

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager
Moderator: Kim Ghattas

Kate Seelye: We're going to be starting the second panel of the day, *Containing ISIS*. All right, let's get this panel started. I want to introduce the moderator. Kim Ghattas, who will be running the show. Kim is a BBC correspondent based in Washington covering international affairs. Previously she was the BBC state Department correspondent where she followed Hillary for many years, which led to a *New York Times* bestseller, *The Secretary: A Journey with Hillary Clinton from Beirut to the Heart of American Power*. Ghattas was previously based in Beirut where she and I reported often together, so I know that this panel will be in very good hands. So Kim, I'd like to hand things over to you. Thank you.

01:02

Kim Ghattas: Good morning everybody. Thank you very much for joining us for the second panel of the Annual MEI Conference, *Containing the Islamic State*, and it's a great follow-up to the panel earlier this morning. I don't know if you had an opportunity to attend but it I was very pleased to hear the comment of one of the panelists saying, you know, it does look like gloom and doom in the region and it does look like the Middle East is always in the throes of some bout of violence but you know, it doesn't always have to be like that and it doesn't mean that this region is the worst ever because look at what Europe had to go through during the First World War and the Second World War. So although we don't take comfort from terrible historic episodes like that it does mean that all hope is not lost for the Middle East.

Now, the Islamic State is of course the one topic that is grabbing most headlines in the US and probably around the world at the moment, and an interesting question, is that state here to stay? What are the challenges that the US and its allies in the region and around the world or regional players like Iran, what are the challenges that they will face as they try to contain the threat? It is really enough to just have a dozen military airstrikes everyday on ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria? There are also deep divisions within the coalition itself that the US is leading. There's a sense amongst some of the allies that the strikes are actually benefiting President Assad and that undermines everything and that is very much to the dismay of countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia who have very clearly said that they would also like to see a strategy that tackles the problem of the war in Syria.

Iran, for example, is hoping that perhaps there's an opportunity here to work with the United States. How do countries like Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq work to roll back ISIS? Is that even possible? And notice of course that the panel is called *Containing the Islamic State*, not destroy the Islamic State, and we'll discuss whether it's one or the other, whether destroying ISIS is possible. That is a word that

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

President Obama has often used when discussing the problem and the strategy. And finally, how did we get here? Because that does seem to be a key question to explore so that we can truly move forward. Now, if you notice in your programs we have a slightly different list of panels for this segment. Our panelists had to change a bit. Unfortunately Brett McGurk, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iran and Iraq could not make it. I'm sure you know that most administration officials who deal with the Islamic State are up to their ears and are constantly on planes, so we don't have an administration voice but I do think we have a truly excellent panel because we have voices from the region. This is the regional perspective that we will be bringing you, representing in some way the key players, Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and I think it is quite fitting that we should bring you the regional perspective to Washington because in the end it is also up to us, and I say us, because I'm Lebanese, it is up to us to find the way forward.

So I will introduce our excellent panelists starting to my left with Dr. Abdelaziz Sager who's from Makkah, Saudi Arabia. I will keep the bios brief. He's the Chairman and Founder of The Gulf Research Center. He's also the president of Sager Holding in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He is on way too many boards to list here but I'll mention that he's a member of the Makkah Province Council. He's on the advisory group for the Fourth Arab Human Development Report for the UNDP, which I think is very relevant when we talk about youth and how to move forward, and he's written many books and articles, including *Reforms in Saudi Arabia: Challenge and Feasible Solutions*.

Next to him is Omar Al Nidawi. He's the director for Iraq and Gryphon Partners, LLC. He works on the company's consulting engagements with a focus on Iraq energy and the Middle East. He's the co-author of the award winning blog, *Iraq the Model*, and in his native country of Iraq, Mr. Al Nidawi was a pioneer of internet journalism. A strong advocate for freedom of expression, he earned recognition by the world PC Magazine in 2007 as one of the 50 most important people on the web.

Next to him is Said Hossein Mousavian. He's an associate research scholar with a program on science and global security at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He has an illustrious career as a former diplomat. He served in Germany as Iran's ambassador. He was head of the foreign relations committee of Iran's National Security Council, a spokesman for Iran in its nuclear negotiations with the international community and he's the author of several publications and a very prolific writer. I can tell you that for sure because I get emails from him with articles almost every day.

06:28

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

And then sitting next to him is Cengiz Çandar. He's a senior columnist at the daily liberal Turkish newspaper *Radikal*. He also writes for the online publication *El Monitor*, which comes out of here in Washington but has a great roster of writers from the region. He served as an adjunct professor at various universities in Turkey and in 1991 he was a key player in establishing relations between the Turkish presidency and the Iraqi Kurdish leadership and the Kurds will certainly come up in our discussion. Mr. Çandar is also the author of the Turkish bestseller *Mesopotamia Express: A Journey in History*.

Now, I would like to kick off this discussion with a question that perhaps you did not expect me to start with, and I'm gonna try to keep this conversational as much as possible. I would like you to imagine that you have President Obama's ear. He's invited you to come to the White House, he wants to hear from you, in a minute or so, a convincing argument about how he could contain, or destroy, if you think that's possible, the Islamic State. You have one minute to convince him. He'll say, "Whatever you tell me I will do it, but you have to make a convincing argument. How do we tackle this problem?" Abdelaziz, why don't you go first?

07:50

Abdelaziz Sager: Certainly I will thank the president for giving me the minute. But at the same time I think I'll start by saying, the unfinished job of the US in Iraq have created ISIS, so you have to finish your job, and to finish your job, airstrike will not do it. You have to have forces in the ground, and forces in the ground cannot be by regional forces. It has to be either by the Iraq or the US because of the unfinished job, they have to do it. Airstrike can achieve it in the short-term but not in the long-term. This is why containing is a short-term idea, I will not call it a strategy, the strategy should be moving from the short-term containment to a destroying, you know, a strategy for the ISIS.

Kim Ghattas: So Iraqi forces, Syrian moderate rebels on the ground as well?

Abdelaziz Sager: Yes.

Kim Ghattas: Okay, Omar, why don't you tell us? You bring us the perspective from Iraq. What do you think of the strategy so far and what would you advise the president?

08:48

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

Omar Al Nidawi: Well, I would thank him for taking the initiative to actually ordering the beginning of strikes against ISIS. I applaud his strategy for tackling ISIS in Iraq and Syria except that it is missing one critical component, both militarily and one critical component politically. Militarily I think the critical missing component is the addition of forces on the ground, not necessarily 5,000 or 10,000 soldiers but air traffic controllers, people who can direct strikes and guide and help the local forces in conducting missions and building on the momentum of strikes. We're seeing that the local forces are capable of making progress. This is happening in Iraq, this is not happening in Syria, so adding forces, adding some special force from either the US or the coalition would help. On the political side we have a political framework for Iraq. There is a federal system, there's a constitution, it's in place but the implementation has been lacking. We're making progress in that. The new government is making progress in that direction, but there's no Syrian component for the strategy. We need the president to have, perhaps borrow the Iraqi system of a federal decentralized system to disengage the... to give the warring factions a chance that this is not a fight to the end. They need to... that there is a way out.

Kim Ghattas: Okay. Hossein. That would be an amazing opportunity for you, to get into the White House. You could make peace between the US and Iran right there.

Hossein Mousavian: Actually, I would advise Mr. President to stay out of military strikes against the Muslim countries. Before ISIS we had Taliban, we had Al Qaeda. And the US declared war on terror in 2001. And for 10 years the US have military strike in Iraq and Afghanistan. Ultimately, neither was able to defeat Taliban nor Al Qaeda but the terrorism has been expanded in the region. Jabhat Al-Nusra, ISIS and the crisis is more and more and more. Therefore whether really the US is the right country to lead military strike, I don't believe so. I believe we need an inclusive regional coalition between major powers, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq. We need Islamic forces, we don't need western countries, specifically the US which is not popular. The US has already invaded two Muslim countries, Afghanistan and Iraq, with disastrous consequences for the US, for Afghanistan, for Iraq, and for the region. I think we have to rethink about the US strategy.

Kim Ghattas: I'll come back to you later on that and get you and Abdelaziz to discuss the potential of an inclusive regional coalition. Why don't you tell us what you bring from Turkey for us?

12:10

Cengiz Çandar: Yes, on the weekend I was a few hundred yards away from Kobani, the main battlefield nowadays against ISIS and at a certain moment at around 9 pm,

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

the coalition aircrafts' sounds were heard and the moment it was mostly presumed they were the American fighter planes and the moment their sounds were heard in the darkness of the night, Saturday, the Kurds right across Kobani a few hundred yards away started to shout in Kurdish (*Speaking in Kurdish 12:57*) which means, long live Obama or bravo Obama, keep on doing what you are doing. So this is the sentiment for the main resisting element on the ground and if President Obama as he declared that he doesn't want to have American boots on the ground in the Middle East anymore and he will provide air support to fight against ISIS, there are people fighting against ISIS and as the development in and around Kobani proved, given the air support, indigenous people could overcome ISIS. So what I would tell you, tell him, in response to a question, engage with the Kurds more than you used to be and... because when we speak of the Kurdish resistance of Kobani they are mainly YPG forces or PYD forces and the leader of PYD has no access to this town, the visa was not recorded until now, therefore you have to engage with them, more than you have and if I may add one unconventional proposal, start contemplating and de-listing PKK from terrorist organization list because it was the main force that fought against ISIS in Sinjar Mountains near Mosul and it is the main force still resisting against ISIS. That would create a lot of uneasiness on the part of Turkey for sure, it will upset Turkey, but in the long-run, even in the midterm, given Turkey's reconciliation process which has started with the PKK and the Kurds. It will even promote reconciliation to further ends and secure Turkey's better positioning within the large coalition.

Kim Ghattas: Let me pick up on this because it is an unconventional view. It's not the view we hear most coming out of Turkey, where Turkey's position at the moment has, you know, confused and upset a lot of people in Washington. There's a sense here, and even I think in Iran, Hossein, I know you've written a couple of pieces saying that Turkey is encouraging ISIS as part of its long-term strategy to bring down President Assad. Cengiz, why is Turkey taking the position that it taking when it comes to the Islamic state? Is it fair to say that they don't see the Islamic state as their prime concern, that they are more worried about Kurdish separatist ambitions?

16:18

Cengiz Çandar: Well, that's exactly how I read and rationalize, not justify or legitimize, but rationalize the Turkish position from the vantage point of the government in Ankara, ISIS is not seen as it is seen elsewhere or from here, from Washington. Implicitly meant in your question that ISIS is instrumental for the Turkish government for multifaceted aims. One, that it will be a permanent, it will remain as a permanent challenge for the government, for the regime in Damascus. Turkey wants it to be removed as soon as possible and it interprets the continuation

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

of the regime Damascus as an existential threat to itself and in that sense ISIS have fighting element on the ground against regimes. Secondly, in a region where we have a sectarian conflict going on ISIS as a Sunni phenomenon consists a challenge also Shiite dominated government in Baghdad that Turkey has and might have frictions. And third, as you mentioned, Kurds, in order to be contained not to go as far for demands, for ultimate independence, or even self rule, whether it could be autonomy or federation but that could endanger the body politic of Turkey to be checked under a certain stick and that stick comes up in the name of ISIS.

Kim Ghattas: Okay, we're going to come back to the debate about is it important to focus just on ISIS first or does the military strategy have to include targeting President Assad or not. We'll get back to that in a second but I want to get the perspective of the three panelists to react to what Mr. Çandar was saying in terms of, you know, where does Turkey stand and how do American allies like Saudi Arabia, how do the Iraqis and how do the Iranians view Turkey's position? Because there are those who say that without real Turkish military participation or without their approval for the use of their military bases it's going to be very difficult to really bring a military strategy towards a success, however you want to define it. So could I ask you Abdelaziz to interject in here?

19:14

Abdelaziz Sager: Well, the Turkish position is based in four parameters. One of them of course is have a no fly zone, the second is to have a safe zone for the refugees, the Syrian refugees and it should be an international responsibility and not only a Turkish responsibility to have a safe zone there, and the third is to have a proper training program for leadership and military that will allow these moderate forces to take over, and fourth of course, the airstrike should not be only limited to the ISIS but also should be extended to the Syrian government forces and they're still using their aircraft and helicopter to bombard an innocent people. I think they are all good points and I think we should really, you know, respond positively to that one. Maybe in the region there has not been a voice out clearly stating the full support of the Turkish, you know, four points, but I think in general they all seems to be an important one to achieve a target because when we have accepted to join from Saudi Arabia point of view the...

Kim Ghattas: The coalition.

20:32

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

Abdelaziz Sager: ... the coalition, I think that we had two key objective. One is to see that the extension of the, I mean first it's a partnership, it's a strong alliances with the US. Saudi you know, brought legitimacy to the coalition. Otherwise it would have been difficult to have a legitimacy for that because you're talking about, you know, fighting Muslims on the two Muslims counties. But at the same time because they had been identified as they have no relation to the Islamic act and to what they are doing at ISIS, so that sort of coalition was important, but we were hoping that the US will extend it over to Syria, or the Syrian make enough mistake that will push the US and the coalition to move towards Syria. Unfortunately we have not seen that.

Kim Ghattas: But so do you think that the Turks do in some sort of way acquiesce to the behavior of the Islamic State? Do you think that that's what the Turks are doing? Do you agree with Hossein? I know he's your friend and you could make peace between Iran and Saudi Arabia right here, right now, but do you agree that Turkey, is that how Saudi Arabia sees it?

Abdelaziz Sager: Well, I mean, we had the foreign minister from Turkey last week in Saudi Arabia and I'm sure a lot of the discussion took, you know, they discussed that issue in detail. The question is, is Turkey willing to move forward more and to try to have a land force involvement in Syria or Iraq? The answer no, because they have clearly stated that one. Is the region or country capable of having the involvement indirectly on the ground? Again, my answer is no, for two reasons. Either they don't have the capability or the Iraqi government themselves, in fact the Iraqi have clearly said we do not wish to see a neighboring country involved in the coalition bombarding the ISIS. So it's either they don't have the capacity and the capability or they do want to be for the reason that the Iraqi government does not welcome that one, but to see much more Turkish involvement, I don't think we're able to resolve the Syrian problem without a serious Turkish involvement.

22:41

Kim Ghattas: And that goes, again, at the heart of the question about ISIS versus Assad. Hossein, you've been quite vocal in some of your recent pieces about Turkey and how they seem to be somehow abetting the Islamic State. Can you expand a little bit on this and then Omar, I want to come to you on what's going on in Iraq at the moment and some of the progress that we are seeing, particularly with the retaking of the Baiji Refinery.

Hossein Mousavian: About Turkey, the reality is that the current administration in Ankara is supporting Muslim Brotherhood, al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun, is supporting Hamas, is supporting Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria as a NATO ally, as a US ally, is now

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

perhaps more revolutionary than Iran supporting these groups. It's really strange but domestically they have big problem you should pay attention. One is the big population of Alawites and big population of Kurds perhaps combined these two would be majority of Turks, therefore the crisis in Syria, the crisis in Iraq would have long-term impact on domestic stability situation of Turkey, unfortunately whether we like it or not. But we have differences between powers in the region, between Iran and Saudi Arabia, between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, between Iran and Turkey. This is a fact we really cannot neglect, however, if you're looking for a sustainable regional stability, without creating a regional platform for a regional cooperation between the major powers, we are not going to get it only by foreign intervention.

Kim Ghattas: And that is an argument that, you know, Iranian officials, including your president, made at the UN General Assembly, for example, saying, you know, we can help the United States roll back ISIS, we're on the same side here, which makes countries like Saudi Arabia quite worried, especially as we see the Iran nuclear negotiations take place as well. There's a fear in the Gulf of a rapprochement between the US and Iran. Are you telling the US we can help you roll back ISIS, or do you think that it's really the US that should be telling you, if you want us to make progress in our relationship you have to step back your involvement in a country like Syria and your support for Hezbollah which is feeding that problem, because it also has a sectarian nature.

25:45

Hossein Mousavian: You see Kim, practically Iranians and Americans are cooperating now on fight against ISIS, directly or indirectly, whatever you want to...

Kim Ghattas: Are you saying there's direct communication, military cooperation?

Hossein Mousavian: I don't know but the fact is that the US is leading the airstrike and Iranian army, revolutionary guard with Iraqi army, with Assad army, with Hezbollah and with Peshmerga, they are the only real powerful ground forces fighting ISIS. This is the reality on the ground. I mean, Iranians, if they are not leading the ground forces they are the key element. Practically, indirectly or directly the US and the Iranians they are cooperating. This is exactly the same cooperation Iran and the US they had on 2001 fight on Taliban. This is the same, even against Jabhat al-Nusra, but what I'm saying, I'm saying the US should put more potential to help a regional system, a regional cooperation within Muslim countries to fight Muslim extremists, rather than Western countries, the US, this is much better for the US, this is much better for the regional countries. We should recognize the US is not

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

popular in the Muslim world. There is a lot of negative opinion against the US and we should not increase this negative image for the US in the Muslim world.

Kim Ghattas: Omar, would you like to step in here and tell us a little bit about your reading of the situation in Iraq currently? It's taken a long time but there is some progress on the ground. It's still unclear whether the retaking of the Baiji Refinery is a definitive victory or whether the Iraqi forces will be rolled back. And then if you could, tell us your point of view on America's role in the region versus Iran's roll, whether this should just be a regional coalition or whether you welcome the US involvement, and I think that from your starting you seem to welcome that involvement.

Omar Al Nidawi: Well, indeed there has been some promising progress I think militarily in Iraq. If we look at the multiple fronts, various fronts at which ISIS and Iraqi forces are engaged, the momentum of ISIS in the West in the Anbar Region has been blunted, has been... the front has been largely static for the last few weeks, in the north and north central great progress in Baiji which has a few significance, not only that it's recapturing the country's main refinery that produces, used to produce about half of the country's fuel supply, but Baiji is also a critical communications node linking the Euphrates Valley system with the Tigris Valley system and these are the two arms of ISIS presence in Iraq and disrupting this communications node would put a huge burden on ISIS internal lines of communications. They'll have to go through either open desert or through the Syria communication network. So logistically and technically that's a very positive...

Kim Ghattas: And is that made possible because of US, whatever you want to call them, troops or special units that are supporting the Iraqis, is that really what's made the difference?

29:30

Omar Al Nidawi: US strikes are helpful. US help with...

Kim Ghattas: Advisors and...?

Omar Al Nidawi: ...coordination, planning, operational planning, is very helpful. You know, there was a... the main problem that was playing in the Iraqi army was the inability to plan and conduct operations because of corrupt and incompetent officers, lack of proper intelligence capabilities, lack of proper command and control structures. The US is helping that and honestly, Iran is also helping with that.

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

Kim Ghattas: And do you welcome that as well? Do Iraqis welcome that as well?

Omar Al Nidawi: Well, it is a reality that this is making progress. Do you prefer that Baiji remains in ISIS hands or do you prefer that ISIS is recaptured...

Kim Ghattas: So this is a pragmatic approach?

Omar Al Nidawi: Right now it is a necessary situation. The situation requires that you take assistance from... However, that comes with the caveat in that long-term this will be problematic. You'll need to deal with the aftermath of these situations. You know, we had situations in previously reclaimed territory from ISIS like in Amirli or in (inaudible 30:43) Baghdad where you know, paramilitary units, a popular mobilization called the Mishima Militia, the terms can vary, have either... were poorly prevented Sunni families from coming back to their neighborhoods or have destroyed property, committed human rights violations, extrajudicial killings and arrests. So these things are (inaudible 31:14), these play, actions like that play into the hands of ISIS. These are the actions that, you know, that were committed, these are mistakes that were made by Maliki's administration and by the Assad government that allowed ISIS to gain popularity and be seen by large segments of the Sunni populations as a source of support and as a way out, as a salvation.

31:40

Kim Ghattas: Abdelaziz, would you like to comment? I think you've been wanting to say something for awhile.

Abdelaziz Sager: I think the response from Iran to the US, you're involved in airstrike, we're involved in the ground. So the Iranian have mobilized their forces. It used to be a myth whether the Iranian are involved with the Shiite Militia or not. I think Qassem Suleimani from the revolutionary guard clearly said, "yes, we are there, we are controlling, we are managing."

Kim Ghattas: Yeah, there have been many pictures of him on the ground.

Abdelaziz Sager: Yes, many pictures of him in different places liberating two cities, one in Babel and the other one I think in Diyala. So again, they make clean statement, "yes, we are there and we are involved and we're doing it. You handle airstrike, we are on the ground." And I think the big issue is the airstrike may help to cut logistic, to destroy some training camp, but in reality when you want to liberate cities, like Mosul, you can't use airstrike for that, so you have to use local forces, ground forces. The big issue was whether the National Guard to support the

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

National Guard to create and train Sunni for their own purposes, whether that is a good idea or a bad idea. In the short-term it's not a bad idea because you need to have forces trained and protected. You cannot just equip them without protection because last week we've had an example of the (Inaudible 33:19) family where lots of them were killed and I think 30 of them being slaughtered in the street and, you know, head cut there. So you need to protect even if you mobilize, even if you support the Sunni creation of National Guard. My worries about that still even from the Gulf perspective point of view we don't like to seed militia support. We like to support the creation and the support of a central government and a structural army, you know, because again, Hezbollah, it's a bad example for us in Lebanon. The whole militia that Iran decided to support (inaudible 34:03) been a militia there so what we are going to have now, we're going to have a Peshmerga in the north, Shiite Militia and then the Sunni National Guard. This is a perfect platform for a real civil war on the long-term. So how can you ensure that because one of the destabilizing reasons in the Gulf Region that the tribe who is there, they don't have weapon in the hand. It's unlike Yemen. Yemen because they are armed, they are armed on the hands of the tribes in Yemen was one of the destabilization factors. So what we would like to see, this is why we want to support now the Lebanese army because we wanted to say defeat them at that. Hezbollah used to say Lebanese army is not strong enough so we are stronger so we can act and do the role. We say, no, let's support the Lebanese army, let's support (inaudible) and Libya and support the Libyan army, let's support the real establishment to have a national army that can defend the country, not based in a sectarianism or ethnicity selection but based on a national point of view.

35:05

So I think if you look at all of that together, yes, we have a big worry. We understand Iran is taking the ground inside and doing it, but I think it's a clear message. This is why I'm not surprised to hear from my good friend Hossein saying that America should not be involved because they would like to leave it for them to be, but who said in the region we would like to see a more Iranian hegemony? I think there's a lot Iranian hegemony there already in the region using the sectarian domination as a means of expanding their influence in the territory.

Kim Ghattas: We're not really discussing Lebanon in this panel but it is a very interesting point that you make because the Islamic State is also making small forays into Lebanon, it's been fighting the Lebanese army on the border, it has kidnapped a number of Lebanese soldiers and beheaded a few of them. It doesn't make headlines in the US because the focus is mostly on American victims but it's important to remember that there are many, many Muslim, or other victims, Christian

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

victims, of all religions really for the barbarity of ISIS in the region, but I want to get each one of you to respond quickly to this question. You all seem to indicate that the approach of the coalition, or at least of the US, it's all pragmatic, short-term tactical, but it doesn't bring long-term vision. Is a military, a short-term military strategy all that we can hope to achieve at the moment? And what is the end goal? Can you destroy ISIS or is it really only about rolling them back? If I can ask you each one starting with Cengiz to give me a brief response and then I want to move onto the Assad versus ISIS debate.

36:52

Cengiz Çandar: It's right that what you focus on mainly anyway the short-term measures to roll back the advances of ISIS, but ISIS is a very unique phenomenon. It's not a terrorist organization, per se, which many people in the western hemisphere made to believe thanks to the coverage of media which we are part of you and me, publishing photographs of a bunch of black... people in black outfits with Kalashnikovs over trucks, Toyotas mainly, giving a sense that the fanatical volunteers pouring into Mesopotamia and Iran, created this ISIS and they're just with their swords head cutting and doing very brutal things to panic the societies and so on and so forth. ISIS is more than that, and much broader than that. It's for example, in Iraq it is the regeneration of the old party's army, Saddam's armed forces which evaporated during the American invasion came back under the cloak of ISIS, and it operates over Arab Sunni tribes in the eastern part of Syria and the western part, northwestern part of ...

Kim Ghattas: And it's feeding on Sunni grievances, in essence?

Cengiz Çandar: Yes. Not only Sunni grievances, the Salafi movements always emerge when there is big upheavals in the region. So they go all the way back to the birth Salafis as an interpretation of Sunni Islam in the 10th century when there was the invasion of the Mongols in the region. Then during the Ottoman times in the 18th century they appeared and how did they appear under Mohammad Ibn Abdul al-Wahhab, who the first manifestation of the Wahhabi uprising which confronted the Ottoman rule. It was in fact the Wahhabi forces, Salafi forces, consisted of Arab tribes of central Arabian Peninsula marching over to the Negev in order to destroy Mamari's Shrine.

39:48

So inherently there is something anti Shiite, in the Salafi Islam, and it's anti western, it's anti anything and puritanist so ISIS is an ideological issue, a social issue, and

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

political issue because it is different than Al Qaeda and groups like that in the sense it places itself on a territory and over the territory there is state crafting going on, therefore, dealing with ISIS is not only a matter of short-term tactics of rolling back terrorist organization consists of a bunch of fanatics it has to have a strategy but the eminent issue since they are consolidating themselves as a state, big swathes of territory of Syria and Iraq which comprise nearly the same size of the territory of the (inaudible 40:51) countries combined. So it's a serious thing and therefore it has to end, it has to take precedence, when it comes to the question first Damascus or first ISIS? Of course ISIS it has to be. Otherwise it will consolidate in the area and it will add, to exacerbate the already polarized situation and the bloodshed and the sectarian strife in the region.

41:15

Kim Ghattas: Hossein, that is one of the key differences between Al Qaeda and ISIS. They're holding onto territory. They could change societies from within for the long-term. Do you think that a military strategy is enough, whether it's regional or whether it's led by the US?

Hossein Mousavian: No, even if this is regional that would not be enough. We need to pay attention to the root causes. ISIS is not just a bunch militants, terrorists, which have created at one night. We should remember Taliban, Al Qaeda, for many years before ISIS was created. The same problem, the same ideology, the same way of thinking. Therefore the first root causes is about the ideology. I mean, this is not just a terrorist group. This is an ideology threatening, that moderates from Saudi Arabia to Iran to the whole region, and this school of thought has deep rooted within many Muslim Sunni countries and really enjoys a big support from some Sunnis if not millions.

42:52

This is number one. Second is the bad governance in the Middle East for over 50, 60 years. We really cannot deny that dictators supported by the US, by the west, for 30, 40, 50, 60 years in the region. Mubarak was a dictator for 30, 40 years supported by the US. And look at the poverty, unemployment and the disaster economic situation in Egypt, as the root causes of the Egyptian revolution or Arab Spring or what you want to say. Therefore the bad governance in the region and the US policies supporting the dictators from Shah to Mubarak to Ben Ali is an important issue for the world powers to pay attention to the future of the Middle East.

43:48

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

Third is about Palestine problem. I mean, the peace process. One of the root causes of rise of extremism in the region is the way Israelis handle Palestinian issue and the way they have treated Palestinians in last 30, 40, 50, 60 years and the problems are still there. We need to understand the Palestinian problem is one of the real major root causes and ultimately what I said the four root causes is foreign intervention, in parallel with the lack of regional cooperation system. Abdelaziz, I really don't mean the US should stay out in order Iranian to get more influence. Whether we like it or not more the US has been involved in last ten years attacking Iraq and Afghanistan this has caused more influence of Iran, therefore already the US engagement has helped the influence of Iran a lot. Okay, if this true, are you encouraging the same trend? This is not what I'm saying. I'm saying we have to choose between two scenarios. Either like Europeans to be mature enough to create a regional cooperation system, European union to resolve all problems within the region or always begging and crying for foreign intervention? I'm advocating the first one.

Kim Ghattas: I'll come back to you in just one second but I want to hear the immediate response of Abdelaziz on this. Is it really necessary for you to be working with the US or perhaps you should be working with the Iranians to counter ISIS?

Abdelaziz Sager: Well, I think my personal position on that one I will say the US they are irreplaceable in our part of the world. They could be indispensable. You know, we can go back to the old ages and live in our (inaudible 45:48) and so on but you know, to replace it is very difficult because neither India, China, Russia or even the EU is replaceable you know, of the US in the region.

Kim Ghattas: But why does it have to be an outside regional... a power from outside the region?

46:10

Abdelaziz Sager: It goes back to 1940 so you cannot change that one so you have to, it takes time to rebuild up our own capacity capability. Until then we have a friendly Iran and not an interventionist Iran. Until we have that sort of a friendly framework that can guarantee a regional security architecture where we all can live together without using sectarianism as a means of intervention, without having a hegemony over a certain territory, then we don't need the US, but the US presence in the Gulf basically is not just only for our security, it's controlling our destiny because we export 65% of our energy to Asia, India, China, Korea, and Japan. So if you control the Strait of Hormuz and if you are there, you control other destiny. Otherwise why would Iran pay 20 billion on 1990 in the Gulf War? Why would they

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

contribute to that cost, the only war, the cost? Why would they do that? Because of the vital interest that they have there. So what you are saying, yes, we would love to have, and this is what Prince Abdul Faisal in 2004 in the Manama Dialogue, I'm sure Hossein was there at that time, when he said we need a friendly Iran, a safe Iraq and a prosper Yemen. Ten years later we don't have a friendly Iran. In fact we have an Iran that established intelligence cells in Bahrain, in Qatar, and in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia we have Iran that says the four cities of the Arab world have falls into our hand, we have Beirut, Damascus Baghdad and now Yemen, now Sana'a. So I think that attitude has to change if they would like to have a regional security where it's all inclusive and not excluded because going back to your question on the ISIS. I think because of the Maliki government...

47:55

Kim Ghattas: Because of the Maliki government?

Abdelaziz Sager: Maliki government. It is of sectarianism, of eliminating, of not inclusive of the Sunni there. This is a result of that. But now unfortunately, if it wasn't ISIS coming close to Baghdad, the U:S administration supported Maliki, even for the third term, but ISIS was the reason to stop that one because then it became part of the condition from the region that Maliki should not be renewed and we should have a new prime minister to reduce tension, otherwise we cannot, you know, stop that movement of ISIS getting closer to Baghdad. They're really getting a lot of ground support. I mean, today you have 40% of the land in Iraq controlled, either ruled or controlled by ISIS and 20% in Syria. So they have... and 1,000 kilometer border with the Kurds. So in reality it's very complicated, but my worry is that it become a de facto, after some time this is a new state being created on the buffer zone between Iran and Lebanon, a new state, a Sunni state, very extremism, very militant, using different means and ways, that we all accept it in the ground that new state and then we have a serious problem because what I don't like hearing in Washington is what they call, Soft Federalism in Iraq. Soft Federalism for me it's a separation. It's disintegration and that is, if that's the idea in Washington I think they need to revisit that because it's not going to help. We've heard it from a different ministers from the region, you know, from the region, particularly the Israeli defense minister when he said we can see an Allawite state and a Kurdish state and maybe Sunni state there. We don't like that. We would like to keep the integrity and the unity of those country but having a new security architecture I think my idea will be to my friend Hossein that we should have our own discussion and coming up with a new security architecture, go to President Obama, since he still has two years, and say, "Mr. President, this is what we'd like. We need your help."

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

Kim Ghattas: Saudis and Iranians together? The whole region?

49:50

Abdelaziz Sager: The whole region, not only Saudis and Iran.

Kim Ghattas: I will get you that appointment with the president. Omar, I want you to react to some of this.

Omar Al Nidawi: So many excellent points to comment on.

Kim Ghattas: If you could do it briefly and include a reaction to this, we are sitting here discussing the Islamic State, how to counter it, where it comes from, how it's, you know, a rivalry between Sunnis and Shias, Iran and Saudi Arabia and yet, I travel to the region a lot and the number of times that I have read headlines about how the Islamic State and ISIS, or ISIL, whatever you want to call them, are a creation of the US and of the Mossad, and that is a headline that you get out of Iran as well. How is it possible that it could be both at the same time? I'm not saying that it is but what does it say about our own abilities to take responsibility for our problems?

Omar Al Nidawi: We certainly lack in this area. I mean, obviously...

Kim Ghattas: Thanks for being candid.

Omar Al Nidawi: No one can, you know, disagree that the US has made mistakes in handling the situation in Iraq and the broader Middle East over, you know, the decades of its involvement in the region, but ISIS, I think there's consensus on the panel that poor governance was a spark that ignited this crisis, but also we need to not forget that sectarianism has existed in the Middle East before the United States was even a country. And that's something I think the big players in the region, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia have I think a major role in either exacerbating or containing. I probably disagree with Abdelaziz on the issue of federalism. Federalism is actually has become a necessity in Iraq and this is not necessarily my personal opinion but you have a lot of major Sunni players in Iraq, lots of voices in Iraq that are calling for the implementation of federalism. The same powers that were actually against federalism in 2005 when the constitution was drafted are now calling for, they're now calling for a national guard unit because they don't want the federal army, and this is a result of, you know, being stuck in the middle of a proxy war. We have, you know, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, frankly, they have interests. And their interests may pursue these interests in Iraq and Lebanon and Syria through

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

proxies and through policies that further their national interests or the interests of their allies, and these things, these policies and these views have in a significant way I think, particularly in Iraq, have resulted in the inability to deliver good governance.

52:40

I mean, Maliki did not exist in vacuum. He may have been given an extension by the Obama administration simply by really not caring who gets to stay in power, but if not for Iran he would not have stayed. And I think there was also an overreaction perhaps a little bit shortsighted policies on the Sunni states supporting the Sunni community in Iraq that, you know, instead of trying to work out the differences with Iran, they tried to play it out in Iraq, and we got what we have today.

Kim Ghattas: Okay. We have a few more minutes before we go to questions from the audience and I want to try to explore quickly two themes. We could be here all day otherwise. Yesterday at the dinner we heard from Senator Tim Kaine who said that any debate in Congress about the AUMF, the authorization to use military force, to sort of focus on Syria and ISIS, would pit those who want to focus only on ISIS against those who say you can't roll back ISIS, you cannot contain them or destroy them without dealing with what started it all. I mean, you could argue that it started in 2003 and that, you know, you have Ba'athists from Saddam Hussein's regime that have joined with ISIS but the vacuum, a lot of people will argue that ISIS is exploiting, is the war in Syria and it started with President Assad's brutal putdown of the uprising. Are we divided here at this table in the usual lines of, you know, the Saudis saying that first you need to, you need to deal with both at the same time, the Turks want to deal with Assad first, the Iranians, you know, want to deal only with ISIS as a regional problem, how are we all, you know, divided here? Can you tell me...?

54:50

Abdelaziz Sager: You describe it correctly. I mean, for us without, if we still have a sectarian government in Iraq and you still have Bashar al-Assad there, we're not going to get right of the ISIS so we have to deal with these two issues. Luckily there is a better...

Kim Ghattas: At the same time?

Abdelaziz Sager: ... luckily there's a better move now in Iraq. I mean, we just welcomed the Iraqi president two weeks ago and two days ago we've had the Iraqi

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

head of the Parliament with a big delegation from his side in Saudi Arabia. So we are welcoming a new phase with Iraq, as long as we can see a much better attitude toward the issue of isolation and the sectarianism issue there in that one, and more involvement in that. But at the same time...

Kim Ghattas: And would Saudi Arabia participate then, in military strikes against Assad government installations?

Abdelaziz Sager: As far as the airstrike we did participate. We have our boys there.

Kim Ghattas: But against regime installations?

Abdelaziz Sager: Well, against regime installations we did participate. Saudi Arabia had no problem with that one. The only problem with that since the beginning of 2011 it's the US veto either on the Free Syrian Army or in the equipment of that one or in the proper missiles that we need for anti-aircraft and anti-tank. You know, the smaller group, what we call Hazba, the other one, which is supported by the US and Qatar. They were trained in Qatar and Jordan and Turkey. They were given the TOW missiles. There is more than 22 YouTube, you can see it in the YouTube that they launched the TOW, you know, missile in that one. And then they were defeated by the al-Nusra. They were defeated by Da'ish. So even we have not really supported enough the most moderate forces...

Kim Ghattas: To make a difference on the ground?

Abdelaziz Sager: To make a difference in the ground. Traditionally we've had veto all the time from the US.

Kim Ghattas: Omar, do you think that dealing with ISIS requires dealing with President Assad in one way or another? Briefly.

Omar Al Nidawi: Definitely, I mean, to put it... we need a military solution combined with a governance solution, combined with a cultural global level solution to counter the ideology. We need, I think the Islam, the Muslim world needs to have some soul searching, go back and revisit the idea, do you have to always, you either take it all or leave it all and you know, there are parts... the Koran itself is a very dynamic document, and there is room for modernization. There is room for adapting to this age, to the 21st century and shedding some parts that provide the, the energy that ISIS and its like campaign on.

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager
Moderator: Kim Ghattas

Kim Ghattas: Hossein, obviously Iran doesn't think that President Assad should be targeted in any sort of way. You or the Iranians are offering to be a partner in fighting ISIS, are you really the answer that Washington is looking for and does that mean that President Assad stays in power?

57:50

Hossein Mousavian: We need to understand Kim, that Sunni extremism did not start with ISIS and Assad in Syria. It started 2001 when the Taliban, Al Qaeda, terrorist groups, they attacked Twin Towers in United States of America and killed 4,000 Americans.

Kim Ghattas: But a lot of those who joined ISIS...

Hossein Mousavian: Before, before Assad we had this crisis, Al Qaeda, Taliban, this is another version of Al Qaeda.

Kim Ghattas: But a lot of the rebels who joined the fighters on the ground say they did so particularly from Europe they say they joined because you know, President Assad was killing his people and the West was not helping. So it feeds the problem.

Hossein Mousavian: Really the issue about Assad is not whether he is a democrat or dictator. Mubarak was a dictator so Saudi Arabia was supporting Mubarak, US was supporting Mubarak. Therefore the issue is not whether we have a dictator or a democrat. Forget it. I mean, the issue is something else. We have to main a distinction, fighting extremism, terrorism, needs a comprehensive, sustainable solution, inclusive coalition within the region, with the support of international community. It is not only ISIS. First. Second, Assad, if today Assad collapsed do you think you would be able to remove ISIS? You will have much worse situation in Syria. Today the real power fighting ISIS in Syria is Assad's army and security establishments.

59:42

Kim Ghattas: I think people in Washington would argue differently but...

Hossein Mousavian: Yeah, but the reality is that neither Saudi Arabia is fighting ISIS in Syria nor GCC even nor the US. Some military strike that's it. Who is on the ground fighting is Assad military forces and security establishments and Iranians and Hezbollah. If you delete Assad Syria totally would collapse within one week, as a nation and as a state. Therefore I really believe we need to be realistic. Definitely I

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

agree that all countries, powers in the region, should compromise on a principle, the rule of majority, power sharing. In Iraq, Abdelaziz, whether we like it or the majority are Shia.

Abdelaziz Sager: We have no problem with that.

Hossein Mousavian: Yeah. In Bahrain majority is Shia. In Syria majority is Sunni. In Afghanistan majority is Sunni. We have to agree about a power sharing with the rule of majority in all Middle East, not only fighting Assad because Assad is Alawite minority and supporting Bahrain because this is completely contraction. But I we can fight collectively, the extremism, I'm emphasizing this is not only ISIS, this is not only Jabhat al-Nusra, I bet you if even ISIS today is there tomorrow you would have a worse version coming out. And then we need to go to a transitional period....

Kim Ghattas: In Syria?

Hossein Mousavian: On Syria, to first of all, we need to corporate together to keep the integrity of Syria. I fully agree with Abdelaziz, no integration in any country in the Middle East this should be a red light. Second, we need to fight to control the sectarianism and civil war. Third, humanitarian help, then to agree with Assad for an election supervised by United Nation, for a transitional government ruled by majority of Sunni with power sharing system with a good role for Alawites and others.

Kim Ghattas: I think we're... that should be the subject of a whole different panel, how to solve the Syria conflict. Yes, I'm going to go very quickly to Cengiz Çandar. Just give us your reaction if you want. I mean, do you think, do you feel strongly about the fact that it has to tackle both, the strategy or can it be ISIS first and then Syria? If you could do it briefly and then we can give you a right to reply before we start going to questions.

1:02:52

Cengiz Çandar: If we subscribe to the imperatives of real politic it's impossible.

Kim Ghattas: What is impossible?

Cengiz Çandar: To treat both simultaneously.

Kim Ghattas: Okay, so it has to be one and then the other? It's a sequencing issue?

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

Cengiz Çandar: But I think what we need is a correct prognosis of what ISIS is. If the argument is based upon that ISIS is the product of the atrocities of the regime in Syria, it helped the growth of ISIS but there's no such equation.

Kim Ghattas: It's not at the source. And I think that's the point that you were making Omar.

Cengiz Çandar: We will be speaking of the direct products of the atrocities of the regime in Syria, the (inaudible 1:03:43), the brigades that emanated from the town of Homs, for example. Are they pious, even for Salafi tendencies? Yes, they are and they came up after the tyranny the regime introduced on the Sunni population. The brigades of Tawhid in Aleppo are they the direct products of the regime? That was (inaudible 1:04:16) or al-Ashram yes, but al-Nusra, no...

Kim Ghattas: So it's focus on ISIS first?

Cengiz Çandar: ... as the leader of the Al Qaeda and ISIS do have a background preceding the events in Syria, it's one of the main components of ISIS is the group and the movement of (inaudible 1:04:49) nothing to do addressing its fight to the regime in Damascus so the formation and growth of ISIS was helped by the regime's positions but not the direct outcome of it. Thus, and as long as we do have, if we look at the balance of power and if we need to be realistic, as long as Iran and Russia stands behind the regime, and as long as a global consensus can be reached either through the nuclear talks between US and Iran or the situation of Ukraine reflects upon a new understanding between Russia and the US and the western world we cannot introduce these unless we do have such progress on these issues that let us deal with Syria and the ISIS phenomenon simultaneous and fight on two fronts. It's impossible.

Kim Ghattas: Abdelaziz, 30 seconds because we want to go to questions.

1:05:55

Abdelaziz Sager: In 2004 I wrote a long essay saying we need to establish an Arab peace force coalition if they're willing to be based in Jordan. Based on what my assumption at that time of the unfinished job will be left on Iraq after the US leave. The Saudi foreign minister have called for Islamic forces in a coalition and one and that was the whole idea was for Iraq at that time, so I think the idea could be revisited to be structured to be a coalition of the willing. The second just point I'd like to mention that I have also, you know, called for a transition, salvation, military counsel in Syria for a period of two years to take over consists of everybody so I am

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

in agreement with Hossein. If we can have that, and this goes with Geneva One, you know, agreement to have a transition government and the transition government could be in the beginning the military salvation counsel because they can still keep law and order, they can keep, you know, the integrity of the country and they can gradually move but this required a lot of, you know what they call...

Kim Ghattas: A lot of hope.

Abdelaziz Sager: A lot of hopes and a lot of compromises, a lot of compromises. People they have to, they have to you know, accept you know, you can't have it all so you have to have some sort of (inaudible 1:07:13).

Kim Ghattas: We've deviated a little bit from the central topic of containing ISIS but clearly ISIS, the Islamic State and the war in Syria are so closely intertwined so we can go to question. I see people already lining up. I'm gonna take three in a row and then I'll divvy them up and try to remind you of what the questions were. If you could introduce yourself and keep your question as short as possible then we can take as many as we can.

1:07:30

Peter Humphrey: I'm Peter Humphrey, I'm an intelligence analyst. I'm hearing an argument that is indistinguishable from Pol Pot being left in place to prevent Vietnamese hegemony. You're living in La La Land if you think you can take on ISIS without controlling that ungoverned space in Syria. So how about repealing executive order 12333, putting a bounty on Bashar al-Assad's head, 10 million bucks, and removing the bounty only if he retires to Teheran. This is the way to solve this problem. Get rid of that mass murderer and allow a decent government to come in and control the ungoverned space. That's how you get rid of ISIS.

Kim Ghattas: Thank you. Next one?

Bakar Mahkmoud: This is Bakar Mahkmoud. I have a question about the national guards in Iraq. Is it going to be a short-term goal or a short-term solution? The long-term we know you're gonna have a Sunni militia in Iraq and I think nobody wants more militias in Iraq. The second question, is it going to be a good move for Abadi's government just to allow Rafi al-Issawi or the Sunni politicians who are exiled during what Maliki did? Thank you.

Kim Ghattas: Okay, I'll take three from here and three from there if that's okay, so one more from here.

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

Mitti Dijina: Meti Dijina, I'm a journalist and a Middle East analyst. My question is United States to form a coalition against ISSL tomorrow or next week, an inclusive coalition and Iran is invited. So what would be the practical solution of Islamic Republic in order to tackle ISSL with you know, respect to the concerns from other regional powers including Saudis and Turks?

Kim Ghattas: Thank you very much. Hossein, why don't you take that last one and tell us what your practical solutions would be, Iran's practical solutions would be for dealing with ISSL if you had the opportunity to be part of that regional coalition and how would you allay the concerns of countries like Saudi Arabia if you could also...

Hossein Mousavian: First I said Kim, if there is not a regional understanding between regional powers we would never be able to address neither ISIS nor Jabhat al-Nusra, nor Taliban, nor (inaudible 1:09:52) and extremism in the region. We need...

Kim Ghattas: So how do you convince a country like Saudi Arabia?

1:09:50

Hossein Mousavian: A cooperation between Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt, the four powers, and Iraq also. Second, I said extremism we have in Shia extremism, we have in Sunni extremism, we have to agree to fight extremism. Third, the war powers they can't support the moderates in Middle East as a principle, not sometimes supporting the terrorists and extremism for other purposes and sometimes fight terrorism. Fourth, we need to stop the sources, financial sources and weaponry sources for ISIS and other terrorist groups. We cannot fight them at the same time to feed them with money and weapon at the same time.

Kim Ghattas: But how do you convince a country like Saudi Arabia that you are their ally?

Hossein Mousavian: It is not a matter of convincing that Iran would be ally of Saudi Arabia or Saudi Arabia would be ally of the US. Look, I don't believe that the differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia today is more than differences between France, UK and Germany, 40, 50, 60 years ago. Two World War was created from Europe, Germany, European powers, but look how do they live today together in peace? A regional cooperation? Definitely the confidence building, the trust building would not be created at one night. And Saudi Arabia neither Teheran nor Riyadh they should expect that they both first give up all the advantages and would come to

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

create. It is impossible. You need to start from somewhere. Europe started from economic cooperation, then political cooperation, then security cooperation, then now they are a united Europe. It took forty years. ISIS is a threat to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and GCC and all. We need to create a cooperation, regional cooperation system to fight ISIS. This is the way to go forward for further trust building.

Kim Ghattas: And Abdelaziz, I think you were quite a fan of the European, EU model. Could you react quickly to the first question about you cannot take on ISIS without taking on President Assad. Put a bounty on his head. I know you support the idea of dealing with the problem of the civil war in Syria and President Assad, but is that the way to go about it, to put a bounty on his head?

1:12:30

Abdelaziz Sager: Well, definitely after all the people he have killed and six million Syrian as a refugee he can't rule. I mean, even if he stay he will be a weak president. He can't have a control of the country. This is why the removal of the Assad is a precondition to have a stronger alliances in dealing with a regional security issue, having a fair government in Iraq and not a sectarian government and peace in Iraq will be a prerequisite also for that one. So I think, I am endorsing the idea through what I call a military salvation counsel that can really take over a certain period until then you establish the sit... and to control the damage. There's a massive damage of having in Syria. It's only the people in the villages and the tribes that really can help, you know, to work closely with that.

Kim Ghattas: All right. Omar, very quickly, is the idea of a national guard really a solution or is it going to feed the problem with increasing sort of Sunni only brigades and Shia only militias?

Omar al Nidawi: The intention is certainly not to create more sectarian militias in Iraq because we already have enough. The idea, and it's still a concept with a lot of debate going on, that's why we still don't have a law for that and the law will have to pass in Parliament with a obvious majority. That means all three components of the, political components of Iraq will need to agree to it. Not all, but there are lots of questions about it. How do you integrate or how do you deal with the Kurdish Peshmerga? Well, if you consider grandfather under the umbrella of this law and if that's the situation how do you have 100,000 Peshmerga and 5,000 in Anbar and Saladin. There will be a lot of discrepancy in that.

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

Kim Ghattas: And does it, I mean, does it undermine the idea of a sense of national identity? Because even if you have a sort of federalism that emerges in Iraq the best way to counter groups like the Islamic State is to foster a sense of belonging to a nation isn't it?

Omar al Nidawi: Not necessarily. I mean, there is one, you know, again, competing ideas right now in Iraq. One idea is to reinstall conscription so that everyone, every young man will go to the military and serve the country and that will create that sense of nationalism. However, that you know, that didn't work in the past. Saddam's army was not a proficient army and it failed the country multiple times. The idea right now... the concept of the national guard is that keep the army small, professional, national, external defense only. Internal defense, internal security should be, should not be the job of the army, as it shouldn't be the job of the army anywhere in the world, and for that you don't want a troop from Basra serving in Mosul. That doesn't work. It didn't work and it created, precipitated the problems that we have. Instead have, you know, it's just like having local police except that it will be a more capable force. The question is how capable and how big and who's going to manage that chain of command of that unit? These are still questions that are being debated in Iraq right now.

Kim Ghattas: Okay, thank you. We'll take three questions from this side. If you could introduce yourself please and keep the questions short. And speak into the microphone, please.

Male: I'm (1:15:45) From the Turkish Embassy and my question goes to my compatriot Cengiz Çandar. It's about the morality of using one terrorist organization against another. If I have understood correctly, Mr. Çandar was advocating making use of the PKK to counter ISIS. What I see is two bloody terrorist organizations that are considered as such by the United States and not only Turkey, the European and so on and so forth, so my question is what is the underlying logic of using one terrorist organization against another one? Is there a good terrorist or a bad terrorist, a more viscous one, a less viscous one? You know, from time to time we all suffer from, you know, medium term memory loss but my memory's quite vivid about you know, what the PKK has done. I'm from Turkey. You know, some of the methods, some of the attacks that the PKK has perpetrated, as viscous and bloody and cruel as ISIS so...

Kim Ghattas: Okay, so it's a question of, you know, a terrorist is someone else's freedom fighter and why would you use one and....??

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

Male: Is it a moral recommendation that you know, we can raise in a public forum, thank you.

1:17:00

Kim Ghattas: Thank you, next question, please.

Malik Jandali: Malik Jandali, a Syrian/American Musician. Ladies and Gentleman, have you met a Sunni Syrian ever? Here's one. I'm one. I'm a Muslim Sunni from Syria, I happen to be a musician and I'm an American citizen. I do agree with the panel that we have a proxy war. I totally disagree with Mr. Mousavian. We do have an occupation, an Iranian occupation in Syria. This is a gentleman the US government listed the Assad dictatorship as a state sponsor of terrorism in December 1972 before I was born. In 1982 they massacred 40,000 civilians. Today 17,000 children. Ladies and gentleman, I'm discussing children. 17,000 children, that's more than ISIS, or ISIL, once we agree on the terminology. 250,000 civilians have been massacred in Syria, 6 million plus people have been displaced and Muslim Islam is about peace. Containing the Islamic State has nothing to do with dictatorship. Assad must be brought to justice because we are Americans, we are a beacon of freedom and we must bring him to justice. That doesn't mean intervention but we must bring him to justice for crimes against humanity and massacring just to one child. And one American is way too many. The great woman, American woman journalist Marie Colvin who have been massacred by Assad is way too many. Thank you.

1:18:37

Kim Ghattas: Thank you for your intervention. Please, next question.

Fouad Hamdan: Hi, My name is Fouad Hamdan. I'm the head of the Arab Rule of Law Foundation in Beirut and I have a question to Mr. Mousavian. Mr. Mousavian, I understand you the following. People correct me afterwards if I got you right. Basically you want the Arab countries in the region, the US allies, to accept the fact that the Iranian regime is fully in control of what's happening in the so-called regime held areas in Syria, that you control the Shabiha, the Hezbollah fighters there, you have your Paskaran, you are responsible for all what's happening military on the ground in Syria and of course all crimes and crimes against humanity, that you control the militias in Iraq with de facto control also the...

Kim Ghattas: Could you get to the question kindly please?

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

Male: The question is I want him to tell me if I'm getting it right that you are controlling also de facto Northern Yemen and Sana'a and you want everybody to accept that and to accept that your country, your regime is de facto controlling these four countries in one way or the other and you want everybody to accept that you will get at some point the bomb and nobody will touch you again in your regime.

1:19:55

Hossein Mousavian: No, it is not the case. I want to stop the....

Kim Ghattas: Hossein, if you don't mind just let me get one more question in and then we'll go through them all.

Male: (Inaudible 1:20:05) from Kurdish Policy Foundation here in Washington. I have two question, one for Mr. Çandar which is about the PKK and the role of PKK fighting ISIS. Don't you think this is the moment since we see that PKK has been fairly neglected by Washington because of the dominance of the Turkish policy, Turkish like influence in the US foreign policy toward Kurds, region-wide. It is not the time for Washington to think deeper about the PKK because I hear from the moderate also keep saying that the separatists, which is the separatist ideas you maybe correct me if I'm wrong, departed by PKK since you know the end of 90 by Erdogan self ruled democratic model within Turkey, which is that's the claim for them and it's not a time for Washington to deeper understanding this kind of like the PKK's not something that you freaked out, that it's not gonna be separate from Turkey. It's political solution within Turkey. So the other question kind of like an argument, I don't agree with the Sir Abdelaziz, if I got his name correct, which is also it's panicked about having national guards and the model of Peshmerga in Iraq and having, you know, this kind because you should understand the diversity of the Iraqi community which is cannot be controlled, it's over by one central army. The Iraqis they suffered more from each other than any other neighboring country, since the modern history started. So there's a certain dilemma between Sunni, Kurds, Shia all of them. They need protections, not against Iranian, not Turkey, not any other country, from themselves. So having like the idea of Peshmerga and national guards will under, you know, constitution of course, not the militia, will solve most of the problems that we have in.

Kim Ghattas: Thank you, if I could group two of the questions on the PKK, Mr. Çandar, if you can go first, you know, is the PKK better than ISIS? Is it worse? You know, how do you deal with this going forward? And then Hossein, I'm giving you time to prepare your rebuttal.

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

1:22:16

Cengiz Çandar: The first question addressed to me does reflect the official discourse of the Turkish government so it's not novelty for me hearing that. Speaking of ISIS and PKK that are equal part both terrorist organizations. The president of Turkey employed this language very recently and it was not very constructive. It created a great outrage within the Kurdish community of Turkey and the country imploded the cost was 40 lives lost in one night. So to treat this issue the two terrorist organization are fighting with each other in and around Kobani ISIS versus PKK. First it's wrong. Secondly it doesn't serve for any good. And we wish that the developments also proved it is wrong. During the panel I more than once, as far as I remember, tried to emphasize that simplistic approaches depicting ISIS as a terrorist organization per se will be mistaken. It's more than that. We have to take it much more seriously than dealing with a terrorist organization. Otherwise we will lose. On the PKK issue, as far as again I remember I said, I'm introducing an unconventional proposal knowing that it is unconventional and when you say something unconventional the conventional mind reacts immediately. What I said, it is time for President Obama, it was a response to your question, it should be time for President Obama, or anybody who's in charge, to stop contemplating to delist PKK and then I underlined what good may come out of it, but there is one issue that we shouldn't neglect, we shouldn't ignore I think. As you said, Kim, terrorism is a very, very slippery term, so it can be manipulated for political ends. Somebody's terrorist might be something else for others and when it comes to the PKK nobody could deny that that organization had committed terrorist acts but it evolves as many in the Irish situation or in other examples in the recent history. It is evolving into a political mechanism rather than to be defined as a terrorist organization. Otherwise the government of Turkey and the current president would not take PKK as a party for a quest of reconciliation and the leader of the PKK who's in prison still in Turkey is treated as an (inaudible 1:25:50) of the Turkish government. So what kind of a terrorist organization government for the stability, domestic stability of Turkey is more and more relying on the good offices of the leader of this organization. The last thing, this organization proved to be a real fighting force on the ground when the ISIS forces were approaching towards Erbil occupying Sinjar Mountains since 60 days, since over two months they are the main fighting force in Kobani itself against ISIS. And they are signaling to transform into a political organization. Therefore, again, I say it is time to contemplate how to delist, what are the prerequisites, but it's time for it.

1:26:50

Kim Ghattas: Thank you. So you know, short-term tactics pragmatism not always palatable to everybody. Hossein, can you respond to this question about the

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

perception that many do have in the region, including Saudi officials have said, you know, Iran is in essence an occupying force today in Syria. Clearly, Iranians see it very differently. And then we'll take a few more questions.

Hossein Mousavian: If you ask Abdelaziz why you are in Bahrain, what are your military doing in Bahrain where the majority are Shia, and is ruled by minority of Sunni? Abdelaziz would say the government of Bahrain has invited us officially and we have a strategic agreement alliance with Bahrain.

Abdelaziz Sager: And they're a member of the GCC.

Hossein Mousavian: Member of GCC. Okay, it is exactly the same with Iran and Syria because Iran and Syria they have the same strategic agreement signed in 2006 between Iran and Syria and the government of Syria officially has invited Iran to help. The government of Syria has not invited the US, has not invited Saudi Arabia, has not invited GCC. The others are uninvited. There is no UN resolution for the others to interfere with Syrian affairs. This is one. Second look at the opposition. One opposition side is like Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS they are terrorists. They have been supported from Arab countries and the western countries. Weapon, money. One of the root causes of the current crisis in Syria. They are not representative of Syrians. We have the other part of Syrians, Free Syrian Army, and the Syrian opposition which is supported by the US, Arabs, and coalition. They are weak, disputed, no power, and they really neither they can fight Assad nor they can fight ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra on these groups and they are not represented in Syrians. Alawites, Christians, Kurds, they prefer Assad. Definitely. And then when we come to Sunnis the majority of Sunnis in Syria they are silent. They are not supporting this ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra and the other groups which are supported by Syrian, by the coalition, they are not really collectively representative by a majority of Syrians. This is one. Second what we are saying, we say that we need ultimately to secure the integrity of Syria to wiping off the terrorism from Syria and Iraq and to restore stability in Syria and then to have a freely elected democratic election supervised by United Nation and to respect the rule of majority in Syria. This is what they say. About the Iranian influence, my friend, you don't need to recognize the Iranian influence and we don't need, we are not asking to recognize. The influence of Iran is there, whether you want to accept it or not. But where the influence came from. The first year of revolution an Arab country invaded Iran, to disintegrate Iran and to dismantle Iran. It was Iraq. Supported by Arabs, supported by US, supported by Europe. For eight years invasion continued. Over one million Iranians they were killed. Iranians did not invade Arab countries. It was Arab country invaded Iran. Don't forget. Chemical weapons was used against Iranians. Unfortunately material technology was provided by US and Europe. And Arabs they supported the use of

Panel 2: Containing the Islamic State

Cengiz Çandar, Hossein Mousavian, Omar Al Nidawi, Abdelaziz Sager

Moderator: Kim Ghattas

chemical weapon against Iranians. One hundred thousand Iranians they have been killed by chemical weapons. Don't forget the history.

Kim Ghattas: Hossein, I'm going to have to wrap you...

01:31:21

Hossein Mousavian: Iranians now began an offensive strategy to defend their integrity independence. The offensive strategy of Iranians began from war against Iran and to the Iranians everywhere. What we are proposing, we are not saying that you should recognize, we are saying to create a regional cooperation system for operation between Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt. Do you have any other option? Or than, I mean, the foreign powers have been occupying the Middle East, Persian Gulf for centuries. And this is actually the current situation in Middle East is the result of honeymoon between United States and Arabs and Israelis for last 40, 50, 60 years. Now we are proposing another alternative, regional powers in the region sit together to create a regional platform peace, stability, security and respecting their independence and their rights based on the rule of majority in the region.

Kim Ghattas: All right, Hossein. Thank you very much. This was quite the panel. We, I think, went into a lot of deep issues. Unfortunately I'm really sorry for those who've been lining up very patiently but I'm being told that lunch is going to be served very soon so we can't take any more questions. I think that we touched on a lot of very interesting topics. I wish we had even more time to really debate the cultural, social and religious reforms that we need in the region to be able to counter the ideology of a group like the Islamic State. Thank you very much for joining us and Kate Seelye has a few more words for you. And of course, thank you to all the panels, who really just by themselves could bring peace to the region and I am going to work on that and I will try to work on that appointment with the president.

01:33:25 discussion ends