THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

ISIS LEADER ABU BAKR AL-BAGHDADI AND SAUDI CROWN PRINCE MUHAMMAD BIN NAYEF

THE TWO MEN AT THE CENTER OF THE STRUGGLE OVER VIOLENT JIHADI EXTREMISM

Washington, D.C.
Wednesday, November 4, 2015

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. GHATTAS: Good afternoon, and thank you for joining us at the Brookings Institution. And thank you to all of you who are also joining us online this afternoon from around the U.S., and perhaps also certainly around the world.

I'm Kim Ghattas. I'm a BBC correspondent based on Washington covering international affairs. I covered the Middle East for a very long time from Beirut where I was born and raised.

I'll be your moderator for today's event, a discussion about violent jihadi extremism, the men leading it, and those fighting it. ISIS's chief, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, who is also the interior minister. These two men are enemies. They are in essence out to kill each other, and they're on opposite sides, therefore, of a fight that is consuming the Middle East, destroying the lives of hundreds of thousands of people across the region, and keeping policymakers awake, both in the Arab world and in the West, in the U.S. and in Europe.

We are going to have a policy discussion as well this afternoon about what to do about ISIS. What are Saudi Arabia's options? What are American policy options? Because it isn't just about Syria and Iraq, which make most of the headlines today, but it is also, of course, about ISIS's presence in other parts of the Arab world, from Yemen to Egypt and Libya.

The juxtaposition of the lives of these two men and what drives them in our event today is what makes this so interesting. It's not just your average policy panel and discussion, but an innovative format. This is the first time that the Brookings Institution does this. We are going to have visual presentations by two Brookings scholars wo have written two essays on the two men that I just mentioned, and their two presentations will be followed by a discussion that I will moderate on stage and then we'll take questions from the audience.

At my far left, Will McCants. He's the director for the project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World. He's an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins, and he is also the author most recently of The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State.

Next to me is Bruce Riedel. He is the director for the Intelligence Project at Brookings. He joined after serving 30 years in the Central Intelligence Agency, including postings in the Middle East and Europe. He knows many of the players in the Middle East personally. He is also the author of JFK's Forgotten Crisis: Tibet, the CIA, and the Sino-Indian War. And I recommend both books.

The Brookings essay was launched two years ago. It's a multimedia long form, narrative essay on key international issues, and there have been 14 so far focused on everything from equality and opportunity in America, to the role of nuclear energy in the battle against climate change. Authors have been in-house. For example, the Brookings president, Strobe Talbott, but also outside experts, such as historians Margaret MacMillan and William Dalrymple. And you can get all of those essays online.

In a moment, we are going to hear from Bruce Riedel on "the prince of counterterrorism" and the story of Washington's favorite Saudi. But first, we're going to hear from William McCants on the believer, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, an introvert who became the leader of the Islamic State.

Will, the stage is yours. We'll rejoin you back here when you're done.

MR. MCCANTS: In July 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ascended the pulpit in the al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul and proclaimed himself the caliph, or leader, of the Muslim community throughout the world. The institution of the caliphate had existed since the death of Muhammad, and at one time had ruled a broad swath of land from Spain, all the way to South and Southeast Asia. But overtime, the caliph, who once yielded supreme political and spiritual authority, saw his authority melt away by other

challengers. And by the time that the Ottoman sultan claimed the title for himself, it was faded into nothing. And when Ataturk abolished the institution in the 1920s, the caliphate had really ceased to exist as an institution.

Conservative Sunni Muslims around the world wanted to revive the institution because they saw and believed that the institution of the caliphate had to exist for them to function properly as a Muslim community. So there were a series of conferences that were held throughout the Sunni Muslim world to try to restore the Caliphate, but they never succeeded. They failed due to quarreling. Violent Sunni revolutionaries also tried to reestablish the caliphate, but many of them over time saw it as a distant dream. Their enemies were simply too powerful. It was not until the Islamic State last year proclaimed the return of the caliphate, the return of God's kingdom on earth, that anyone had made a credible or plausible claim to have refounded the institution. And today, it controls a broad swath of territory in Iraq and Syria, and numbers some eight million inhabitants who live under its rule.

Baghdadi has the title of commander of the believers, the historical title of the caliphs. But early in his life he was known simply as "the believer." It was a nickname that was given to him by his family and childhood friends for two reasons. One is that he was known to be deeply pious. He spent most of his free time in prayer and contemplation of Islamic scripture and tradition. But he was also known for telling off other people when they weren't being religiously observant enough by his standards. His brother recounts that Baghdadi would come home from the mosque and chastise his brothers and sisters because they didn't conform to his ideal of proper Islamic behavior.

Baghdadi's passion as a child and in his teenage years was the Koran, particularly the recitation of the Koran, which is an art in the Muslim world. His father taught the recitation of the Koran to neighborhood school children, and Baghdadi picked up the craft and was known to have a beautiful voice and be an expert in the art. And it's

a passion that he carried with him through his undergraduate and graduate career. He specialized in the study of the Koran and its recitation as an undergraduate, later for a master's degree, and then finally for a Ph.D. in Koranic studies, which he received in 2007.

The common story about Baghdadi is that he was a quiet, religious scholar and then the Americans invaded in 2003 and radicalized him. This isn't quite true. Baghdadi had radicalized himself well before the Americans invaded. While he was at school in Baghdad, he gravitated towards forms of Islam that were more and more conservative and that were more in line with his own urge to meddle in the religious affairs of other people. So by the time he was nearing the end of his graduate program, he had not just become an ultraconservative Sunni Muslim, but he had also embraced jihadism. And it was the final end of this intellectual arc for him. He wanted to impose his vision of a just society on all of the Muslims, if force by need be. And it was the American invasion that provided the opportunity for him to live out and realize his vision.

Baghdadi, in 2003, helped found an insurgent organization, and in early 2004, he was detained by American forces. He was at the wrong place at the wrong time, and he ended up in Camp Bucca in Southern Iraq, which was a hotbed for radicalization. Sunni jihadists were mixing with former members of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime, networking with one another, and Baghdadi emerged as an important prayer leader and imam and teacher among the prisoners, who gravitated towards him because of his superior religious knowledge. And the prison guards also noted that Baghdadi had a knack for negotiating between the various factions within the prison, moving easily between the former members of Saddam's regime and the other jihadists. And Baghdadi's skill at navigating between these factions and his religious knowledge and the respect that accrued to him because of it, stood him well when he rose through the ranks of the Islamic states after its establishment in 2006. He was put in charge of

the religious affairs in various provinces, and ultimately, rose to the position of the supreme director of the religious affairs in all of the provinces.

He also successfully navigated the cut-throat politics of the Islamic State's democracy. It was divided between the Arab foreign fighters and the local fighters, and the Arabs were on top. They had founded the organization. Baghdadi, as an Iraqi, had an affinity with the other Iraqis in the organization, but he was also able to reach across the divide and work with the foreign fighters as well. And by the time that his predecessor was killed in 2010, Baghdadi rose to become the commander of the organization, the Amir. And it was by virtue of his political talent, and also because of his religious knowledge, and his claim to descend from the prophet Muhammad, which gave him a special aura of religious legitimacy.

Baghdadi today commands a military that has bested some of the most capable militias and states surrounding the Islamic State. He rules over eight million people. He has finally been able to realize his dark hope and vision of forcing others to bend to his religious will. He is also a uniquely capable leader of an insurgent organization and a proto state. He has religious credentials which are usually lacking among the top echelons of the leadership of these organizations. He has the lineage from the founder of Islam that gives him this special aura of legitimacy, but he is also a very savvy politician. He rose up through the cutthroat ranks of the Islamic State and oversaw its period of successful expansion. If he dies tomorrow, he will be very difficult to replace. There are people in the organization who possess some of these traits but not all of them in the particular combination of Baghdadi. So his death will not only be a major symbolic blow to the organization, but it will also be a real blow to its program and its bureaucracy.

If Baghdadi's life is a cautionary, if we are to take any lesson from it, I think it is this: we have to be very wary of creating the chaos that allows men like

Baghdadi to thrive and flourish. We have to be very wary of invading states and destroying the social fabric and the political fabric in order to remove a tyrant, because a worse tyrant can be waiting in the wings afterwards.

Thank you very much.

(Applause)

MR. MCCANTS: Bruce?

MR. RIEDEL: Thanks, Will.

Thank you. I'm going to talk about what I guess is the good guy in the story today, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, who I have nicknamed "the prince of counterterrorism."

Saudi Arabia is America's oldest ally in the Middle East. The relationship turned 70 this year. On Valentine's Day 1945, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt met with the king of Saudi Arabia, King Abdulla al-Saud, better known in the West as Ibn Saud, on a cruiser in the great Bitter Lake in the Suez Canal, and forged an alliance which has lasted now 70 years. It's an alliance based solely on shared interests, especially interests in oil, not based on shared values. The United States and Saudi Arabia share no values in common but we do share interests.

For over 100 years now, the modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been ruled either by King Ibn Saud or his sons. Since Ibn Saud had 44 acknowledged sons and dozens of other unacknowledged sons, it was a pretty successful platform. There were enough sons in the running to keep the succession process going horizontally instead of vertically over the last several years. But today, the kingdom is engaged in a generational change in leadership. The generation of sons is coming to an end, and we're now going to start getting the grandsons of Ibn Saud.

King Salman, who ascended the throne early this year, accelerated that process in April when, with no warning and with no explanation, he removed the crown

prince that had come in with him, Prince Muqrin -- he's the fellow over there on the far side in the middle -- and elevated Muhammad bin Nayef. Here is the current tryptic -- the king, Muhammad bin Nayef, and the king's son, Mohammad bin Salman. I'll come back to him in a minute.

By removing Muqrin, the last of the 44 acknowledged sons who was judged capable of being king, King Salman has accelerated the generational change. Why is generational change so important? When Muhammad bin Nayef ascends to the throne, his legitimacy will be different than that of any Saudi king in the last 100 years. He will not be able to say, "I am a son of the founder." He will say, "I am a grandson chosen by a son." It's a much less secure base of legitimacy.

Fortunately for us, Muhammad bin Nayef is a very well-known quantity. Muhammad bin Nayef was educated in the United States in Oregon. He was the son of Prince Nayef, also a minister of the interior. The son was sent to the FBI and then to Scotland Yard to learn the intricacies of counterterrorism, and he is a specialist in counterterrorism, and truly one of the world's experts.

In the middle of the last decade, between 2004 and 2006, Saudi Arabia underwent the most severe challenge to its internal stability since the 1930s. Al-Qaeda launched a major attempt to overthrow the House of Saud. There were gunfights and shootouts in nearly every major Saudi city. There was an attack on the American consulate in Jeddah. There were attacks on Saudi oil facilities. Muhammed bin Nayef led the counterattack, and by the time he was finished in 2006 and 2007, Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia had been decimated; its entire leadership either killed or arrested. It's now, unfortunately from the Saudi standpoint, starting to make a comeback, as is the Islamic State, which is also operating in Saudi Arabia. So his talents are very much, again, called to order.

Muhammed bin Nayef is also probably the most pro-American Saudi

prince in a generation. I think you can go back to King Fahd to find someone who is so instinctively as pro-American as Muhammad bin Nayef. And what's striking about this is his father was anything but pro-American. His father, Prince Nayef, was often called the "Black Prince" by the ex-patriot community in the United States, and he detested the United States and he detested working with the American intelligence services. Fortunately for us, and fortunately for the U.S. intelligence services, Muhammad bin Nayef is much more friendly.

So in many ways, if generational change has to occur in Saudi Arabia now, this is the guy you would want to have to take over the reins. But there is another phenomenon going on, and you can see it here dramatically, which is the rise of the king's son, Mohammad bin Salman. Look over here. There is a traditional order, pecking order. The king at the top, the crown prince one step down, and the deputy crown prince one step down further. Over here, we have the king in the middle, the crown prince and the deputy crown prince equal in stature. Mohammad bin Salman has accrued and acquired an enormous amount of power in less than one year.

First question. How old is he? We don't know. Saudi sources, when he became defense minister in January, sort of pointed us to he's 34. When that was pushed by some journalists in Saudi Arabia who went back to his class at King Saud University, it became increasingly clear that he was probably 29 or 30. When his birthday actually occurred this summer, the Saudi press kind of led you to the conclusion he was 31. In fact, I'm pretty sure he's only 29.

Why is this important? Because in a kingdom where age and experience matter so much, where the king is 79 and his predecessor died at the age of 92, a 29-year-old next in the line of accession, is a bit of an embarrassment. He's not only minister of defense; he's chief of the Royal Court - de facto chief of the Royal Court. And he has, through the influence of his father, merged his Royal Court with that of the crown

prince. So third in line actually controls access not only to first, but also to second. He controls who gets to see his father, and to a certain degree, who gets to see number two.

He's also in charge of the committee that decides whether or not Saudi oil policy will be changed, Saudi oil production, Saudi oil levels. Mohammad bin Salman is an extraordinarily ambitious young man. He is also the face of Saudi Arabia's war, the war in Yemen. Saudi Arabia, with very little warning earlier this year, began airstrikes against the Houthi rebels, and former president al-Abdullah Saleh loyalists in Yemen. This war has now been going on for about eight months. It's dragged in several other countries -- Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and others, all fighting on the side of Saudi Arabia.

The Saudis, of course, argue that the Yemeni rebels are the chutzpa of their great regional rival, the Iranians. Several countries have opted to stay out -- Pakistan and Oman. The war, I think it is safe to say at this point is: (a) a stalemate. The Saudis have been able to recover the city of Aden in Southern Yemen, but they have not been able to move on the capital Sana. And secondly, a humanitarian catastrophe. Twenty-five million Yemenis today are on the verge of either starving to death, running out of water, or being bombed into submission. It is Mohammad bin Salman's war in many ways. He is the public face of this.

Why the wings? The wings are symbol of the Royal Saudi Air Force's battle in Yemen. That's what it's supposed to mean behind them.

The great tragedy that happened last month at the Hajj. Here we have a picture of the Kaaba as it appears today. That's a hotel behind there. Don't worry; if you're not a Muslim, you can't go there, so don't even think about how expensive a one-night stand would be at that hotel. It has further raised questions about the competence of both Muhammad bin Nayef and Mohammad bin Salman. Muhammad bin Nayef, as interior minister, is responsible for ensuring that the Hajj comes off with no tragedies like

what happened this year. Clearly, he failed. But the rumor in Saudi Arabia, the rumor that is so prevalent it's been officially denied by the kingdom, is that the reason the tragedy occurred is because Mohammad bin Salman's entourage was moving through the Hajj area and blocked the exits. Whether that's true or not is really irrelevant. It's raised more questions about the rivalry between these two people and where they might go in the future.

Muhammad bin Nayef is, as I said at the beginning, is the most pro-American Saudi prince we've seen in well over a generation. He is by inclination inclined to work with the United States of America. He probably will put the kingdom in fairly safe hands. He has been the target of at least four assassination attempts over the last decade. One which came very close to killing him was when an Al-Qaeda terrorist operative appeared to be arguing that he wanted to defect to the kingdom and become a source, but in fact, he had a bomb lodged in a part of his anatomy which I'm not going to specify because this is a PG audience. He blew himself up. Muhammad bin Nayef fortunately was only superficially wounded. Again, he came to the Americans immediately after that and it was to American Central Intelligence directors that he told the story of what happened, and that's how we know the details today.

In his hands, Saudi Arabia will be a secure and serious ally of the United States in fighting the war on terrorism. But he faces several challenges. Low oil income, a potential quagmire in Yemen, and internecine squabbling within the royal family. Whether or not he will be able to steer the Saudi ship forward safely through those is a subject I hope we can come to in Q&A.

Thank you.

(Applause)

MS. GHATTAS: Thank you, Bruce and Will, for those two excellent presentations. I think they deserve another round of applause.

(Applause)

MS. GHATTAS: I think this is a great format and it leads us into a very lively discussion with a packed house. If you're watching us online, you can tweet us your questions. We'll be taking them at the end of the moderated discussion.

I want to start by asking both of you how -- what it was like to write those two complementary essays in essence, because these two men are at opposites sides of this fight. As we said, they're enemies. They want to kill each other. Did you talk together about what was going -- what you thought was going through each of these men's mind?

Bruce?

MR. RIEDEL: I don't think that we talked to each other about what was going through their minds. We definitely compared notes on our essays, on the essay process at Brookings, which is a very, as you said in your opening, a very innovative and different approach. I think in retrospect though you hit the nail right on the head in the beginning. These are two people who spend probably a great deal of time every day thinking about how do they murder the other one. And I'll begin by saying my money is on my guy. I think we have a much better chance of seeing Mr. Baghdadi appear on the wrong page of the newspaper than we do Mr. Nayef. I think Mr. Nayef's real danger is that the king will at some point decide that he wants to move his own son up faster and he'll be retired to a position that way, rather than through a hell fire strike or a bomb or something like that.

MR. MCCANTS: Yeah. And the parallels are also interesting. I mean, both men are at the top of ultraconservative Muslim states. They have both, in their own ways, learned to navigate the cutthroat politics of their organizations that run the state. I think the difference is that Baghdadi, as the title of the essay suggests, is a true believer, even if some of the people high up in his organization may not be. And he seeks to

expand the state beyond its current borders. And in that way, his pragmatism ends. And I think that's a major contrast with the Saudi state and someone like Muhammad bin Nayef, who have come to grips with the modern state system and have been willing to make those tradeoffs. But they're not easy tradeoffs, right, Bruce? I mean, that's what struck me about your essay, is that they have had to in many ways kowtow to the religious establishment in order to make these kind of deals with the west.

MR. RIEDEL: Absolutely. I mean, the two are bound by the fact that they both believe in a very intolerant version of Islam. The House of Saud is tied at birth to Wahhabi Islam. It remains tied to Islam, Wahhabi Islam. King Salman is particularly pious and particularly close to very ultraconservative parts. But the House of Saud is a pragmatic state. It has had to evolve over the years. The first Saudi state founded in 1744 would never have a relationship with an unbeliever state like the United States. It would regard the United States as an enemy. But Ibn Saud decides that he had to live in the modern world and he had to make a relationship with the United States.

MS. GHATTAS: We put a lot of focus on what happened in the most -- in recent history with the invasion of Iraq to explain why we got here, and I want to get to this in a moment. But when you look at Saudi Arabia and the very austere version of Islam that they espouse there, and you think back to 1979 and the '80s and the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan, and King Salman's role. He was very much at the heart of the effort to fund the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan. There are interesting parallels between those two trends that emerged from Saudi Arabia, went to Afghanistan, and now we're finding them back in Syria. I mean, Baghdadi, himself, didn't fight in Afghanistan, but Zarqawi, his predecessor that you write about in your book, did. Tell us a little bit about how did we get here briefly from the Mujahedeen to today, and can you draw that straight line?

MR. RIEDEL: The United States, confronted by the Soviet invasion in

Afghanistan in 1979 under President Carter, created a global alliance to defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia was a key component. Pakistan was the most important component. Saudi Arabia was the second most important. King Salman was tasked by then-King Fahd to be the fund-raiser for the Mujahedeen. The CIA and the Saudi intelligence services both gave official money to the Mujahedeen through Pakistan. King Salman raised so-called private money. That is money that came from royals who took it out of their own pocket. He actually raised more money for the cause in the first five years than the CIA and the Saudi service did together. By the way, he did the same thing for the Bosnians, and he's done much the same for Palestinian groups, including Hamas over the years.

The Afghan War can be looked at in two ways. On the one hand, it defeated the Soviet Union, ended the evil empire, ended the threat of thermos-nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union, and on the other hand, was the birthplace of the global jihad. Osama bin Laden and many others, Zarqawi, Iman Zawahiri, all got their battle stars fighting in Afghanistan.

When it comes to Iraq, if a Saudi was here and listened to Will's closure, he would have said, "Told you so. Told you so. What did you think you were doing trying to create democracy in a country that had no experience in it and giving the majority, the Shiites, the right to determine the future of the country?"

MS. GHATTAS: But, Will, we've also heard last week from -- or perhaps it was the week before that -- from Tony Blair, who said that, yes, the invasion of Iraq did in some way lead to the rise of Isis. That's what you allude to in the conclusion of your presentation. Be careful what forces you unleash. But you do point out that Baghdadi was radicalized before the invasion, so there was something driving him before that as well, and perhaps you could talk about this a little bit more.

But also, when you look at the fact that he had gone to Syria right after

the Iraqi invasion, before there was anything going on in Syria, and the fact that there has been no invasion of Syria. You could also almost argue the opposite, that not doing anything is what brought Syria to where it is today with the Islamic State taking territory.

MR. MCCANTS: So, to the first part of your question, and to go back to your previous question to Bruce, his radicalization, part of it had to do with his own personality and his desire to control the religious behavior of other people. Bu the also had a series of mentors, and one of these men was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood who had left the organization and gone to fight in Afghanistan in the 1980s and had come back and been very influential in Baghdadi's life. And then as you say, also Zarqawi had been as well, and a number of the people and the leadership of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and later the Islamic State had fought in Afghanistan and were vets.

With regards to Syria, Baghdadi benefitted from the fact that the Assad regime in the previous decade wanted to stick it to the Americans for invading Iraq. And so Assad was encouraging the flow of foreign fighters across the borders of Syria into Iraq. Baghdadi was a part of that process. He moved to Syria to serve as a facilitator. But I think what benefited him the most and the organization the most was the dissent of Syria into civil war. And in that instance it wasn't the Americans who had caused the dissent into civil war; it was the Assad regime, but the outcome was the same. Whenever you have this chaos bloom, men like Baghdadi are going to try and take advantage of it.

MS. GHATTAS: So in a way, was it inevitable that we would reach a point where someone like Baghdadi would try to establish an Islamic State beyond the pockets that they controlled in Iraq?

MR. MCCANTS: Yes, because they kept trying. And even when the Islamic State was defeated the first time in 2009, other jihadist groups in other countries attempted to do the same thing when their countries fell apart. So when Syria fell apart,

the Islamic State felt it could try again.

MS. GHATTAS: Bruce, I want to come to you and Muhammad bin Nayef again. Is there anything that the Saudis could have done differently to help avoid this trend that leads us to the Islamic State today? And would you say that some of their own tactics have been counterproductive in terms of trying to suppress radical militants?

MR. RIEDEL: I think there are two things that they conceivably could have done. It's highly unlikely they would do either. One is back in the 1970s and early 1980s, not pressed to spread their version of Wahhabi Islam throughout the Muslim world. In the 1980s, partly in competition to Iran, partly in order to appease domestic Saudi audiences, the kingdom spent huge quantities, billions of dollars pushing a very intolerant version of Islam around the world. I always like to point out the anecdote. I moved in 2003 out of the Middle East to Brussels, and what did I discover when I got there? Immediately across the street was the largest mosque in the city and it was funded by the Saudis and it was not producing a love and warm, tree-hugging environment by any means.

But to have not done that would have been to not be Saudis. To not believe in what they believe in. The other thing conceivably the Saudis could have done is when the Arab Spring began, given some leeway for the success of I would call them more liberal Islamic groups, like the Muslim Brotherhood when they succeeded in taking over through free and fair elections, so the government of Egypt and other places. Instead, the Saudis -- and Muhammad bin Nayef was very much a part of this, were the leaders of the counterrevolution. Saudi Arabia --

MS. GHATTAS: Across the region.

MR. RIEDEL: Across the region. In Bahrain, they put their own troops on the ground to determine that the revolution was stymied. In Egypt, they assisted General el-Sisi in his coup. I think they played a much larger part in that coup than is

commonly perceived in the West. And then they funded his government since then. And they have been the leaders of the counterrevolution throughout the region. The only places where they've supported the revolution is where it targeted their specific pro-Iranian enemies, like Assad's government in Syria.

MS. GHATTAS: And so are these tactics feeding ISIS's narrative as well? Are they driving ISIS? Because ISIS made clear also that their target was Mecca and Medina? Will?

MR. MCCANTS: That's right. Although I don't think the ISIS folk are too worried about the Saudi crackdown on the Brotherhood. They hate the Brotherhood as well.

MS. GHATTAS: Sure.

MR. MCCANTS: I think what feeds the ISIS narrative more is the perception that the Sunni world is under siege.

MS. GHATTAS: And the Saudis aren't doing enough?

MR. MCCANTS: Exactly. And to the extent that the Saudis play up that sectarian threat or are perceived not to be doing enough to protect the Sunni world from the Shia, ISIS benefits as a consequence.

MS. GHATTAS: And I want to get to that in a moment because it was part of the reason why, certainly the Saudis told me it was one of the reasons why the Saudis decided to go to Yemen to show that there were Sunnis coming to the defense of Sunnis.

But I want to ask you, Bruce, first, about this one interesting point in your essay that has to do with the anti -- or the deradicalization program in Saudi Arabia, which is actually to some extent successful.

MR. RIEDEL: And it's very much Muhammad bin Nayef's baby. This is a program to take Al-Qaeda members who have been captured or who agree to turn

themselves in, and send them to rehabilitative centers where they are given access to psychologists and they're given access to clerics to both try to clean their minds and then fill it with the right interpretation of Islam.

According to Saudi statistics, which I think are more or less accurate, it has a very good track record. Over 80 percent seem to stay within the system. If you compare that to recidivism rates in any prison in America, we would love to be able to say something like that. But there's also a catch, which I think is very important. Part of the way it works is that the Saudi Ministry of Interior also goes to the family of the individual and says, "If your son is on the straight and narrow, we'll give you a new pickup truck. We'll make sure that your daughters have a chance for education. But if your son falls off the wagon, you're going to pay the price." It's not exactly a criminal justice system that most Americans would regard as free and fair.

MS. GHATTAS: And it's not something you can replicate in other Arab countries. It's not something that you could encourage Baghdadi to join, for example.

MR. MCCANTS: That's right. It only works in Saudi.

MS. GHATTAS: I want to turn to Yemen and start with another question about Saudi Arabia and how it sees it's, you know, what is Saudi Arabia's view on what is its biggest challenge or its biggest enemy? Is it ISIS? And I'm sorry to be pointing at you, Will. I don't mean you, obviously. But as the --

MR. MCCANTS: I could speak for them.

MR. GHATTAS: -- as the author and the expert, because what seems to be driving most of the tension in the region today isn't just what ISIS is doing; that's almost a parallel trend. A lot of what is driving the conflict in the region at the moment in the Middle East is this intense rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which has been going on since 1975.

MR. RIEDEL: Absolutely. I don't think there's any question that for King

Salman and both of the princes, Iran is enemy number one.

MS. GHATTAS: But are they wrong?

MR. RIEDEL: I think that the way they have pursued this is by exacerbating sectarian tensions is creating this firestorm in the region. I think it is very unhealthy for the region. Look at Beirut, for example. Prior to the 1970s, Sunni and Shia may not have been friends all the time, but they coexisted. They even intermarried. That's increasingly a phenomenon we don't see, not just in the Arab world, but spreading throughout the entire Islamic world. I think fanning the flames of sectarianism is, in the long term, not good for the kingdom, not good for the United States, not good for anybody. We can take solace, however, that we seem to be on the side of 90 percent of Islam, and our Russian rival has now chosen to throw its lot in with the 10 percent of the Islamic world. So I think while it's bad for us, I think it's even worse for Moscow.

MS. GHATTAS: I want to throw forward a little bit and look at the future and policies that the West and Arab countries should be considering. Because, Will, is it enough to just go after Baghdadi and kill the people at the top? Is that what the U.S. should be pursuing at the moment?

MR. MCCANTS: It's about all we can do. I mean, the destruction of ISIS is not a priority for any of the enemies of ISIS that surround it, with the exception of the Jordanians. You just talked about the Saudis. They're more worried about Iran. If you talk about the Turks, they're more worried about the Kurds. And on down the list. The United States has very limited tools to use to dislodge ISIS. The solution, I think, to dealing with ISIS in Syria and Iraq has to involve the empowerment of the Sunni Arab tries that live under ISIS rule. A number of them have been chomping at the bit to fight against ISIS but they have not been receiving much outside report. This is the center of gravity in this conflict. That's the way that ISIS sees it, and I think increasingly, that's the way the U.S. government sees it as well.

MS. GHATTAS: But briefly, what happens if Baghdadi is killed? I mean, I know it's hard to predict, but what happens in the immediate aftermath of his killing you think for the organization?

MR. MCCANTS: Well, it depends on who replaces him. You know, there are people in the organization who care capable military leaders but they don't quite have the stature, the religious stature that he does. So they have put around the idea that their institution is the caliphate reborn, and he has the lineage and the religious knowledge to back it up. But if the next guy doesn't, it could be a real blow to the credibility of the organization.

MS. GHATTAS: So this is an organization that has some vulnerabilities most certainly, but Bruce, I want to end our discussion before we go to questions from the audience with a question to you about the vulnerabilities in the Saudi system. And you alluded to them in your presentation. It seems to me that Muhammad bin Nayef is a little bit on the back foot because of the rivalry with Mohammad bin Salman, the deputy crown prince. There's also rumors that at some point the Saudi king may push aside Muhammad bin Nayef and promote his son to be the crown prince where he is assured that he will be king one day. How much is this hampering MBN as he's known in many official circles? How much is this hampering MBN's work on counterterrorism? And how worried are officials in the U.S. about that and the impact that that rivalry has on the U.S.'s efforts on counterterrorism?

MR. RIEDEL: Saudi Arabia, as you know, is an extraordinarily closed society. And the workings of the royal family are even more closed than that. So there's a lot of speculation about what's going on. I think it's in many cases well founded, but we really don't know what the dynamics of the relationship between MBN and MBS is. But I think it's safe to say there's a rivalry now.

I think it's also safe to say that there's a lot of consternation within the

royal family. We've seen this in really unprecedented letters sent to the outside world by unidentified royal princes, usually very, very critical of Mohammad bin Salman. The rumor I mentioned that it was Mohammad bin Salman's motorcade that caused the Hajj tragedy is probably inspired by his enemies more than it is by any truth. It could also be true. Again, we don't know.

But I'd put it to you this way. The kingdom is not immune from the same forces that produced the Arab Spring. The Saudis know that. King Abdullah spent $130 billion in 2011 in order to prevent an Arab Spring in Saudi Arabia. That's an awful lot of money for anyone to spend. King Salman spent $30 billion at the beginning of his coming into office to make sure that everybody was happy with him. Again, that's a lot of money. But the difference is, in 2011, oil prices were $100 a barrel. Today, they're less than $50 a barrel, and they're going to remain less than $50 a barrel for the foreseeable future.

If you take the fact that Saudi oil income is now and for the foreseeable future going to be far below what they need to maintain the site that they have created, the social contract they've created, plus the royal family maneuvering that's going on, plus a quagmire in Yemen, and on top of that a region in flames, you can envision the perfect storm. I don't think it's the most likely outcome, but I don't think it's inconceivable anymore to say that the House of Assad may be facing a very, very severe crisis as all of these factors come together in a very near term.

Does it worry the White House? You bet it does. Do you think the White House is going to come out though with a public statement saying, "We don't sleep at night because we're afraid that Saudi Arabia may fall apart"? I've worked in the White House. I don't think you put those kinds of statements out. But look who the president has spent so much time courting this year. He even gave up the opportunity to go to the Taj Mahal with his wife in order to rush to the funeral. I wouldn't have done that.

MS. GHATTAS: On that slightly cheerful note in what is a very serious discussion, we're going to open the floor to questions. If you could raise your hand, introduce yourself, and keep it short so we can fit in as many questions as possible.

Question here in the front, please, second row. And if you're watching us online, you can tweet your questions and we'll try to fit them in as well.

SPEAKER: Thanks a lot for this great presentation. Two quick questions for Will, if I may.

First of all, you said that there are eight million people (inaudible) Baghdadi. If you had a chance to conduct the poll, what will be the approval rating?

And secondly, ideologically, what is the role of Baghdadi's Muslim Brotherhood background is playing a role in his relationship with allies or in his organizations, et cetera?

And secondly, after King Salman, there is some assessment in this town that the Saudis approached the Muslim Brotherhood movement has changed. What is the effect of this? If it's true, what is the effect of the Saudis counterterrorism efforts towards ISIS? And what is the view of two princes to these wars? I mean, while King Salman, bin Nayef is supporting the counterterrorism effort, are other princes supporting the Yemen War?

MS. GHATTAS: I'm going to do like President Obama and limit you all to one question.

MS. GHATTAS: Will, please go ahead.

MR. MCCANTS: Sure. So I don't think ISIS would poll well, but I don't think it would be at zero either. They have to maintain a certain level of support just to keep society running. They need society to run because it's their tax base and that's where they get most of their money for prosecuting the war.

With regards to the Muslim Brother networks that Baghdadi used to

move in, I don't think he uses them much anymore, but he has attempted to assassinate some former members or current members of the Brotherhood that he used to rub shoulders with. But he sees them very much as a competitor, not an ally.

MS. GHATTAS: Bruce?

MR. RIEDEL: Saudi Arabia traditionally has not been an enemy of the Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, for most recent history, it had a cozy relationship. That changed in 2011. I think as the Egyptian Revolution recedes, antagonism towards the Muslim Brotherhood is less fervent in Saudi Arabia than it is say in some other Gulf States, particularly the United Arab Emirates. And here there's another rivalry. The crown prince of the UAE, Mohammad bin Zayed -- just to make sure everyone is confused here, he's MBZ. And MBN are also rivals. They don't get along with each other. They each see themselves as the leading star of the next generation, and as anyone knows, you can't have two leading stars.

MS. GHATTAS: All right. A question in the middle. The gentleman with the gray shirt.

MR. PACHENCA: Alexis Pachenca. When did exactly the breakup between the so-called pragmatism of Saudi Arabian leadership and the support for the worldwide jihad happen? And specifically, was it -- what role did Saudi Arabia play at the early stage of the revolution in Syria where presumably the pre-ISIS forces were there already? Were they supported by Saudis? Thank you.

MR. RIEDEL: the Saudis have always been Wahhabi Muslims. This is a dynasty that goes back to 1744. They never weren't Wahhabis. I think most people though would credit the 1979 takeover of the mosque in Mecca as a key defining moment when the Saudi has been out, say on a somewhat reformist bent, and then they made a course correction to being much more in line with hardline clerical opinion within the kingdom. So 1979 is the truly critical year in terms of Saudi policy towards hardline

Islamic views.

Saudi Arabia from the beginning of the Assad revolution saw an opportunity to get rid of something they detected, Bashar Assad and to stick it to the Iranians. And although it's very hard to come up with hard data, I think it's safe to say that they were ready to give guns to anyone who wanted to fight Bashar Assad. Today that's even more true. The Saudi press and the Saudi clerical establishment in particular is now trumpeting the Russian intervention in Syria as a repeat performance of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. And this time, Russia is going to be taught a lesson that we'll never, ever, ever forget.

MS. GHATTAS: I'm not sure anyone is looking forward to that in the region itself. It comes at a cost for a lot of people who live in the region.

I don't see any hands on that side. Oh, right here in the front. Front row, please. One more question. Then we'll have time for a few more.

MR. MITCHELL: t hanks very much. I'm Garrett Mitchell. I write The Mitchell Report.

I want to pose -- I don't know whether it's a hypothetical or a thought experiment, but it goes like this. Will has articulated the fact that ISIL without Baghdadi is a faltering proposition, if that's a fair way to put it. Bruce has pointed out the mounting financial problems that the kingdom is in given the rising price of production and the lowering cost, the lowering price of gasoline. They're already dipping into their sovereign wealth funds. So let's assume that at some point MBN wins by knocking off your guy, and oil stays where it is and no matter who's in the driver seat in the kingdom, they're running out of money, they're much less influential in the region. Who is the winner in the region?

MR. RIEDEL: I think the simple answer when you frame the question in those terms is obviously the Iranians. The Iranians have already, as Saudis would say,

control four traditional Sunni capitals -- Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sana. That's a gross overstatement of reality. But they are like to benefit from any problems in Saudi Arabia and I don't know how much they benefit from the death of Baghdadi, but the Saudis and Iranians have turned this into a zero-sum game, and Kim is absolutely right, that people of the Middle East are suffering horrible consequences as a consequence of that.

There's not a whole lot the United States can do about that. We're not going to convince them 1,200 or 1,400 years after the Sunni-Shia divide to lay down together as two sheep.

MS. GHATTAS: Although, you know, 1979 is the year that really unleashed that rivalry, which, you know, had, in terms of Sunni-Shia, had laid dormant for quite some time. And I do think that 1979 is the year that changed the Middle East.

We have a question from Twitter.

SPEAKER: We have a question about countering ISIS. Is there any way to take down ISIS with a strategic alliance of Shiites, Sunnis, and the P5? A one-time alliance?

MS. GHATTAS: Will and Bruce?

MR. MCCANTS: Sure, but it will never happen.

MS. GHATTAS: In an ideal world.

MR. MCCANTS: Because they're all quarreling or fighting one another.

MS. GHATTAS: But, Bruce, I mean, is there a way that you could bring the Saudis and the Iranians together on this actually and say, "Look, this is your enemy, both of you. Why don't you find common ground?"

MR. RIEDEL: If it wasn't the Middle East, it probably could happen.

MS. GHATTAS: Sure. And I should know better, shouldn't I, than asking these naïve questions? But you can always dream.

We have time for one more question. A lot of hands. The gentleman with a tie and gray jacket. If you could introduce yourself, and please keep your question brief.

MR. CORDERO: Sure. John Cordero.

My question is being that as you earlier pointed out, Mr. Riedel, that Saudi and ISIS share the same religious ideology background, isn't it time to reexamine our relationship with Saudi Arabia given what we have seen so far? Thank you.

MS. GHATTAS: Bruce? And then I have a follow-up for Will.

MR. RIEDEL: That's a great question. And the U.S.-Saudi relationship is being questioned more today than at any time I can remember. I've followed the relationship since 1978, and I've never seen as many questions being posed in public as they are today. But, those questions don't seem to being posed inside the Obama White House. Since 2010, President Obama and his administration has sold Saudi Arabia $95 billion in military equipment. That's even more than we've given Israel since 2010. Now, of course, there is a difference; the Saudis pay for it, and we pay for giving it to Israel. But $95 billion is an awful lot of equipment.

And in the war on Yemen, the United States, I think, has some serious doubts about the wisdom of this course, but it keeps those doubts entirely to itself. And I think that's really sad because I think 25 million Yemenis are suffering a horrible outcome, and because the United States is not leading an international effort as it should to bring this war to an end.

MS. GHATTAS: And Will, I want to end our discussion with you with a follow-up to that. I mean, does it matter anymore what Saudi Arabia does or doesn't do, how much it reins in some of its own austere militants, austere clerics? You know, there are a lot of pockets of sympathy for ISIS. I mean, I have Sunni acquaintances in Beirut who say, "You know, we don't want them here, but they're doing an okay job against the

Shiites." How do you handle that, beyond fighting ISIS, the organization, if you can call it that?

MR. MCCANTS: I don't think there's much you can do. Given the political turmoil in the Middle East, there are going to be groups who will follow the ISIS Model for waging an insurgency and establishing a state. And if they see that its ideological program has been politically useful in mobilizing people to fight for the cause, I think you're going to see more and more people sign up. I see the prominence and the popularity of ISIS as a function of the deep political dysfunction right now in the Middle East and North Africa.

MS. GHATTAS: It's not exactly a cheerful note to end on. I do try to inject a bit of optimism in the panels I moderate, but join us for further discussions about this issue. For now, this concludes our event this evening. Please thank me in joining [sic] both Bruce Riedel and Will McCants for their presentations and their very insightful discussion. Thank you all very much for joining us both here and online. Thank you very much.

(Applause)

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