Minister of Canada got up on TV and he said that this terrorist act and this terrorist act and the terrorists and terrorist act. Now, whether you like what happened or you don't like what happened, let's talk about reality. The reality is that Canada had been at war in a Muslim country for 13 years. It is totally unrealistic to assume that at some point

someone is not going to respond to what they perceive to be your aggression.

So, I have an issue with calling this a terrorist attack. It was an attack, whether you like it or not, but a terrorist attack? This person actually waited, according to the Canadian Security Services, for two hours, to attack soldiers. There were plenty of pedestrians and civilians walking around that were not attacked.

So, we're going to have to look at this and we're going to have to redefine this throwing of the word of extremist and terrorism and such like that and I think that we're going to have to focus on, is it really that some of these things are happening because of foreign policy? We're going to have to really examine that.

MR. BARAKAT: Thank you so much. We'll take another round of questions. Please.

QUESTIONER: (Inaudible) researcher in Islamic thinking. My question is, jihad in Islam has some rules that's kind of worshipping and it's not in

DOHA-2014/10/29

line Da'ish is doing. Da'ish (inaudible) in Damascus and Baghdad. So, what is it doing in other liberated zones in Syria and what is it doing in the other Iraqi, Sunni regions? This is the -- and the goals of Da'ish after why what's doing is something serious.

Another thing, Da'ish, as the relationship with Syria, with Iran, with USA, are they the same relationships? I think this is the only question I want to ask.

MR. BARAKAT: Yes, doctor, please. Briefly.

QUESTIONER: (Inaudible). In the name of (inaudible) most compassionate. In fact, I have come from Germany after an aid holiday and I was called for a dinner meeting about ISIS. So, as if there's no other problem, somebody asked me, where are you going? I said a seminar about ISIS. He said, you are like them, the ISIS is not so bad. We must keep in mind that ISIS had stopped the creation of a Kurdish state, which is another Israeli state, and has stopped the creation of the (inaudible) Crescent.

So, my question, why did we call those who

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they brought them to the first Afghan war were financed by USA, (inaudible) jihadists and going into a holy war and our freedom fries and they made a film, Rambo film for them, well, as long as they are called extremists and terrorists, there has been Arab revolutions, peaceful ones, that would have been able to kill this extremism of ISIS, but you left the dictator (inaudible) and you say to that (inaudible) killed 6,000 people in one day and nobody protested against that. You protest against ISIL, you don't protest to what Da'ish -- what Bashar and CC are doing.

MR. BARAKAT: With the glasses, yes, please.

QUESTIONER: Thank you very much. I am Satora Nakamora from Japan, Kobe University and currently a visiting scholar to Qatar University. Thank you very much for all the precious information and the discussions, but I would like to raise a question to Mr. Bilal. You raised the strategy after September 11 is all a bit kind of mistakes. What would you suggest other options beyond bombing to

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ISIS? Do you think they would (inaudible) to table that respond to -- come in for dialogues or can we make up some kind of political solutions?

I guess you are not supporting training (inaudible) origins, so I guess you have other options (inaudible) point some of them. Thank you very much.

MR. BARAKAT: Thank you very much. I'm going to start with your question, actually, because I think you're bringing a very interesting, new dimension to this dialogue. We seem to have lost the art of conversation in this part of the world. We don't talk anymore and maybe more so since 9/11, you're either with us or against us.

Is there room for dialogue with these groups, do you think, or is this an impossible thing to achieve?

MR. ABDUL KAREEM: I believe very, very strongly that the majority of these groups that are fighting for an Islamic State, which is not limited only to ISIS, as we may mention, you know, different paths that they want to take to achieve this goal, I

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believe that opening the door to dialogue is very, very possible, very, very possible. However, it will not be easy. You made mention about, you know, in the wake of September 11th and bombing and such like that, the first and foremost thing that we have to keep in mind is that if we're looking at the facts and we're seeing that the additional bombing is making the situation worse, we've got to say that we really need to maybe think about not doing this anymore. So, then, what would be the alternatives? Firstly, the alternatives are this: I believe strongly that Muslims, just like Americans, just like Canadians, are well able to sort out their problems and their issues. They're able to do that. However, when you have constant intervention from outside actors, this is going to make the situation worse.

Now, is it realistic that we're going to say now that the Iranians are not going to get involved, the Saudis are not going to get involved, and the Turks are not going to get involved? No, this is not realistic. However, these are regional players and

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that's normal and that's natural. However, when we have other players getting involved -- the UK, the U.S., and such like that -- these are what you would call traditional enemies as far as these fighters see it. They see America and the UK and the West as traditional enemies. Their involvement totally changes the paradigm and the dynamic.

So, yes, if you engage in some of these groups -- in all of these groups with an opportunity to discuss what is your core issue, I may agree with you. I might not agree with you. We might finish the conversation in a punch up, but at the end of the day, we're now sitting and we're discussing, what is your problem, Abdullah, and he said, well, you know, Steve, my main problem is this. Really? I didn't know that. And now we can start to discuss this.

But as he made mention, if the only thing that we're going to talk about doing is firing upon one another, I fear what's going to happen next. Right now, the major weapons of mass destruction are in the hands of Western powers. We cannot assume that

DOHA-2014/10/29

this dynamic is going to remain as it is today. What is going to happen when some of these people get a hold of weapons of mass destruction? No one can say around the world -- you've got how many mujahidin fighters, which is interesting, which you made mention as well -- what's going to happen when they get weapons of mass destruction and they want to return fire? That's what we're leading up to.

If we don't get serious about talking -- I'm talking about from both sides -- I can promise you that we're going to talk in five or ten years, but that's only going to be after hundreds of thousands of people in America, UK, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, have been killed. We're going to talk. Everybody's going to talk. But how many people are going to be dead by that time?

So, I say we need to get serious about that now and like yesterday.

MR. BARAKAT: Thank you. Richard.

MR. BARRETT: Yeah. It's great. But before joining the Soufan Group I worked ten years at the

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United Nations and I can't remember how many heads of state, heads of government I listened to speaking at the United Nations. We're really good at talking. We're really good at talking. We're not very good at doing anything, that's the problem.

Talk is cheap, talk is easy, but fundamentally, when it comes down to practical politics, it has to be self-interest, they have to be driven by self-interest, whether it's at the community level or at the national or international level, and that's why I say again, that right now, we're at the crucial national/regional level. I don't think self-interest, at the moment, determines resolving this problem. I think it's prepared to kick the can down the road and let the problem carry on for a bit because if I solve it, I have to give up something. I don't want to give that up, therefore I'll just sort of let it go on, see if my rivals have to give up more.

And this is a big, big problem without vision or leadership, because as you said, it may go

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too far you can no longer solve it, and all wars, you know, that resolve themselves eventually, end up with massive movements of people. Already in Iraq/Syria, we've seen massive movements of people and, fine, okay, that may be some sort of solution, you get a balkanization, if you like, of the problem, but when you get communities who have a history now, generational history, of fighting one another and they're now in smaller units, it doesn't necessarily bode particularly well for progress towards a more stable region or world.

So, I would agree with you, talking is great, but talking leading to action is the key thing.

MR. BARAKAT: Talking leading to action, but it's also talking in order to understand the position of the other.

MR. BARRET: Well, understanding --

MR. BARAKAT: In order to establish a strategic position. I mean, I have a question here from someone who's following us on the Internet and it's a very simple question. What are the Arabs

gaining from their war on Da'ish? Why did they all rush to join the coalition at that speed, with money and weapons and so on, when there are many other priorities elsewhere? What are they gaining? Have they undertaken the analysis as to the threat of Da'ish or the Islamic State, to their own states, their own positions, or were they just responding to the American request that were established as a response to the beheadings and so forth and other threats?

MR. ABDUL KAREEM: I firmly believe that they responded -- see, America, UK, they are not in need of planes from the UAE or any of these other places. They've got more planes than they have, they've got more planes in the mechanic shop than these other countries have, but what they require from them is legitimacy. They need to have these other countries so that they can say, hey, we came there with the coalition to help to solve this issue.

So, they pressure these weaker governments and force them to participate in this and I do have to

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DOHA-2014/10/29

say that I've got to take my hat off, if I had a hat, if I had some hair to put on it, to (inaudible) because he really put forward something that was very, very important. They said that we will participate in this because we see ISIS as a threat. However, we have four conditions -- and I hope that I can remember all four of them -- one of them is that you have to establish a no-fly zone, another one is that we have to train and prepare the future forces, another one is that we also have to target regime forces -- regime meaning the Syrian regime, and I'm sorry I've forgotten the fourth one -- and a buffer zone.

This, in my opinion, showed true leadership. We've got a threat. If you want our assistance in this you've got to be prepared to satisfy, just as you made mention, this is going to have to satisfy some of our demands as well. Unfortunately, I believe that some of the other Arab countries, through pressures or whatever it is that is said in the back door that they joined in. They have no stake in this. They have nothing to gain by this except to draw the ire of

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people that did not have you in their crosshairs but now they just might.

MR. BARAKAT: Thank you so much. Thanks. Charles, the links or suspected links between the Islamic State and the regime in Damascus, is that something that is established or could you comment on that?

MR. LISTER: It's a very contentious subject. I think if you're talking about actual concrete links between the regime and ISIS today, there aren't any concrete, coordinative, cooperative links. However, with that being said, you can look back in history, back towards the U.S. occupation all the way from 2003, it was very clear that the Assad regime very strongly facilitated transfer of foreign fighters into AQI, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and its various successor organizations.

So, there are links in history between the Assad regime and the jihadist organization that is, today, the Islamic State.

But they're very much at loggerheads today.

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There was a period of time, nearly a year, in fact, from probably approximately July or August 2013 until about June this year, whereby the Assad regime and ISIS rarely fought, if ever.

Now, I personally believe that did not have anything to do with coordinating operations together, but more of it was a pragmatic belief from both sides that they had more immediate enemies to be fighting. Back in July 2013, Assad was -- and his armed forces and supporting militias -- were fighting for their lives, they were fighting to protect Damascus and secure the Lebanese border through the Kullanimi Mountains and up through the main road into Tartus and Latakia and likewise, the Islamic State was predominantly focused on expanding its influence across Northern Syria, which, by extension, was a period or an area of the country where Assad forces were almost zero.

So, they didn't really have an interest in fighting each other, and I think, probably, if I might try and defend my theory, the one biggest piece of

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evidence of that was when ISIS or the Islamic State had conquered most of Raqqa governorate, they had taken Mosul in June this year, they had, you know, sparked this mass offensive movement across Iraq, and then look what happened: ISIS was in a comfortable enough position to re-initiate operations against the Syrian regime, and it did, and it did extremely fast. It took over, I think, six major military bases in four weeks capturing huge amounts of weaponry and killing hundreds of Syrian soldiers.

And that was simply as a result of the fact that ISIS was in a position to fight the regime again. It had conquered enough of the north and the east of Syria to be able to refocus its energy on the regime in order to acquire local domination of the north and the east of the country, which is what it has comparatively done by this stage.

With that being said, there's the one, probably -- the one come back against this argument is the financial one and there is very clear evidence that the Islamic State has, for a very long time been

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selling oil through middle men to regime areas of the country, including into Damascus. But, again, I think that's more to do with pragmatism. Islamic State has a product, government -- pro-government businessmen, middle men, have an interest in buying that oil and then selling it more expensively to pro-government people in Damascus, but it doesn't mean that the government and the ISIS have mutual interests, because they most certainly do not, not in the long-term, certainly.

MR. BARAKAT: Thank you so much. We still have five minutes and I'll use it -- there are lots of questions. I can only take two, I think, so please, if you can, be very, very brief and introduce yourself as you ask the question. The young man in the black t-shirt.

QUESTIONER: Hi. Thanks. So, I was going to ask a question -- I'm not sure who brought it up, but they talked about supporting local actors or local states. Are we talking about supporting Assad? I mean, this has been a thing that was talked about by

several IR theorists that sort of question whether the Obama Administration really wants to stop ISIS in the first place. If they did, they'd set up a loose confederation in Iraq, right, that would respect the regional -- relatively autonomous sort of sectarian divides and support the strongest actor against ISIS, which would be Assad. So, any thoughts on that?

MR. BARAKAT: Thank you so much. Please, yes, in the back.

QUESTIONER: Yes, my name is (inaudible) Mubarak. I'm a professor at Qatar University. My question is for the United States, okay, ISIS is a terrorist organization and it's a threat. We, in the Syrian opposition, would be warning against it for at least a year and a half. I know many people who spoke in media that this is a growing threat and the more vicious the regime gets, the more it kills and the more it maims, it's going to provoke this radicalism somehow. And we've seen that grow and we hoped that a practical solution was to support the Free Syrian Army to be the dominant mainstream opposition, but that was

DOHA-2014/10/29

totally ignored and the West turned a blind eye on the growing terrorism there within the extremist organizations purposely (inaudible).

So, how do you explain that?

MR. BARAKAT: Thank you. I'll change the rule, I'll take one more question, but please make it very brief.

QUESTIONER: (Inaudible). If you leave our country there will be no need to any jihad. I hope they can convey this message to your countries, to your people in USA and the West. This is a summary of the whole thing.

MR. BARAKAT: Right. So, the two questions we heard, they're alluding to one position, really, that is a solution to the issue in Syria either by supporting Assad and saying, well, strong states may be the answer to counter these kind of movements, and we saw the example of breaking up Iraq and now Syria and so on, or by coming clear and strong behind the opposition in Syria. What can be done? What can be done? Do you think it is pragmatic, it is helpful to

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think in those terms, one or the other? Or maybe linking to the issue of dialogue, maybe there is a third way in which one could engage with all sides simultaneously. Richard?

MR. BARRETT: Okay. I don't think there's a solution that could leave Bashar al-Assad in power, but how would he be removed from power? I think that would be for the Syrians to decide. So, the Syrians - - somehow the Syrians must have the capability, have the opportunity, to decide the nature of their future government. How do you provide that I think is extremely difficult to determine.

I agree with President Erdoğan and Bilal here that you can't solve the problem of the Islamic State without solving the problem of Bashar al-Assad and Syria. But the United States, extremely exhausted with intervention, intervention itself is a very complex issue, is very controversial issue, why do you intervene here and not intervene there, for example. Didn't work out so well in Iraq. I would suggest maybe not -- we shall see what happened in other

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countries where there has been some sort of intervention, but we had two Geneva processes, both of which failed and most people think they failed, essentially, because the United States and Russia disagreed, and until you have Security Council agreement and until you have an agreement at that level, I think it's difficult to think that it can come up from a community level and just sort of manage to sort things out by some magical process.

And the Free Syrian Army, yes, has been starved, to a certain extent, of resources, but what is the Free Syrian Army? I think it's quite difficult to say that the Free Syrian Army has an identity, a leadership, and a traction, a dynamic, within Syria that rarely inspires people to think that it is going to provide a solution when it is surrounded by so many difficulties -- Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic State, but also the sectarianism and the regional problems in Lebanon, for example, in Jordan, and in other neighbors.

MR. BAKARAT: Thank you very much. Bilal?

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MR. ABDUL KAREEM: The issue, in my opinion, is not the fall of ISIS. I don't think that that's the issue. I think that the issue is who defeats them, because what happens when someone who controls territory is pushed out, some force pushes in. If this is a Western force or a Western-backed force, if it's either a Western force or a Western-backed force, there will be no peace in that area because what you have is you have Islamic factions who are fighting in these territories.

Any possible permutation for peace in the future that does not include them is doomed to failure. It doesn't make a difference whether people actually like them or they don't like them or whatever the case is, they are players in the game, and as long as they are going -- we're going to look for the Free Syrian Army, okay, no, not the Free Syrian Army, okay, well, look, what about Bashar al-Assad, 250,000 people, okay, we can put that on the side, and I know that probably is too fast for the translators, but the reality of the situation is that there's got to be

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some level of Islamic solution to this issue or it will surely, surely fail.

We spoke briefly about the main opposition to ISIS. The main opposition to ISIS is not Bashar al-Assad. The main opposition to ISIS, if you look at all of the fighters who are active in the Syrian territories, are Zahran Alloush's group, the Ahrar al-Shams, the Jabhat al-Nusras, when you put that together, that number has got to at least dwarf the Assad regime. So, I don't see that it's either this or it's either that, because both of those permutations are doomed to failure and I think it's going to weigh very, very heavily on the people of Syria.

So, I wrap this up by saying supporting groups that don't have traction on the ground, like the Free Syrian Army, is something that will make the people in the Washington and the Downing Streets -- make them happy and they'll feel like they're doing something, but all they're doing is destroying the Syrian people, and I think that they need to stay out

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of it.

MR. BARAKAT: Thank you so much. Charles, closing words?

MR. LISTER: Sure. I think probably most of what I'll say will be largely in agreement, but I'll expand on a few points.

I think Richard is absolutely right in terms of the first question about Assad. There are people in various administrations who tout the question, you know, maybe things would just be easier if we place our support in Assad's lap and then he's got the capabilities, he's got the relatively unified security force apparatus to fight against extremism, but -- and it's a very big but -- there is a pretty much unanimous acceptance that Assad isn't a unifying factor in Syria, and that is over and above everything else what Western states are looking for in Syria, if we're talking about Syria in particular.

Whatever comes for Syria's future, for Syria's political future, has to be a unified Syria, has to be a non-sectarian future and that isn't what

DOHA-2014/10/29

you're going to get from sustaining Bashar al-Assad's power, and I think that's why the overarching rhetoric coming out of most Western governments these days is that there has to be a transition eventually.

Now, absolutely, I think all of us have said so far that moves towards that are far too slow, if not moving at all, but that is the eventuality that Western governments are looking for and it is the eventuality that I would say is the most positive. There will have to be a sort of unified Syrian government negotiated between all Syrians, not just between the opposition and between Assad supporters, but between the vast middle ground, the gray area that is relatively unengaged today.

And then on the second point, I would say that probably the biggest failure of Western policy is an extension of that earlier point, is that the idea that the opposition has to one day succeed in one way or another, whether that be by forcing a transition or by actually winning the conflict, the fact that Western states have always stood by that, their

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actions haven't resulted in that eventuality and that has primarily been because they've had such tight blinkers on a very small subsection of the Syrian opposition and they've, through some understandable policy restrictions, had to refuse engagement with various Islamic organizations, for example, they've swayed away from other organizations because of, for example, Gulf political tensions, and all of that has resulted in a failure to create a truly representative Syrian opposition, which is representative of the people on the ground.

Too often I have meetings with Syrian military commanders, including moderate Free Syrian Army guys, who still say they don't see their exiled opposition as representative of their interests. They still say, we want to create our own structure and only then will we be interested in negotiating with the government. Until we feel represented, we'll have no interest in any kind of negotiation that's going on, and so in that sense, to cut a long story short, the biggest failure is having not created a truly

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representative opposition structure, both a political, a civil, and a military one all combined, and there are, which is fascinating, very significant moves going on inside Syria, to do exactly that right now and it will be extremely interesting to see whether or not that ends up being created and whether or not international states interfere with it or not.

MR. BARAKAT: Thank you so much. Thank you for the three of you. It's been absolutely fascinating. I will not attempt to summarize what was said except to say, we seem to be in agreement that the bombing campaign and the strategy in its current form is unlikely to deliver the results desired, not just internationally, but also more so regionally and there is a call for a greater degree of engagement, maybe around the issue, maybe it's a degree of dialogue with some elements that are involved in the conflict at the moment, there is a call for being slightly more selective in terms of identifying your partners and who you work with, and more importantly, I think there is a call for Arab nations to better

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understand the threats from this phenomena to them and why is it in their interest or not to be at the forefront of this war.

With this, I'll bring this session to conclusion and I'd like to thank my colleagues who have worked very hard behind the scenes to make this happen.

* * * * *

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