Panel 1: A Middle East in Flux: Risk and Opportunities
Juan Cole, Amb. Robert Ford, Paul Salem, Randa Slim
Moderator: Daniel Serwer

Kate Seelye: Good morning, I'm Kate Seelye, Senior Vice President of the Middle East Institute and thank you for joining us for today's 68th Annual MEI Conference, Navigating the Storm: the Middle East in 2015. We're thrilled to have so many people who'll be joining us over the course of the day. Over 1100 people have registered for today's conference. I hope the cold doesn't turn them off, but clearly there is a lot of interest in MEI's programs. MEI's, the region rather, is in the middle of tectonic shifts and changes and transitions and MEI has worked hard to respond to and shed light on these changes. We've put on more conferences, programs and panels than ever before and our growing roster of scholars, including the many assembled to my left, have been churning out analysis of Syria, Iraq, ISIS and many other regional challenges at an unprecedented rate. In fact, our six in-house scholars and 30 affiliated scholars have recently contributed to a publication which I want to bring to your attention. You can find it in the lobby. It is called Obama's Legacy in the Middle East: Passing the Baton in 2017, which includes analysis of Obama's policy in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, the Maghreb and elsewhere and it is a first in MEI's history, it's over 60 pages long and really speaks to the quality and level of our scholarship. So pick it up when you go out. You'll see articles from Robert Ford. Paul has an excellent piece on the drivers and regional trends, a topic they'll be examining in this panel today. We'll also send everyone an electronic version.

Our scholars give mixed reviews of Obama's legacy in the region but in all fairness this administration has inherited an unprecedented set of circumstances, from regime changes to civil wars after decades of largely political stasis in the region. Today's four panels will delve into these issues, from the question of how to check ISIS, what the regional power should be doing to check ISIS, to the question of how to address the slow boil taking place in Jerusalem and the West Bank between Arabs and Jews. To tackle these questions we've assembled a great group of scholars, many of whom have flown in from the region. We'll hear from Egyptian, Iranian, Iraqi and Israeli voices today whose comments reflect the thinking and the mood in the region, as well as for many analysts based here in the United States who follow the region closely, and I hope you stick around for all four of our panels today.

We are also looking forward to honoring William Burns, former Deputy Secretary of State, and a great Arabist, who recently retired after more than 30 years of service in the State Department. He was going to receive lifetime achievement award but he got called up at the last minute to join the Nuclear Talks in Vienna, and while it's unfortunate that he cannot be here with us today, we are wishing him much success. In the meantime we've lined up an outstanding panel of ambassadors and former
ambassadors to discuss the future of US diplomacy in the Middle East. We’ve got Deborah Jones, Ambassador to Libya, Bob Pearson, former Ambassador to Turkey, and Daniel Kurtzer, former Ambassador to Egypt and Israel. The luncheon, for those of you who’ve bought tickets and registered, will be held next door. If you did not register there are many great eating establishments outside of this fine hotel and we’ll see you back at 2:00 pm, for our third panel of the day.

03:33

And with those introductions I will now turn the show over to the moderator of our first panel, our good friend Daniel Serwer is an MEI scholar and professor of conflict management at Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies. He served as vice President for Peace and Stability Operations at USIP for over a decade, contributing to its peace building work in Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan and The Balkans and he served as the Executive Director of the Hamilton Baker, Iraq Study Group. He also runs a great blog, peacefair.net, and he’s an avid Twitterer, and so if you see him working on his phone it’s maybe because he’s trying to live Tweet his own panel. So Dan, I’d like to turn the microphone over to you and once again thank everybody for joining us today.

[applause]

Daniel Serwer: Thank you, Kate. I feel truly privileged to moderate this opening panel of the MEI Annual Conference. You’ve given me a Dream Team, a Dream Team of Middle East experts. First up will be Juan Cole with the University of Michigan whose blog Informed Comment has become one of the daily must reads for many of us. It’s a privilege for me to meet him in the flesh. I’ve been reading him and enjoying his writing for a long time. Paul Salem, like Professor Cole, is someone I once knew only from his writing. That was until about a year or so ago when he came to MEI to be Vice President for Policy and Research. He’s been a crucial contributor to reinvigoration of the institute and I advise you not to miss the tour de raison that he posted, I guess it’s two days ago now, on the MEI website. Robert Ford, whose diplomatic efforts in Iraq and Syria earned him well deserved kudos worldwide, will be next. While I first met Robert when he was Deputy Chief of Mission in Baghdad, it’s been a particular pleasure to get to know and admire him up close at the Middle East Institute. Randa Slim who now runs track two initiatives at MEI is a master of that art and is running some of the most important and innovative dialogues the Middle East has ever known in a moment of enormous upheaval.
What I’ve asked our distinguished speakers to do in the first instance is to focus on the forces and factors that will determine the long term future of the Middle East. We are all very concerned with the current crisis but we also have to ask ourselves from the perspective of 2040, 2050, what will have proven to be most important to the future of this region? There are truly many candidates. Paul in his paper outlines 18 of them if I remember correctly. And you know, there are demographics, social media, urbanization, economic success or failure, citizen empowerment, water shortages, oil and gas, or lack of them, state failure, military strength, non-state actors, this is an extraordinary array of forces and factors.

The list is so long that I’ve asked each of the panelists to do something difficult, which is in five minutes in their initial presentations decide what they think will be the three most important factors that will determine the future of the Middle East region over the next several decades. Let me underline. These need not all be negative forces and factors. We shouldn’t lose sight of some positive developments in the region. After we’ve tossed around their top choices a bit we’ll begin to hone in on an understanding of how these long term factors should inform our response to current events. What has more than passing significance? What can we ignore and what do we need to pay attention to? How can we develop an effective response to upheavals the region is facing? We’re navigating in a storm. What are some of the things we need, and people of the region need do to survive its ravages and produce a Middle East that will bring stability, inclusion and prosperity, rather than turmoil, exclusion and poverty? So that’s the challenge for the panel. I’m gonna ask you to stay where you are unless the organizers tell me differently and Juan, why don’t you lead us off on three key factors?

08:45

Juan Cole: Well, yes, Daniel Serwer’s well-known for his optimism and that’s clear here in his hope that professors can be made to speak in five minutes. But I’ll do my best not to disappoint him. With regard to the challenges facing the region and looking for three big ones, I actually think that there’s just one on my mind which is sustainable development and we can, professors like to have sub points so we can certainly put three under that, but sustainable development is really what will determine the future of the region and one of the problems with the region as we speak is not so much the surface problems that we see in the headlines of personalities and factions and religious ideologies and so forth, but a failure of sustainable development, so Syria, I hesitate to talk about Syria in the presence of Ambassador Ford but certainly part of what’s going on in Syria is a long term drought which may have been exacerbated by climate change considerations and
the same thing is true, by the way, although it doesn’t get as much attention in the literature, in Iraq.

So let me just say a little bit what I mean about this challenge of sustainable development. The first sub heading I’d put there is demographic growth. There’s an enormous youth bulge in the Arab world. It is not unique in this regard. Much of Asia has a youth bulge. India and Indonesia suffer from these problems, but the Arab world is unique in one respect that it has a large youth bulge. The Millennials, the people born in the ‘80’s and ‘90’s and early ‘00’s are over a third of the population. It’s a very young region and especially some parts of it like Saudi Arabia or Egypt are extremely young, if we look at the mean age. But the big problem is that there’s, compared to the rest of the world, which has these young bulges, the Arab world suffers from markedly low investment rates, international investment rates.

11:32

So it’s just not attracting the kind of capital investment and infrastructural improvement that would have provided jobs to all of these young people who are coming on the market every year, and my new book, *The New Arabs: How the Millennials Are Changing the Middle East*, is in part about this dilemma and about the ways in which that dilemma fed into the political discontents that have resulted in the overthrow of four presidents for life and we’re still waiting on the fifth. So dealing with that demographic fact, which is not going to go away anytime soon, in fact, it’s entirely possible in some of these countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia that there’s yet another bigger youth bulge coming in the next generation. I’m not sure the marketers have named that one yet.

So having the kind of investment in the economy and in infrastructure and so forth, that would provide jobs for all of these young people coming on the market, is part of what has to be meant by sustainable development. But here’s the problem, that the sustainable part of it is absolutely key to the Middle East. The Middle East is among the regions in the world which is likely to be most affected by climate change. It is already in a long term stable arid zone that’s been there for a couple thousand years from Morocco to the Gobi Desert. Most of the region cannot practice rainfall agriculture. I lived in Egypt for four years. I was rained on twice for 15 minutes. So it has a water problem and it’s gonna get worse because of climate change. Not only does it a have a prospect of increasing aridity, but as populations grow there’s a prospect of irrigation and damming at the headwaters of some of these rivers that now satisfy water needs and we already saw Egyptian liberals and people we thought were good guys got caught on television talking about the need to start a
war with Ethiopia over its plan to dam up the Nile. Iraq is very upset about Turkish plans to dam the Euphrates and so forth. And as I said, climate change, the projections are that there’s going to be increased aridity, which is exactly what the region doesn’t need. Not only that but there’s going to be a sea level rise and the Middle East and South Asia are the two parts of the world, aside from Miami and New Orleans, that are going to be devastated by that.

14:25

We’re looking, the IPCC, which is probably very conservative, is looking for at least a three-foot, or one meter rise in sea level over the next 80 years. Faw Peninsula in Iraq, one meter above sea level. And there are at the moment major plans in Iraq and contracts being let in Europe, to develop Faw as a port, and I wouldn’t advise them to do that because it’s just not long for this world. It’s gonna be a temporary investment. But it’s not only Faw. The entire Egyptian Delta where at the moment probably 50 million people live, is likely to end up under water over the next couple centuries. So where are those people going to go? I mean, Sudan’s going to get bigger or it’s not entirely clear. Bangladesh is in a similar situation. It’s just not going to be there. So the river deltas of the region are in danger from climate change as well.

And the third big issue that’s going to face the region is as you go forward in trying to abate climate change obviously the region now lives in large part on hydrocarbons. That’s going to change, and it’s gonna change the power dynamics in the region and it’s going to be wrenching. You’re likely to see solar panels go below grid parity in this region very soon, if they’re not already there. There is, you know, a difference in that hydrocarbon infrastructure already exists so the solar and wind have startup costs but those are going to be amortized pretty quickly by the cost savings that are going to be there. We’ve seen solar panels go down in price, 60% in the last three years. So energy is going to be much cheaper, which is good for development, but the Saudis and the UAE and others who have made their way in the world by having extra currency reserves and huge sovereign wealth funds based on hydrocarbons, they had better invest really well because 20 years from now that’s not going to be there in my opinion. There may be a shift to the countries that are more technologically forward looking and get in on the ground floor with the renewable energy, Morocco is a possible example, so that the money flows may shift to countries that now seem very poor.

So those kinds of challenges are implicit in what I’m talking about with regard to sustainable development and the final thing to say is that the region needs to learn
to make something, that is to say not just primary commodities but tertiary ones and secondary ones, needs to learn to make something at a price that the world market wants to pay, of a quality that people will accept, and without a lot of corruption. All of the countries that have gotten ahead in the world from South Korea to China and so forth have dealt with this problem. They’ve learned to make things that people want to buy and learned to cut down on government and private industry corruption, and it’s one of the big problems with the Middle East. On the whole and by and large they have a lot of potential in this regard but they haven’t found the killer app with regard to development.

Daniel Serwer: Thank you very much, Juan. Paul, is it all about sustainable development?

Paul Salem: Well, thank you. Thank you Dan and that really was an excellent set of ideas presented by Juan as well. I want to talk about the interconnection between three things: Dramatic social change; institutions; and paradigms. And the change I’m talking about is partly driven by resource issues that were mentioned by Juan, a large fast-growing population, a huge youth bulge, not enough land, arable land in the Middle East is around 4% of the entire territory and it’s getting tighter, not wider, dwindling water resources, both the river systems as well as the water tables. Sana’a, the capital of Yemen is likely to be the first national capital to run out of water. Economic growth that is present but not creating certainly anything like enough jobs, as well as changes in communication, mobility, awareness of populations, which have created completely new power shifts in the region. Fifty, 60 years ago states were comfortable in their domination of their populations. We’ve seen certainly in 2011 and even moving forward the amount of empowerment, part of that leads to positive developments, part of it leads to forming of militias and so on, but an immense period of change, a kind of a boiling of the pot, and this boiling is likely, as Juan indicated, to get more intense, not less intense, because the natural resources shows the demographic issues, technological change, and you throw on top of that climate change, certainly promises a very, very rough ride.

Now, all of the challenges that the region faces would be, could be dealt with, managed as best as societies can, if the institutional structure, A, could absorb some of the, you know, tensions and changes, maintain sustainable stability, not rigid sort of temporary stability, and through institutional development and management attempt to manage as other societies do. Everybody faces certain ranges of challenges from demography to resources to climate change and so on
but the Middle East is, in many of the countries, unable to even absorb and begin to deal with these issues, so the institutional structure, which historically always lags behind social change because institutions take a lot of time to build, and the institutions in the Middle East, in the Arab world in particular, have been more behind I would say than others. That there were many decades in the ‘60’s, ‘70’s and ‘80’s where institutions could have developed more robustly and evolved to keep somewhat pace with social change and they did not do that and then we had the eruptions of 2011 which are certainly not the last eruptions that we will see in the years and decades ahead. And the institutions I’m talking about are a combination of institutions. Certainly domestic political institutions, those are the obvious ones, and we see today actually a great variety from what’s happening in Tunisia, what’s happening in Morocco to what’s happening in Egypt and other places, but political institutions need to be able, certainly, to engage, include this great demographic surge that’s taking place, and channel it in a way that doesn’t lead to eruptions or implosions but rather includes it in a system that can then, you know, make political decision-making part of that process.

22:11

Political institutions, state institutions, have been challenged dramatically and will require a lot of reform, a lot of revision. In some cases the whole cadre of political institutions, in other words, the nation state itself has simply blown apart and over the past year, four out of around 20 Arab countries really ceased to exist as centralized nation states, that’s Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen to some degree, and that is a dramatic collapse of basic political order, and there are a number of countries that might face a similar fate in the next decade or two, particularly depending on oil and gas issues, on demographic issues which still might come to hit them, but beyond the obvious political institutions also economic institutions, what Juan mentioned that what the region needs, particularly the large oil poor countries need it more urgently than others, is really to make the institutional leap to high value added, export led, competitive, global growth. Turkey next door did it over the past decade, China of course did it in different circumstances. It’s difficult but it’s not impossible. Egypt, Morocco are the two biggest certainly could attempt to make that leap in the years ahead. That is one of the essential institutional changes, but maintaining sort of clientalistic, central power based, political, economic power structures with a lot of corruption and cronyism is certainly not gonna get us there.

Social institutions I think are essential as well. A big difference I think between what happened in Tunisia and Egypt are the social institutions, the labor unions, the women’s movements, the social society despite the dictatorship of Ben Ali
previously, civil society was able to really maintain and then reorganize in a very, very robust way, and I think that needs to be a basic element of the social institutions moving forward, to avoid extremes of radicalism and so on to maintain sort of that social fabric.

The fourth set of institutions which are proving critical are the cultural ones which deal with religion, secularism, knowledge, values, morality, identity, and as my colleague Randa Slim in a discussion a few days ago indicating, you know, a few decades ago it was Azhar in Egypt and Najaf in Iraq which sort of were the institutions that managed sort of interpretations of religion and so on and then in institutional way an integrated society and interests and new generations into it. Today cultural identity is being contested by militia leaders and Sheikhs and as it were cultural or religious entrepreneurs and it’s a free for all which is proving very, very destructive.

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Building institutions will take a long time but it is something that can be built gradually and I think one of the positive stories of the Middle East is the extent of variety. It is not a monolith. We have failures and we have great successes. We have setbacks and we have leaps forward. And hence this variety, which was a great advantage to Western Europe in its evolution, learning from different experiments is something I think that will be good for the region. I’ll end with a few words about paradigms. A section in my paper is called Paradigms Lost and what I mean by that is that this large population which was invigorated by the uprisings of 2011 and for a moment there was the beginning of a paradigm that was becoming quite widespread which was a very, not very well defined but kind of accountable government, no dictatorship, power sharing, inclusivity, social justice, fighting corruption, which we could sort of describe as sort of a democratic, unarticulated vision. That has broken apart in favor of many different rival narratives from Islamist narratives to research and authoritarian narratives to economy first narratives and I believe without a vision, without a common paradigm, it’s very hard for populations and societies to build institutions. You have to imagine it first, be convinced of it first, before you can really make that progress. And one of the things that has been a great challenge for the societies that are attempting to get out of old molds and leap into something new is that the regional context has not been unified or welcoming in a progressive sense, that whereas we saw recent, not recent, 20 years ago when you had uprisings in Central and Eastern Europe there was a Western Europe. Okay, Western Europe had taken five centuries to resolve the issues that we’re dealing with, role of religion, identity, national borders, governance and so on, but it
had reached a certain collective paradigm and set of institutions, and these countries which were throwing off dictatorship in Central and Eastern Europe many of them could join an ongoing concern. Societies in the Arab world didn’t have that opportunity. So I close with saying it’s incumbent obviously on, you know, people and populations like us, but also leaders in the region to think long-term, in terms of what are the long term institutions that we are going to arrive at? In my mind, in the long run it’s going to have to be democratic, it could be constitutional monarchies which Morocco is experimenting with, or it could be republics that are moving seriously but possibly gradually, into full-blown democracy, but I don’t see any other sustainable way, particularly because oil resources, which enable you to buy stability for certain periods of time are not going to be there in the long run so we should use this sort of period to build the institutions which can sustain societies even when the going gets much rougher possibly than it is today. Thank you.

Daniel Serwer: Thank you very much, Paul. Robert, Paul points to the inadequacy or disunity of the region’s paradigms, the difficulty building institutions, the force for building institutions that social change represents. Juan says it’s about sustainable development. Where do you pick up this stake?

29:20

Robert Ford: I actually think it’s both. It’s a real honor first let me say, to be on a panel with Juan and Paul and Randa. I don’t really feel like I belong up here. I’m not that much of an expert. But I will share with you my thoughts on three things to watch for over the coming decades, and those three are first what I call the demand or the search for dignity, especially among the young people. Second, and related to that, is developing sustainable economic development, very much along the lines of what Juan was saying, and then the third is figuring out what will be the role of religion in the society and in the state? They’re all sort of connected.

First, with respect to the search for dignity, the biggest word I heard out of the Arab Spring over the last few years is karama (dignity). That does not mean democracy by the way, it’s different. With the explosion of access to information about the rest of the world young people in Arab countries have a higher set of expectations for treatment from their own governments. I think Juan’s book, The Millennial Arab Generation, I can’t recommend that book highly enough so Juan, excuse me if I steal a few of your thoughts but I loved your book. But I’ll just share a couple of things that fit with what you said.
When I worked in Algeria, 2006 to 2008, I was ambassador there, and then in Syria, 2011 and ‘12, members of my diplomatic staff when they were out talking to young people, in both countries had Algerians and Syrians say back to them, “You know, in your country we see on television that the police read your rights when they arrest you, but they don’t do that in our country.” We were all very stunned, first of all that they like understood that that is what we do in the United States, so it’s a level of information that you wouldn’t expect, a level of detail, and second, that they wanted it in their countries, and this has to do with dignity, the problems of police abuse, corruption, and ultimately accountability and I think what Paul would say here is we don’t have good institutions to enforce accountability. It is I don’t think an accident that the Syrian uprising in 2011 started with parents vehemently objecting to police abuse of their children, teenage children, who have been picked up by the police in the city of Daraa and severely abused. And it is not an accident that the first violence in the Syrian uprising was directed against Syriatel, which is a monopoly owned by the president’s cousin, Rami Makhlouf and people know that there’s corruption involved there and so they burned down Syriatel in Daraa. So there’s this issue of dignity and corruption.

32:40

But I was also struck, looking at Syria and then also watching on television Avenue Bourguiba in Tunisia and Tahrir Square in Egypt, how many middle class people, as well as unemployed, were in those protests, and same thing in Syria, by the way. The rising expectations also has to do with rising levels of employment, demand for it, dealing with the youth bulge and rising living standards. I think it’s very interesting that Tunisia is the biggest single source of recruits to the Islamic state from any Arab country and yet Tunisia has a strong middle class, still does. And so how to raise living standards further is going to be a real challenge. This really gets then into the issue of investment over the coming decades and especially private investment, and this is both a macroeconomic challenge as well as a microeconomic challenge.

The Middle East, people were just talking about climate change, the Middle East is definitely going to be a major food importing region over the coming decades. In fact the dependence on food imports is almost certainly going to increase. I don’t see, especially with climate change how you would avoid that. So are they going to be able to generate for an exchange to pay for those food imports? One of the more interesting papers I’ve read over the last six months was connecting the drought in China to rising food prices which raised food prices in Egypt which brought people out into Tahrir Square and that linkage I think is only going to increase in the decades to come, and so there’s both an issue of macroeconomic balances, and
let’s be honest, the IMF and the Neoliberal reforms that many of these countries have tried have had only mixed success, and then there’s also gonna be an issue of microeconomic reforms, improving the investment climate.

The US Agency for International Development can sometimes do these very detailed investment climate studies and one of the ones that I participated in for one of the Arab countries that I was working on in North Africa showed that it took almost 300 days for a foreign company to get enough papers done, signatures, move the process along, 300 days, whereas in East Asia at the same time it took about 60. And so if you’re a foreign company it’s gonna be a lot easier to go to East Asia than to go to an Arab country, so they gotta deal with the microeconomic reforms, and going back to accountability and corruption, businesses want rule of law so that if there are commercial disputes they can go to a court and get them ruled upon, arbitration or a court ruling in an honest, open and transparent manner. And so that’s the second is how do you deal with the macro and micro issues?

Third is, I just touch on very briefly is figuring out the role of religion in the state. When I was at the American Embassy in Cairo as a young diplomat in 1988 the head of the political office of our embassy, I won’t mention his name, sent a report to Washington and said, “political Islam in Egypt is finished.” Twenty, what is that? Almost 30 years later, 26 years later, clearly that’s not the case. And so I think political Islam is gonna be around for awhile. I see no signs that it isn’t going to be. The questions it raises about the role of state and the role of religion are not unique to the Middle East. We had murderous religious wars in Western, well, not Western, all of Europe in the 17th century that really only ended at the end of the Thirty Years War and the Treaty of Westphalia where they began the idea of separating state from religion.

I certainly would not wish a thirty years war on countries in the Arab world and in the Middle East, but I think they are going to have to work on these questions over the coming decades, and it’s not going to be easy. In particular I think one challenge that’ll come up will be how to manage Salafis, the most conservative Islamists who in many cases have stayed out of politics. In many countries the Salafis did not go in but in Egypt and Tunisia they have recently created political parties and they are now participating in the system. They’re pulling even farther to the right than groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and how are countries going to manage that?
Greg Gause, who’s a very good analyst of the Arabian peninsula said, “It could be the biggest challenge for Saudi Arabia if the Salafis start demanding elected parliaments because in the end the Saudi monarchy depends heavily on support from the Salafi trend within Saudi Arabia.” And so how do you deal with Salafis, how do you deal with political Islamists in general, will be an issue and it’s not like they have all the answers themselves, and I think we saw that in Egypt and we saw it in Tunisia. There isn’t a political Islam answer to economic problems and dealing with the youth bulge in jobs, there isn’t a political Islam answer to human rights and demands for accountability, and so those parties themselves, if they do enter the system, are going to have to adapt and figure out ways forward, which may pull them ultimately back towards more centrist visions to deal with the macro and micro issues and the institution building of things like accountability that I spoke to at the start. Thank you.

38:40

Daniel Serwer: Thank you very much, Robert. Randa, you’ve been talking to an unusually wide range of people in the Middle East. How do you see the longer term forces and factors that will determine the region’s future?

Randa Slim: Thank you, Dan. First, it’s really an honor to be on the panel with Dan, Juan, Paul and Robert. Being the last to speak, in terms of trends and drivers, I think I, you know, I agree with all the previous speakers and so what I’m about to say might be a little bit of a nuanced version of what some of the remarks, previous remarks. I will be talking, first I want to say that the common narrative that has been with us in the region and that will stay in the region for the next five to ten years is a narrative of change, and that a lot of the drivers that have been mentioned by my colleagues here on this panel, are double-edged. They both have positive, they can have a positive role or they can have a negative role and it’s very hard to really predict when will the positive aspect of each of these drivers will manifest itself and when the negative aspects. So it will be an ongoing process of change and the number of scenarios in the region, or facing the region in the short to long term, run a gamut, you know, all the way from, you know, chronic instability to fragile states to okay experiments with democracy to regional conflict. So this is the common narrative that I see is undergirding what has been said before and I think that describes the region.

40:30
Let me talk about three trends. One is the negotiation of the social contract in each country, and I think that has started, has been unleashed by the Arab Spring 2010/2011, and I think that’s continuing and it’s going to take different forms in each of the countries. We have seen one peaceful, nonviolence model of such negotiation taking place through constitutional committees, through constitutional referenda, through ballot boxes in Tunisia, but then also we see the other extreme of that negotiation taking place in Syria through violence, and these two extremes, you know, of this ongoing process, of negotiating the social contracts, in my opinion presents the two extreme models that are going to be out there in the region, and you will have hybrids between these two extremes so some countries will try, will continue to try the nonviolent negotiation process, will fall into violence, then go back to negotiation, others will be stuck into a violent negotiation for some time to come.

So this process, and this is driven by the fact that of course the old social contract which was predicated on politic deference by the citizenry in return for economic stability from the government, is no longer valid, mainly because of what my colleagues here said, the governments are no longer able, for a variety of reasons, to provide the kind of economic security and to meet the high growth expectations that the citizenry have. So their part of the bargain is not being fulfilled and the citizenry is feeling that also their part of the bargain is no longer valid, and I think we will see that negotiation process taking shape and evolving in the next few years.

The second factor, or the second trend, is something that has been mentioned again by the panelists here is this information revolution that is going on. I mean, let me just share with you some numbers.

42:50

40.2% of the total Middle East population now uses internet. That’s about 90 million people. For a reference the global average of internet penetration is about 34.3%. Now, in terms of access to information, access to news, most Arabs, I mean, a large number of Arabs tend to use their smart phones to watch TV. For example, in Saudi Arabia 34% of young people use their smart phone to access information and watch TV. In the United Arab Emirates it’s 52%. Now in terms of the internet users most, of course most of those who, 85% of the Arab internet users are younger than 14. So if you put these numbers together this is the kind of development in the region that in a way creates a larger space for acquiring information, acquiring knowledge by the young, thus empowering them, but also like any trend I have referred to, others have referred to, it has also the negative aspect of it, which also creates space for a whole host of actors, crazies, religious entrepreneurs, to be legitimized through the use of
the media to offer some very negative ideas and narratives that can capture the youths, and we, I mean, here in the United States as well as other countries, need to engage in this battle for the minds and the souls that is now being waged in the region by a number of state actors, but more importantly by non-state actors. I mean, I’ve seen like ISIS has 40,000 tweets a day. I mean, that’s a number that has been thrown at me, you know, by somebody. So Jabhat Al Nusra Anybody who follows Jabhat Al Nusra Twitter account, I mean, you will be amazed by the number of tweets that are out there, that is accessible by more and more people in the region. And so this battle for minds and souls through the information, through the social medium sphere I think this is going to continue and to increase in its intensity.

And third point I want to refer to is Iran and that’s very much related to what’s going on in Vienna. I think a good, I think an important part of the regional future will be determined by with path Iran chooses to take in the next five to ten years. And there are a number of paths that Iran chooses and of course it depends on what happens by next week partly but also it depends on domestics politics of Iran. I mean, you have a large segment of the Iran population that is dissatisfied with their government, that is dissatisfied with their leadership. You have huge resources in terms of especially human resources, highly educated population, you have high internet connectivity, you have high IT capacities, and on the other hand you have an economy that has been hollowed out by the sanctions, you have an oil and gas sector which is in bad need of technological innovation and technical help, and so I think the Iranian leadership is facing a choice of how to go next. I think we in the outside world, I mean, can help or can have some influence, but this is a choice that has to be done by the Iranian themselves, the Iranian leadership and the Iranian population and that is the positive path that Iran can pursue of growth and modernity that will create positive dynamics in the region, economically, social, politically, and then there is a negative path that Iran can take which is along the acquisition maybe of nuclear weapons, doubling down as a spoiler, as a wrecker of regional development. So a good, I mean, Iran and the path it chooses will have an important role to play in determining the regional trajectory going forward.

Daniel Serwer: Thank you Randa. Thank you Robert, thank you Paul, thank you Juan. This is already an amazingly rich conversation, three people who’ve come up with three different perspectives on the same region and I can’t help but note that there are things that we talk about every day that they haven’t mentioned and that maybe aren’t long term drivers of the fate of the region. The way I’m gonna proceed is this: I’m gonna turn back to the panel and see if they have any comments that
have been, further comments that may have been provoked by their colleagues, and then as quickly as we can we'll turn to the audience for questions. Panel, do you have further thoughts that you want to deliver now? Juan. Go ahead Randa.

Randa Slim: I think one factor, we mentioned en passant but we did not focus on, is emerging, is the growing role of non-state actors in the region. I mean, I looked at a, there is a study that was done comparing the number of non-state actors between 2001 and 2008 and we are talking about non-state armed actors. Between 2001 and 2008 their numbers has multiplied by a factor of four in the MENA region and by a factor of five in Sub Sahara, in Africa. And since 2008 we are seeing this number increasing even more. And I think this is a phenomenon to watch how it impacts this, they are party to this ongoing negotiation of the social contract, they are... some of them now are, like ISIS, and increasingly Hezbollah, are no longer perceiving themselves, or define themselves, or play the role of a domestic actor but rather of a regional actor trying to project influence and power across the region and to define the debate in the region. And I think that’s something that states, people, civil societies, in the region will be contending with for some time to come.

Daniel Serwer: Thank you Randa. Juan?

50:14

Juan Cole: So one thing I think we have to think about is solutions to some of these problems and I just saw an interesting piece by Christian Orikson, or actually a comment by him that a great deal of the water now that’s being consumed in the Gulf countries and the GCC is being produced by desalinization plants. Desalinization is expensive but actually solar driven desalinization is much cheaper. And so as they move to renewables desalinization becomes more and more plausible for, of course, those countries typically have relatively small populations but for places like Yemen that’s clearly what needs to be done to have drinking water in the future. So many of those severe challenges that the region is facing can be addressed. Right now Yemen has no obvious government. The Houthis extremist Zaidis have taken over the capital and much of the north and seem to be dictating government policy to cabinet ministers. They’ve allowed the president to stay there but it’s a very odd situation that I think it would be a real challenge for a political scientist to theorize and so obviously that government is a little unlikely to go forward with solar desalinization plants. So they do have, in order to get these challenges dealt with, as I think as Paul was saying, they need more effective governance.
One final point I would like to make here is that, and this is not a slam at my fellow panelists, I’m really honored to be here and they’ve made really important points, but I just would like to suggest that our framing of the Middle East is often wrong, that we see it as unusually violent, as unusually religious, that it’s out of the norm in some way for the world, and it’s just not the case and we, you know, this trope of going back to the wars of religion in Europe and well, maybe they’ll eventually catch up with us ‘cause we’ve solved these problems, I just want to say that in my father’s lifetime the Germans killed six million Jews. They were Catholics and Protestants killing Jews. Actually nothing that bad has happened in the Middle East, and not only that, but the UK has been driven for 400 years by Catholic/Protestant things which got London blown up several times in my youth and Yugoslavia fell apart between Croat Catholics and Bosnian Muslims and Serbian Greek Eastern Orthodox relatively recently.

Daniel Serwer: Thank you for that comforting thought, Juan.

Let’s turn our attention for a moment to solutions, to what we ought to be doing now to deal with some of these longer term drivers of the future of the Middle East. Juan has mentioned solar desalinization, a very concrete technology that might offer a way out of some of the water supply shortages, but you know, more broadly speaking what else do we need to be doing now to deal with these longer term drivers?

Paul Salem: Well, I mean, what I wanted to say which fits right into that is although the challenges are complex and the trends, you know, for people who, you know, it’s their business to look at them, they’re very interesting and they’re very varied, but
the to-do list is very simple in a way. You know, Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* started happy families are all alike and unhappy families are unhappy differently. So Syria is unhappy one way, Yemen’s unhappy another, Egypt, you know, the problems and the driver, this one doesn’t have enough water, that one doesn’t have enough inclusion, but the to-do list is not complicated, in my mind, but what I mentioned as part of the big problem, what I called, you know, paradigms, the problem of paradigms, that there isn’t enough agreement on the to-do list to begin implementing it but to my mind it is not complicated. And here when I look at the experience of other societies and I look at, you know, Western Europe, I agree with Juan, they were far more, you know, destructive and far more efficient in their conflicts than, you know, than we have been but I do believe that at the end, you know, the evolution of accountable, inclusive, varied types of democratic government is, you know, is a sort of historical evolution that spread around the world, actually, and it was actually what the majority of people inarticulately wanted something akin to. I believe personally that at the end of the day religion cannot be the driver of politics. It has to be part of social life, part of culture institutions, it impacts politics here and there but there is no way that you can sustain to my mind in the modern age a religion-based institution as you have in Iran, as you have in some of the Arab countries or as some of the political parties proposed.

So to my mind the to-do list involves reforms in domestic politics, which are the political institutions, as I said before towards forms of inclusive democracy, reform of economic institutions and it’s not rocket science, you know, low corruption, good business environments, strong social programs that target the really marginalized and the really poor. The problem has not been the lack of knowledge about how to do it, it’s definitely been the interests of those in power and the politics of it. Thirdly, in terms of the obvious challenges of water, land, climate change, desalination, in the proper governance structure those become technical issues. Yes, they’re challenging, where do you get the money, but it’s… then you have something to deal with, so I think the reform of domestic political, economic and social institutions is clear but the challenge is that most of the elite’s not necessarily committed to implementing it. The to-do list to my mind is not confusing.

Secondly, and very importantly, our region needs governance. We are in a region driven by immense conflict. Yes, Europe went through much worse but Western Europe at least, you know, resolved it and has had 60, 70 years without it, now maybe Ukraine and Africa has it. I’m not saying it’s unique but it’s certainly crippling. Obviously for a long time the Arab/Israeli conflict was the big one. I would say now it’s Iran. As Randa said the Arab countries in Iran, Israel and Iran, US and Iran, but also that our region, which for most of the 20th century was defined, or tried to
define itself as an Arab region, with Turkey, Iran and Israel sort of on the margins in different relationships that certainly no longer applies. Certainly Iran and Turkey are now part of the Arab region. Israel still has a certain relationship.

58:55

But more importantly modern patterns of economics, or information, no longer allow you to have complete societies isolated even from the region. The world is integrated and until you standardize and integrate your region you cannot properly (inaudible 59:12) with the rest of the world, economically or politically, and we have no regional security architecture, no regional agreement on what this region is and how we manage our conflicts, let alone how we share resources, labor, information and all that. So the to-do list at the national level and the to-do list at the regional level is not complicated. It just needs to be done.

Daniel Serwer: And let me turn to Randa and Robert and ask, from your perspective can the political forces be aligned that would be able to accomplish this to-do list? Randa?

59:55

Randa: I think, again, I mean, it depends on partly as the region dynamics, this intense competition that’s going on and that’s, as Paul said, that has now replaced in a way the Palestinian cause as the primary concern of many governments and that has translated itself also, what has been translated at the grassroots level into this competition driven by identity politics, Sunni-Shiite, and that’s diverting a lot of the regional resources into this competition, and I think governance, as Paul said, is definitely the answer going forward. I really don’t know. I’m not sure whether this regional dynamics, this region of politics, will trump the work that’s needed to be done within each of these countries and at the regional level on governance and achieving good governance. I would like, if I may, focus on one particular aspect that we should emphasize and focus on is the educational sector in the region. I mean, it is amazing that higher education obtainment now in the Middle East correlates with rising joblessness. And partly because there is a mismatch between what the universities and the high school are producing in terms of skill, and what the job market of the 21st century needs in terms of skill. So unless part of the reforms that Paul mentioned focuses on bringing the educational sectors in many of the Arab countries in line with the demands of the 21st century job market, we’re going to suffer again for much higher unemployment going forward more frustration at the public level. And so that’s one factor that I’m very much interested in, in terms of
something that we need to zero in on and that is achievable in the short-term
awaiting alignment of regional factors which I think might take some time to align
themselves.

1:02:40

Daniel Serwer: Robert, where should we be focusing? What should we be doing?
What should they be doing?

Robert Ford: Well, first I would just say we need to have a great deal of humility and
modesty addressing the question, both because I don’t think people in the United
States, in general, understand all of the complexities of these societies and the
relationships. It’s not a deep criticism of us, it’s just these are complex societies that
know themselves better. I left Iraq where we were trying, you know, sort of a Big
Bang way to build a democracy there, I left greatly humbled by how hard that really
is. So with that caveat I would just say I think two things leap out to me. First, we
can’t make it happen, that’s the humility part, but the second is then that it’ll be more
pressure from within these societies themselves on leaderships that will generate
change and reform I think Dan. I think that pressure is actually the Arab Spring was
one sign but it’ll keep building because of information technology that is making
people in the region aware in a way they were not in the 1940’s and ‘50’s and ‘60’s
of what’s happening around the world and as I mentioned, a sense that they’re not
being treated in the same way that people in other countries are. I’m always very
struck when I have served in North Africa how many families have a brother, a
cousin, or maybe they themselves have been to France and worked or been to
Belgium or been to Spain and they have a real sense of governments operates in
those countries versus their own.

And second then is the leaderships may not want to make a lot of change but they
will in response to pressures and that’s what we saw repeatedly in the Arab Spring,
whether it be Jordan where there’s an argument over should the prime minister
come from the party that dominates, prevails in elections? Same kind of issue in a
place like Morocco, and then arguments over how much authorities, prime ministers
should have as opposed to monarchs, et cetera, and I think these are issues they’ll
just work out over time but the more pressure there is from below the more the
leaderships I think are pushed to change and where they don’t, then you get into
really ugly situations like Syria.

Daniel Serwer: Do we just stand by and watch, do we help, do we…?
Robert Ford: No. I think there are things we can do to help but I don't want to oversell them. But I will just tell a story and in fact a former gentleman with whom I worked a bit in Algeria, Minister Shakib Khalil is here from Algeria. Former Minister Khalil, it's nice to see you sir. When I was ambassador in Algeria, I'll tell the story, I'll try to make it very brief, I went to the Algerian University of Tlemcen in western Algeria to see a long distance learning program that we had just established in 2007 between the University of Missouri engineering faculty and the engineering in Tlemcen, at the University of Tlemcen. When I went to the university there was a crowd of several hundred students who gave me, the American ambassador, a standing ovation. I was shocked, on an Arab university that students would applaud an American ambassador and in fact that very day the Israelis had been bombing Gaza so I almost didn't go to the university 'cause I didn't want to have shoes and tomatoes thrown at me, and it was just the opposite response and I was so surprised I asked the university president, "What is going on?" And he said, "But Monsieur Ambassador, what you need to understand is these programs, they know, kids know that it's working." He said, "Your program with Missouri, the students who are coming out of it every one," he said, "there are not a lot because it's in English," he said, "but the twenty students who came out of it, every one of them got a job." He said, "Every one of them was able to say they speak fluent English, they have studied an American syllabus, and they all got hired," and he said, "so I'm really glad you came because I have a long waiting list for students to get into English programs and I have a long waiting list to get into this engineering program and I need more resources."

I took that story back to Condi Rice a few months later when we had a meeting here in Washington and I said, "that program, Madam Secretary, costs us less than a million dollars. We are spending $750 million a day in Iraq. Could I just have a couple of million dollars to set up a program like that in (inaudible 1:07:52)?" It doesn't fix all the problems, Dan, but I think it helps on the margins.

Daniel Serwer: So we turn to building the infrastructure, of human relationships, of educational contacts, rather than some of the more grandiose...

Robert Ford: Yeah, I'm not into grandiose.

Daniel Serwer: ... and ineffective efforts that we've indulged in. I'm going to turn to the audience in a moment. There are two microphones to ask questions, if you'll line
up. I just want to check with the panel that none of them has anything further they would like to add before we go to questions.

1:08:31

Juan Cole: Can I just say that I think how we use our foreign aid should be looked at again. A lot of it is determined by domestic factors and so forth, but little Tunisia just had what political scientists would call a successful democratic transition. Two elections in a row the major figures all agree on the rules of the game and the losers went home. This is a huge success for the region and Tunisia is number nine in our foreign aid. We don’t frankly do very much for it. We should be offering training to judges, the infrastructures of democracy, and we should be throwing them a lot of money and we’re investing it instead of, well, bombing Iraq and I think investing in Tunisia would be a better bet.

Daniel Serwer: Thank you. Let me turn to the left here and we’ll try to make it to everybody. If you can keep your questions quick I think I’ll take two at a time.

Gretchen Nutes: Gretchen Nutes from Askari Defense and Intelligence…

Daniel Serwer: Can you speak up a little?

Gretchen Nutes: Gretchen Nutes from Askari Defense and Intelligence. Thank you very much for your comments. I was fascinated as I was listening to think about how much Iran provides a case study of many of the trends you are sharing about and thinking about Ambassador Ford’s comment that pressure within the region and within countries is what is going to motivate leadership to change, to deal with corruption, to deal with the economic issues, I’m wondering if you could comment on how is that pressure within Iran as young people do develop so much more access to information as there is a strong demand for dignity, what would you look for to see that pressure build to a point where the leadership of Iran would be motivated to make a genuine rapprochement with the Arab Sunni countries in the region such that it would have a long-term, positive impact on development in the region?

Daniel Serwer: Let me take a second one from that microphone.

1:10:55

Warren Evans: Okay, Warren Evans, formerly with the World Bank. One speaker’s talked about the challenge about reaching directly the marginalized and I wondered
whether any of the countries in the region have yet tried seriously working with the model of the conditional cash transfer programs. Some Latin American countries these programs have made big changes in the situation of the poor. Poor families get a small stipend in return for making sure their kids stay in school and get their heath checkups. There are governor challenges, on the other hand if you’d said to me 25 years ago, “do you think the governor of Brazil can carry out such a program cleanly and efficiently?” I would have said to you, “you’re probably dreaming,” but in fact it has worked and it’s really changing the situation in that country.

1:11:47

Daniel Serwer: Randa, I think of you for the question on Iran. Juan, I think of you for the question…

Randa Slim: I think both of us.

Daniel Serwer: Both of you? Okay.

Randa Slim: I think both of us. I think she mentioned also Robert. I think what’s happening in Vienna today and what’s going to be the outcome by November 24 and let me guess, I would guess an extension of the talks maybe, you know, building on the interim agreement, maybe have another bigger…

Daniel Serwer: Randa, can you speak into the microphone a little more?

1:12:15

Randa: Yeah, I mean, that’s my guess is that I think both parties, especially the Americans and the Iranians have invested too much and have made quite a good progress on a lot of the contentious issues or conflicting issues between them to give it up, and then we are going to fall in January after that to the domestic politics in each country, you know, in the United States and Iran and that will determine whether there would be any future chance to continue these negotiations going forward. I think in the short term if there is a breakdown of talks, and that’s one scenario, and again, it’s (inaudible 1:12:53) of the domestic politics. Absent an agreement it’s going to be very hard, especially for the moderate factions in Iran led by Mr. Rohani, to keep making the argument of engagement with the West on one hand. I mean, we already seen the hardliners appearing to the surface, making the argument, the counterargument, but at the same time I think the supreme leader, who is ultimate arbitrator, who is the balancer between these different factions inside
Iran, understood very well what the election of Rohani meant. It meant a vote for change, for positive change, for modernity. I mean, when you visit the Tehran and I’ve been to Tehran so far at least twice, I mean, when you talk with young people there is an enormous satisfaction with the state of affairs in the country.

1:13:55

I met this playwright, a young woman who was writing a play called *The Terminal*, and the whole play centered around this main character who is stuck at an airport, knows fully well that her destination at the same times keep missing, getting on a plane to get to her destination, and for her this is a metaphor for the whole country, is that we know exactly where we want to go as a country but we are stuck at this place, like a terminal, and we keep missing getting on a plane to get us to our destination. And I think that’s what’s going to be interesting to watch. It is what will happen after November 24. Of course depending on the outcome this dynamic will play out differently. I think it’s going to be very hard, very hard, in my opinion, to go back to the Ahmadinejad days, partly because again, the factors, the domestic factors that have been unleashed by the Green Revolution first then by the Rohani elections are there to stay. You refer to the population, highly educated, well connected, and I think that is a factor that will, that will trump some of the gloomy scenarios that I have heard about, oh, the hardliners will take over again and will push out people like Rohani and such.

Daniel Serwer: Robert?

1:15:28

Robert Ford: Well, a couple of things I’d say real quick. First, with respect to the relations between Iran and Shia and the Sunni Arab dominated societies in Arab countries, seems to me that there is as real terrorism problem which I think frightens, and justifiably frightens Shia, whether they be in the Alawi-Shia communities in Syria or in Iraq or in Lebanon. I think those fears are all entirely reasonable. Yemen would be another example of late. And the terrorism itself will have to be dealt with I think both in the security aspect but there’s also gotta be a governance aspect as well, things that Paul was talking about in particular. I hope over time, and I think it takes time, as governments on both, in Iran and among the Sunni Arab community countries, as governments deal with the question of the role of religion in the state and that is settled over the coming decades, I’m greatly hopeful that the Sunni Shia splits will diminish. For one thing some governments are exploiting sectarianism as a justification for repression and staying in power and I think if they deal with the
dignity human rights governance issues that we’ve been talking about, there will be less incentive for governments to stir up sectarianism to begin with.

I think in the end religious communities, Shia and Sunni both, in places like Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, Syria, Yemen, think they will themselves want some kind of a Modus Vivendi. Historically these are not places that were at each other’s throats, as Juan said. They can I think get back to the more historical norm but it depends in fact then in terms of dealing on the dignity, the accountability, the governance issues that we were talking about.

1:18:00

Daniel Serwer: Juan?

Juan Cole: With regard to Iran it seems to me that the United States has three or four categories of relationship with other countries. There are allies, there are countries that are not allies but which we promise more or less not to invade or interfere with very much and with whom we do a lot of business. China is an example. And then there are enemies that we often invade of overthrow or put under sanctions. Iran has been in the category of enemy since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and the real big question now is can it be put in the China category? Can we do business with it, stop bothering it, have it stop brothering us? And so forth. And the big issues here are nuclear enrichment, which in my own view the Iranians don’t want a bomb, they want a Japan option or a breakout capacity. The real negotiations as I understand them in Vienna are over whether the breakout capacity will be five months or nine months and once you get to that point, I agree with Randa, you know, more or less the game is over. And so I think that is likely, that issue is likely to be resolved, but then there are other outstanding issues, Iran’s relationship to regional powers, Saudi Arabia our ally, Israel our ally, Egypt and so forth. So there’s still a lot of work to be done but the other thing to say is that if it’s the case that Da’esh or ISIL is a major security issue for the United States, well, the United States gave close air support to Shiite Militias, the Iraqi Shiite Army and elements of the Irani revolutionary guards to save the Shiite town of Amerli in Iraq recently. So de facto on the ground the US is starting to form an alliance with Iran under certain condition, an alliance of convenience. So I think there may be a tectonic shift going on here where Iran is much more in the China kind of category than it is in the enemy category.

1:20:20
With regard to education and keeping kids in school, the first thing that has to be done is to make the schools any good. You know, there’s been an enormous increase in literacy, which I talk about in my book, in the past generation. Libya has flipped form 20% illiterate in 1967 to 80% literate today. But often that literacy is attained through wrote learning, people aren’t taught to analyze and in Egypt you have excellent universities but starved of resources, class sizes of 2,000, professors not paid anything so they have to drive taxis in the afternoon or charge the students for their lecture notes. And so you need an enormous amount of teacher training, you need better salaries for teachers and professors, you need more resources for schools and universities and then we can pay the families to keep the kids in school because it would do any good. So there’s an enormous educational challenge here and it’s another thing that I think the United States and Europe ought to be investing more in, in the region.

Daniel Serwer: Randa, you wanted to add…?

1:21:39

Randa Slim: I just want to add something to what Juan said about Iran’s role in the region. I don’t think a nuclear deal with the west would mean, would translate itself into Iran’s moderating its behavior in the region. I think, I mean, in fact the argument could be made that it will give more resources for Iran in the pursuit of an expansionist policy in the region, and let’s not forget that Iran as a region of power is something that is shared, is something that is desired by the majority of Iranians. It’s part of how they look at their country, of how they see their country, and then the leadership and different elements in the Iranian leadership can interpret how you achieve that differently, and so there will be the Rohani’s crowd they will interpret achieving regional power through negotiations, through engagement with the neighbors, through neighbor relations, but then you have the crowd led by Qasem Soleimani and others that will interpret achievement of that regional power by doubling down in Syria, doubling down in Iraq, doubling down in Lebanon, doubling down in Yemen. So I think having a nuclear agreement does not necessarily mean we are going to have Iran moderating or toning down its regional policies, expansionist policies and how it goes about doing that.

Daniel Serwer: Paul, did you want to add anything?

Paul Salem: No, there’s a lot of people who have questions. I’d rather hear them.

Daniel Serwer: Let’s go to two more questions. Please do introduce yourself.
Malik Jandali: An American/Syrian musician. I’m honored to be here, to hear the panel. I heard about sustainable development, I heard about law and order, negotiation, education, and terrorism and corruption, all that stuff, and dignity. I want to clarify something. I’m from Syria and we have a dictatorship which has been listed by our government, my U.S. government, as a state sponsor of terrorism in December 1972 by the State Department. Ladies and gentlemen, 1972 the Assad dictatorship has been listed by my government as a state sponsor of terrorism. Today in 2014 the Assad dictatorship murdered 17,000 children plus. Would you please take a moment of silence and go back to our humanity so we can bring that dictator to justice. The problems in the Middle East and the region, especially in Syria, is dictatorship when you have no human rights, when you have no citizens. We touched on dignity, accountability, law and order, we are not citizens. Assad come to my mother, beat her in her bedroom just because I played (inaudible 1:24:43) at the White House or they can rape you or massacre all of you here in this hotel and nobody can do anything. My question to the panel and each one of you, what can we do to bring American values to bring the dictator to justice? Thank you.

[applause]

Ross Harrison: That’s a hard act to follow. I’m Ross Harrison from Georgetown University and my comments are less freighted with emotion and maybe even poignancy, but one of the comments that was made was sort of how we frame the region. We talked about framing and paradigms and one of the discussions, or one of the points that was made, and I think it was repeated, was that this notion of political Islam is a challenge to authority, to governance, to the state, and that that’s one type of framing, and I guess my question is, is there an alternative type of framing and that is that the competitive advantage of political Islam today, I know we’ll be talking about ISIL in the next panel but groups like ISIL, the competitive advantage is that it’s not just challenging the authority of the state, it’s challenging the basic ordering principles of the region and I guess the big elephant in the room is there a counter veiling identity, secular, nationalism or is, you know, are we living in a post-nationalist era or are we in a moment where there could be an inflection point, where there could be a challenge to political Islam. It’s not just through putting back together failed states that may not come back together, but a regional response that’s at the community level, an identity level. Thank you.
Daniel Serwer: Two very good questions. What do we do about Assad and what do we do about the challenge to state structure in the region? Juan?

Juan Cole: Well, with regard to American position on dictatorships and bloody conditions in the world and so forth, I just want to caution people that the United States is not all powerful and sometimes isn’t very competent and that it invaded Iraq, overthrew the government, abolished the army, and ran Iraq for eight years, and I don’t know. You know, if I were looking around as a consultant for somebody to do that for me in some other country, given the record in Iraq and the outcome in Iraq, I probably would want to go with somebody else. So you know, the United States is not able to control micro events. A lot of the faction fighting in places like Iraq and Syria is in neighborhoods, it’s back allies. The US military was never able to control these things. In Iraq they had a whole civil war in 2006/2007 which displaced four million people under the nose of the US military. So the premise that this is a horrible situation and somebody should do something about it implies that we could and that’s actually not in evidence. I’m not arguing for doing nothing, and Ambassador Ford, you know, has really stepped up to make an argument for doing things but I just want to caution us that, you know, this project of restoring peace to Homs maybe the US military is not the one to do it. And maybe I should just stop there.

[applause]

Daniel Serwer: Paul?

Paul Salem: Yeah, first of all I mean, I share Malik Jandali’s sort of moral, emotional outrage. I think that politics, including for countries or societies that choose to foreign policy, there is an element of morality in our human society and the choices we make and a lot of our own political choices are based on our rights, our dignity, our freedoms or things we want, and I do think the outrage of what the Assad regime has done in Syria, others maybe have done in other countries, obviously something the Syrians themselves rose up again. I’m from Lebanon, I lived under the shadow of that dictatorship and brutality for many years so I know, you know, what it’s like but what that dictatorship then did to its own people suppressed even our, you know, experience with them but I do think that the responsibility to protect the norm, the international norm, it’s not a law, it touches on something very fundamental, that we
are all, you know, yes, we’re in different nation states but we’re all sharing one humanity and to say, “well, there are Syrians being killed, they’re not Americans so I have no obligation,” I think is morally and politically incorrect and wrong. Now, what can be done, what are the effects? That is obviously an important discussion but I do feel a certain outrage and when I see Syrians helicopters dropping barrel bombs on entire neighborhoods, and there are several air forces in the region, in that same airspace and doing nothing to protect these human beings, I feel that is something unacceptable as a citizen of any country.

On a sort of nation states and political Islam, obviously it’s still a challenge that is being, you know, being contested, being worked out and obviously other societies have gone through it. It’s not an easy thing. But I’ll just point to a number of points that I would like to make. That first of all the nation states, take Syria and Iraq, they did not collapse because of political Islam. They collapsed because of profound mismanagement and exclusion of politics in the center. ISIS didn’t create the problem in Syria or Iraq, they exploited a collapse of order and effectively an uprising, and then they came in and took advantage of it. That indicates to me that both Syria and Iraq could have been ongoing concerns. Yes, they have issues of national identity, so does Belgium, so does Switzerland, so does the United States. You know, you don’t have to be all of the same color, religion and race to have a country. But the way politics was handled under Kaddafi’s Libya, Assad’s Syria or under Maliki’s Iraq, that is the problem, and hence the solution to my mind is not rocket science. It’s politics, it’s inclusion, it’s power sharing, things that are very sort of normal.

Another thing I’d like to point out is that in the Arab countries of, and the recent years of experience with political Islam when there has been an opportunity to experience it and to vote and so on and so forth political Islam is a strong current but I don’t think it is a, you know, a majoritarian or a national current. The backlash we saw in Tunisia, the backlash we saw in Egypt talking to, you know, hundreds and thousands of Syrians who might, if pushed against the wall they said, well I’ll join Jabhat al-Nusra to fight Assad but that’s not the social political option they desire. So in the Arab world I feel quite confident that political Islam is a current but it is not in any normal situation accepted by the majority of the population as the order that they want. Now how that will work itself out is a very, very complex issue in very different countries.

1:32:40
Daniel Serwer: Let me, if I may add a word about this question of the challenge to the state structures. People will often say the borders are artificial, they’ll often say, “we want to separate.” But the fact of the matter is that people want to separate need to not only want to separate, they need to agree on what the new borders will be. And when you don’t have that agreement, and I think we don’t have that agreement in the Middle East, wanting to separate becomes a cause of war, not a solution to war. We saw that very clearly in the Balkans, I saw it up front and personal, and I think we have to be very cautious, not because there’s something sacrosanct about the existing borders, but simply because they exist and they’ve been generally accepted for a long time. David I’m gonna try to quickly go through two more people but I’m not gonna be able to get back to the others. I’m afraid.

David Ottaway: It’s actually Dave Ottaway from the Woodrow Wilson and it’s actually a follow on the issue you just… in regard to solving solutions, what solutions, should we… you were saying we should continue to push for the existing nation state borders. My question is, isn’t it time to recognize Kurdistan as an independent country given what it’s doing for us? And what about South Yemen?

1:34:20

Daniel Serwer: And I think I looked to Robert and Randa for responses on Kurdistan and South Yemen.

Robert Ford: Well, on the Kurdistan issue, something that Dan just said I think is really, really true but just the one level of detail down. The borders of what would be the Kurdish independent state within Iraq, those borders themselves are still highly contentious. Would they or would they not, for example, include Kirkuk? There’s not any agreement among Iraqis, among Iraqis, on that issue and there are lots of other disputed towns and borders up there. Not surprisingly some of those borders are co-related to the presence of oil fields. So I don’t think it’s up to the Americans to jump the gun and say, “We recognize Kurdistan.” I think what it is up to us is to say to Iraqis in general, “you need to deal with this problem and you need to find a process to deal with it peacefully. If the international community, not just the Americans, if the international community can help you develop that political peaceful process, please tell us,” but I don’t think it’s up to us to jump the gun on that. With respect to Yemen, again, I would just take the same approach. The Herak I think are advocating and pushing more than they used to but we’re seeing a broad state collapse in Yemen and I’m not exactly sure where it’s going to come out and what the borders would look like and how many states there might be before you’re finished, if it’ll be one or two or three, I don’t really know and I don’t think it’s up to the Americans, or frankly
it’s up to the international community to decide that. It’s up to the people who live in those places. I just make one last comment on the question of are we in a post-nationalist era? I’m in general struck by how even political Islamists for the most part are not demanding the eradication of borders. I look myself at the Islamic state as a very bright shooting star, very bright but its time will pass. I was in Algeria in the 1990’s during an extremely vicious war where at least 100,000 Algerians died. There was an Islamist terror group, as nasty as the Islamic state. It was called the Islamic Armed Group, the GIA in French. Their brutality ultimately alienated people so severely that it was possible for the Algerian government to reestablish order throughout the country. It’s not completely gone away in Algeria but it’s very, very, very much better than it used to be. In Iraq, Al Qaeda’s brutality ultimately drove Sunni Arab tribes in Anbar to fight against it. And even former Ba’athi’s with the promise of political participation joined against Al Qaeda. Now the political participation part didn’t work out well and that helped the Islamic state but my point is that I don’t see anything predestined in some kind of success of the Islamic state. In fact I think its brutality, on both the Iraq and Syrian sides of the border are going to be its undoing, but what those borders ultimately look like, I don’t really know and it draws in the Kurds again. But I just don’t, when I think about political Islamists in Morocco, the PJD, or even the other movement, (inaudible 1:38:31) the charity and justice, Tunisia, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Noor party, the Salafi Party in Egypt, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood Islamic Action Party Front, and the Salafi Parties in the Gulf, none of them are demanding of a broad ummah to replace the national borders. So I wouldn’t, I don’t think we’re necessarily at the end of the Sykes-Picot borders yet.

Daniel Serwer: I’m under the gun to wrap up and so I’m just gonna turn to the panel and see if anybody has something really pressing that they want to add. I think we ought to thank them for a very stimulating hour and a half.

[applause]

Kate Seelye: And I want to thank our wonderful and eloquent moderator and the panelists as well…

01:39:30 discussion ends