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THE GREAT MIDEAST CRACKUP:  
THE INEVITABLE COMES TO PASS

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THE GREAT MIDEAST CRACKUP:  
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(2:00 p.m.)

SPEAKER: (Audio in progress) -- from Egypt to Yemen and in between. As long time partners turn their back on the United States, what comes next for the region and for our relationships there?

Moderating this session is Peter Bergen. I think his introduction goes without saying, but I will say I've been proud to serve with him on the Aspen Homeland Security Group the last couple of years. He is a journalist, documentary producer, vice president at the New America Foundation, a CNN national security analyst, professor of the practice at Arizona State University and the author or editor of seven books, three of which were *New York Times* bestsellers. Only three, Peter. And with that, the floor is yours.

MR. BERGEN: Thank you very much, Dan. Well, so we have two of the world's leading experts to discuss what is happening in the Middle East. In the center, here is Shibley Telhami, who, as many of you know, is the author of multiple books about the Middle East. He's also the Anwar Sadat Professor at the University of Maryland. He's one of the world's leading experts on polling, both in the Middle East and in the United States, which has quite a lot of relevance to the discussion we're about to have.

And then Ambassador Lukman Faily is -- just stepped down as the US -- the Iraqi ambassador to the United States. He was previously Iraq's ambassador to Japan. He also has been a member of the Dawa Party for about 30 years. He's both -- he describes himself of course as an Iraqi, but he's also a Shia and a Kurd. You can imagine that was not a very comfortable position to be in under Saddam Hussein. He left. He lived for two decades in the United Kingdom, where he earned multiple degrees. He also worked for various IT companies. And so these are the experts who will be discussing what's happening today.

And Ambassador Faily asked me what's the title of this session. I couldn't exactly remember, but I said I think we can summarize it as: How screwed up is the Middle East --

(Laughter)

MR. BERGEN: -- and how long will this go on for? And, you know, I guess the first question -- and it's kind of an uncomfortable one and Shibley raised this with me when we talked before -- is: is the original sin here the invasion of Iraq in 2003? And I open that to both of you.

MR. TELHAMI: Well, let me start by saying yes, but I want -- it's not the only thing. But I know that there's a tendency, you know, or discourse to call these ancient conflicts. And even President Obama, who came to the office very optimistic with an attitude that he can create change in the region, just in his most recent interview said that these are ancient ongoing conflicts that essentially we can't control, no one has a responsibility.

We just celebrated 100th anniversary of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. A lot of analyst have said, "Oh, this is just, you know, an outcome of Sykes-Picot all that's collapsing." I think it's neither one of these things, it's neither one of these things.

I think what we're seeing is two big factors that have unleashed the change that we see that started in 2010. One is the Iraq war -- I'll come back to that -- the other is what I call globalization, particularly the information revolution, but also the economic aspect of it rapidly reaching the Middle East.

But let me go directly to the Iraq war. I know that -- you know, this is not a judgment on our military. The military did what they did. They were sent for mission impossible. So it's not about that, right? It's a question: what were the consequences of that war.

A lot of people say it's -- of course they acknowledge -- most Americans acknowledge the war didn't

help, Republicans and Democrats. I do polling on this. But we don't quite understand how big an impact it had. We don't really -- we don't understand even in historical perspective. I don't want to say this is almost as big as Sykes-Picot, but it certainly rivals the biggest changes that happened in the 20th century, whether it's the creation of Israel and the resultant war in 1948 or the '67 war that have essentially unleashed a lot of forces. This is on that scale.

Let me tell you why and very briefly. Number one, it unleashed sectarianism. I know a lot of people say, "Oh, sectarianism has been with us." I'm sorry that's not true. Sectarianism has been with us, but it hasn't been sectarian conflict, people have coexisted. You know, sectarianism has been with us since the beginning of Islam if you're looking at Shia, Sunni division.

The question is: when does it rise to the top, when does it break into conflict? Sectarianism has not been the reason why we see state collapse in the Middle East. It is the outcome of state collapse. It's not enough to say people feel they are Sunni or Shia. Of course, they do. But people have multiple identities. You know, if you're an Iraqi Shia or an Iraqi Sunni you're also an Iraqi, you're also a Muslim, you're also an Arab, you're also a citizen of the world.

So why does your Shia identity rise to the top at any given time? It doesn't always rise to the top. Why does your Sunni identity rise to the top? That is an outcome of state structure, not a function -- not inherently leading to conflicts. So that's number one. So it unleashed it in a big way and we see it in a way that it's hard to stop.

Number two, it brought Al-Qaeda to the Middle East. It's hard to say because obviously it has genesis in the Middle East, but the reality of it is it wasn't -- didn't have a home, an operational home in the Middle East. It was principally operating out in Afghanistan. And we know that terrorism thrives where there is instability and no central authority. And so it brought

Al-Qaeda to Iraq. It probably led to the emergence of ISIS, at least played a big role in the emergence of ISIS. We didn't have that; that is a destabilizing force that didn't exist. Saddam Hussein was an awful dictator, but we didn't have Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Number 3, it led to the strategic rise of Iran. Iraq has always been the balancer of Iran in strategic context. That's one thing that the Gulf States, particularly the GCC states, Saudi Arabia, the oil rich states, all relied on it in a certain strategic balance in the region in a way -- of course they relied on the US, but overtime they were -- regionally they felt assured.

With the decline of Iraq as a power that could balance Iran, Iran increased its power. And with that, we have strategic instability and that led to rising insecurity by the GCC states, high level of insecurity in a way that they led them to be interventionists in areas that they had no experience with, which fuelled even more instability at a time when the fourth consequence of the Iraq war was felt and that is what I call the American-Iraq war syndrome, where we failed in a big way.

After investing \$2 trillion, we have -- the American public sees it as a failure. We've seen the consequences. It certainly didn't lead to what we had anticipated and the public doesn't want the US to go into another war in a big way in the Middle East, and this has been a strategic kind of a constraint on any president.

You might say Obama doesn't want to go to war, perhaps he believes that. But the reality of it is the American public doesn't want to. And think about when Obama even suggested that we fire rockets at Assad after he was found by the US government to have used chemical weapons, how even Congress and the American public restrained him in a way from doing so.

So I would say that if you include all of these, the Iraq war unleashed the process that was hugely destabilizing even before the emergence of the Arab uprisings. Now, I don't want to address -- if you want me, I could, but there's the second part of this, which is

the globalization.

MR. BERGEN: Well, Ambassador Faily, so what -- you know, you went into exile as a result of Saddam Hussein. Presumably, you were very happy when he was overthrown. I mean what -- and how do you assess what Shibley has just said?

MR. FAILY: I mean it's true in a sense that Iraq war was a factor, but I would say -- using an Arab proverb -- which would be the straw which broke the back of the camel. So it's the straw. So there are layers of issues before that, which has to do with Saddam and the invasion of Kuwait and other things of that.

The Arab region overall missed the 20th century development primarily and the nation state concept. Now, there's a major identity crisis. The Shiaism and other isms are one phenomenon of that. Social contract is fractured between rulers within communities, inter-state. So these are the factors which led also. So the Arab -- the Iraq war is symptoms in one way which lead to a knock-on effect.

As a process engineer, if the components are not strong enough, any fragile component itself, a core component will stop the system from functioning -- and that's what we have now here. And it's there to last for a while. So it's not a "just fix the Iraq problem and everything else is fixed."

No, unfortunately the layers of problems you have -- let me give you an example: Libya has nothing to do with Iraq war in a sense of Shia or Sunni, but they have bigger problems. So that's a social contract issue and so on. So you have a multilayered complexity. Managing complexity in the region is very difficult for us.

MR. BERGEN: Now, you just -- you returned from Iraq and my understanding is the best time to be in Iraq is during Ramadan in July?

MR. FAILY: Uh-huh, because it's 125 degrees

then.

(Laughter)

MR. BERGEN: So what did you find? And I mean I

--

MR. FAILY: Let me give you an example.

MR. BERGEN: Yeah.

MR. BERGEN: People, for example, say we know -- as today I think the general of CENTCOM Joe said: Iraqis are confident they will get rid of ISIS. They are mentally ready, they are physically ready. But if you tell me what's the policies in a year or two time, they are not sure; they are not sure of the American engagement, they are not sure of other engagement. And therefore, this uncertainty creates anxiety. Technology, as Shibley said, is highly utilized I might even say in a wrong way. It doesn't help. The infrastructure is not there for use, to develop and so on.

MR. BERGEN: General Votel wouldn't give a timeline for the fall of Mosul, but what do you think?

MR. FAILY: The Iraqis are very eager. The politics is still not aligned with the security aspect of it, I give you that.

MR. BERGEN: But when do you -- I mean --

MR. FAILY: We're not looking far.

MR. BERGEN: Two months before Christmas within the Obama administration?

MR. FAILY: I hope we will have a good Christmas with present for us if that happens.

MR. BERGEN: Okay, so the fall of Mosul before Christmas?

MR. FAILY: Uh-huh. I mean in one way it does



relate to the politics in DC and in Baghdad.

MR. BERGEN: So when Mosul falls, whether it's before Christmas or after, who is going to be in-charge because the big problem has been --

MR. FAILY: The model is already set in sense of Anbar and Tikrit before then, where the -- empowerment of the locals. However, you have to empower them, but they need the infrastructure, they need the money for the stabilization. They need the development for restructuring, infrastructure because this has been vicious wars. So here you have a high dependency of a global understanding of this and supporting it.

MR. BERGEN: What happens to the 30,000 foreign fighters, many of whom are concentrated in Mosul? Where do they go?

MR. FAILY: They are likely to leave elsewhere. That's another issue. Turkey is a wild card as far as we're concerned now. Over the last two weeks, Turkey became a major wild card in the domestic regional politics.

MR. BERGEN: Why?

MR. FAILY: Because it's a gateway, which was before for ISIS. Now, is it the top priorities of the Turkish Government to focus on this or PKK or in domestic politics, and therefore, would they lose their sight or eyes on the ball as a result?

MR. BERGEN: Did the Obama administration take its eye off the ball at the end of December of 2011 when we drew down our forces?

MR. FAILY: Big time.

MR. BERGEN: Explain why and how?

MR. FAILY: I think the Iraqis were -- let's put it: at the end of 2011, Iraqis didn't have a single fighter plane, not a single fighter plane. In an unstable

region, ISIS were there, Arab Spring already started. So to that effect, Iraqis are at fault in one way. Americans, who were engaged in Iraq heavily from 2003, somewhat disengaged abruptly and that in itself led to the knock-on effect until September 2014.

MR. BERGEN: Well, we have thousands of American troops in Iraq right now and one of the sticking points before was there wasn't any status of forces agreement, which is, you know, a sort of contract between two --

MR. FAILY: But you don't have it now. Why you have the troops then?

MR. BERGEN: What -- I guess what I'm going to ask is: we don't have it now, that's correct, so could you imagine a future where there is some kind of formal agreement between the United States and Iraq?

MR. FAILY: I think the necessity of this risk, the necessity of the interest we have requires to have a serious soul searching question as to the relationship: what do we want to do? Is it transactional such as ISIS or is it a long-term stability for both countries?

MR. BERGEN: We are in an election year, as you may have noticed. And --

MR. FAILY: Good luck.

(Laughter)

MR. BERGEN: -- a question for both of you, but looking at it from different -- so -- and you've done polling on this in this country. So Trump -- let's start with Ambassador Faily. So how is -- how do people react to Trump in the Middle East? Obviously, he said a number of incendiary things. And how do they see Hillary Clinton?

MR. FAILY: I think they see Trump as a symptom in one way, the phenomenon and so on of the disengagement of somewhat of the US or being in transition without clarity as to what's the end game of this. So they are

anxious. US has already had issues before with the region, Iran nuclear and other signs as well. So to that effect -- even the Iraq example is one sign of that. So to that effect, it's another example of US being in transformation without clear communication with the regional players what that transformation involves. Are they part to that discussion or not?

MR. BERGEN: So it's producing what in the Middle East: anxiety about American intentions, uncertain --

MR. FAILY: Looking for replacements, local players thinking that they can be a regional or a global player, being sort of cavalier in certain aspects of it and so on. What you see in Turkey might be one example of that.

MR. BERGEN: Now, you polled on the question of views of the Middle East held by Trump and Clinton supporters here in this country, and what are your findings?

MR. TELHAMI: I'll tell you in a minute. But by the way, in the Middle East the view is obviously vary. The public is obviously frightened by some of what they hear from Trump. But at the same time, they actually like the fact that he is a noninterventionist, that he is attacking the Iraq war. There's a lot of -- it's much more nuanced.

And frankly, Middle Eastern rulers are also divided on whether they can deal with him or not. Some of them actually like him because he likes authoritarians and some of them have worked with him before. And some of the elites around them, particularly the businesses, have worked him before. They are not going to go out there given the kind of statements that are anti-Islamic that he's making and say that. Some of them privately share they can work with him. So it's a mixed picture in the Middle East. Don't get that -- it's like a clear black and white.

But what's interesting here in America is that

obviously the Middle East has become a featured part of the conversation and in part because of the horrific attacks that we've seen. I mean the worst shooting on American soil conducted in the name of Islam in Orlando, San Bernardino. And obviously this stuff is happening around the world, particularly in Europe from the American point of view.

And yet despite all the rhetoric something very peculiar happened. I have done polls from November to May, and then after the Orlando attack, I did another poll tracing how the American public views Islam and Muslims and the idea of clash of civilization. And the shocking fact was that American views of Islam and Muslims have actually become more favorable over that period, in the middle of the campaign, and despite Orlando, they have become more favorable progressively -- so that is from November to May to June. And on all of the three issues, attitudes toward the Muslim people, attitude towards Islam as a religion and the compatibility of Islam and the West, sort of the clash of civilization, they have improved on all three.

MR. BERGEN: From where to where?

MR. TELHAMI: From -- on the Muslim people they start off with a favorable view of -- over majority having a favorable view across the board. It increased by almost 10 percentage points or 11 percentage points. The Muslim religion was always negative; views of the Muslim religion were below 50% approval. They remain -- they went from I believe, just off the top of my head, from something like 39% to 46% favorable. They went up 7 percentage points, certainly outside the margin of error and it was progressive.

But here's the thing and we hear this in our discourse: it is just unbelievably divided in America. So Trump supporters have become slightly less favorable.

MR. BERGEN: They didn't start off favorable.

MR. TELHAMI: They didn't start off favorable. They started off very unfavorable and become slightly less

favorable. The Republicans in general didn't change all that much. Democrats and independents have become far more favorable on that issue. And in fact the divide between Republicans and Democrats on Islam is bigger than the divide on any other issue in America, including abortion. Fifty points difference between Republicans and Democrats on Islam --

MR. BERGEN: Just to clarify, Trump and Clinton supporters or Republicans and Democrats?

MR. TELHAMI: Both, both. But especially Clinton supporters and Trump supporters are even bigger, slightly bigger. But we can't do a --

MR. BERGEN: This is the single biggest ideological divide?

MR. TELHAMI: More than any other, more than any other and it's really quite striking. When you see it -- there is one on the Arab-Israeli issue; we see it. It has been strong and it has been increasing. You know, this has become a partisan issue in American politics. We know on domestic issues from gun control to abortion there's a big divide. But there's nothing like this. This is the single -- and I compared it to a lot of other public opinion polls on other issues -- this is the single divide that we have.

So -- and what I believe, by the way, I don't believe that Americans suddenly had a transformation. Obviously, there has been an incremental improvement in some ways because we've had this debate since 9/11 and people have settled in a way on their views.

What I believe happened in this period of polarization of American politics is because Donald Trump has been so associated with his anti-Islamic views -- and other Republican candidates -- is that people who are opposing them are rejecting the issues, the positions that are associated with them.

So in some ways it's kind of: "This is your position, I'm going to reject it," more than it's a

profound transformation of their views on Islam and Muslims.

MR. FAILY: So somebody like me, an Islamist, understands the Islamic perspective. I get scared when everything is associated with Islam in the narrative. To me it's clearly what you might call Jihadist Salafism as a key problem. So that has to do with the cold war with Iran and Saudi Arabia and so on. But Jihadist Salafism is a problem rather than the whole of Islam. Because how do you fight -- I don't know -- a third of the world, you know, population-wise and everything else? It's not even thinkable to think about such an enemy or such a concept to be scared of.

Jihadist Salafism from a security perspective you can identify, you can do something about. So the narrative has to be more richer in its discussion.

MR. BERGEN: Just switching gears a little bit to Syria. I mean Iraq obviously has many problems, but you're somewhat sanguine they are being sorted out?

MR. FAILY: More controllable than Syria.

MR. BERGEN: Okay. So what are the -- I mean why is Syria such a, you know, wicked, complex problem?

MR. FAILY: Historically, it's cosmopolitaned (sic). Historically, the Hafez al-Assad, and before then, vanguard of the Arab, next to Israel, next to the region. Also, you have less wealth than Iraq, and therefore, the policies and everything else has to be more effective and so on.

So to that effect, its geography, its geopolitical sense has had an important factor in the Arab World and to a certain extent in the Middle East perspective.

Now, we also have extreme polarizations within the communities. Iraq, for 20-30 years the oppositions, the Kurds and others were able to talk to each other. The Americans were able to sponsor some of that discussion.

Now, here, you have everything sorted on the battlefield and that's a dangerous aspect.

MR. TELHAMI: May I --

MR. BERGEN: Yeah.

MR. TELHAMI: -- just say on this? I mean I agree that there is obviously some domestic problem in Syria with the ruthlessness of the Assad regime and obviously we've seen the sweeping uprising that started in Tunisia into Egypt, Libya and so forth and they spread to Syria. So there is that dynamic.

But when you ask why is it so bad in Syria, I would have to say that more than 50% of the problem is international intervention, more than 50% of the problem, because there's more international intervention in Syria than anywhere else, in that Syria became a battleground for really a proxy war between regional powers. On the one hand, the Iranians are defending. They allied through Hezbollah. Saudi Arabia is intervening against Assad on behalf of its allies very early on with -- I wouldn't (phonetic) say Saudi Arabia, but the GCC basically -- where Turkey has something at stake. It's playing -- Iraq has something at stake. Jordan has something at stake. And --

MR. FAILY: I think US --

MR. TELHAMI: And then the US and Russia have something at stake. And they are not coordinating fully. Everybody, they are playing their own game. None of them are doing the game to optimally help the Syrian people, but optimally to serve their strategic interests. And that complexity is the worst part of the Syrian crisis. And that's why I always believe that if you're going to control it, it's still going to be a mess in Syria.

MR. BERGEN: Well, how long is it going to go on for?

MR. FAILY: I mean the rule of engagement, which Shibley is more or less saying, the rule of engagement is

clearer in Iraq between the international and local and domestic players than it is in Syria. How long it will be? I think we are looking at at least a decade problem, where a focus need to take place.

MR. BERGEN: So just to clarify: so the civil war in Syria in your view will go on for a decade?

MR. FAILY: The conflict going on -- I don't like the word civil war because I think --

MR. BERGEN: Okay.

MR. FAILY: -- it's more -- it's a bit more complicated than a civil war. It's not a -- it's not an inter-community war.

MR. BERGEN: Yeah.

MR. FAILY: It's no longer that. It became more global perspective. I think that the stability of Syria will require substantial amount of time if it's on the right track. So until I know when it is on the right track, which is not at this moment, nobody can give a time.

MR. BERGEN: So ISIS is losing, right?

MR. FAILY: Yes.

MR. BERGEN: And you think --

MR. FAILY: ISIS as a theme is different ISIS as a brand.

MR. BERGEN: Okay. But ISIS, the group that controlled territory the size of the United Kingdom is in deep trouble? Well, how would you characterize their geography?

MR. FAILY: They are on the losing side everyday -- as every day passes.

MR. BERGEN: So let's do the thought experiment



where Mosul falls by Christmas and then Raqqa falls six months later. I mean I think what you're collectively saying is -- you know, ISIS is a symptom of the problem, it's not the problem. The problem is Iran and Saudi in a proxy war, Shia-Sunni conflict that's spreading from --

MR. FAILY: Russian and America in Syria --

MR. BERGEN: Right.

MR. FAILY: -- that's another dimension of it.

MR. BERGEN: So -- and the collapse of Arab governance and -- so none of --

MR. FAILY: And the ruthlessness of the Assad regime. So that's another --

MR. BERGEN: So I guess what I'm -- when we reassemble again two years from now will we be talking about another group that basically we don't know what its name is yet, but who basically will be presenting the same issues that ISIS does: "Hey, we protect Sunnis, you know," even if that's total nonsense?

I mean ISIS after all has only existed for about three years and, you know, it had previous incarnations. So, you know, what does the future look like? Because the United States is very preoccupied with defeating ISIS and that's completely reasonable, but that doesn't seem to be really the central issue here because it seems to be more a symptom of these deeper problems that you have both been talking about.

MR. FAILY: I think the bigger question, if you don't mind me asking --

MR. BERGEN: Yeah.

MR. FAILY: -- is, is it important enough for you to invest in, are the risks associated with not focusing on it are -- and some ramification is too dangerous. That's the key question. That's --

MR. BERGEN: Shibley has basically said -- and I don't think there's any debate about this -- that Americans actually do not want to produce a giant ground invasion of Syria.

MR. TELHAMI: They don't.

MR. FAILY: Nobody is asking for invasions.

MR. BERGEN: Yeah.

MR. FAILY: Here, we're talking about long-term sustainable focus on the region. Is it important enough for you to do that?

MR. BERGEN: But what does that look like?

MR. FAILY: It will be different variations, because Jihadist Salafism as a core issue has not been addressed yet, and therefore, its offspring being ISIS, Al-Qaeda and so on will still be there. So that's -- and that's not a regional problem. That's a global, geopolitical problem which needs to be addressed.

MR. BERGEN: Well, how do you address it?

MR. FAILY: Well, then you need to go by root causes analysis and other aspect of it.

MR. BERGEN: Well, just give us some headlines about what you think are the main --

MR. FAILY: One thing is you need to create a platform for the Arab regions to have a dialogue. At this moment you have European Unions; you have everything in Asia and everything else. In the Arab region there is no dialogue for discussion. That's one minimum -- that's one key issue you need to do, a platform for dialogue.

Investment, interdependencies, large infrastructure projects and so on, that's another way of -- addressing the youth, addressing the technology. There are a myriad of issues. You cannot say just a silver bullet. There is no silver bullet solution for this.

MR. BERGEN: Well, is the Abadi government being more inclusive with Sunnis? Because at the end of the day that's the basis of the --

MR. FAILY: Yes, that's not the -- every Sunni leader says that, everybody else say it, Americans say it. You heard it today from the chief American military guy on it. That's not the issue. It's not -- it's the deeper problems, which requires longer solutions.

MR. TELHAMI: Well, I just want to say, you know, on -- I think we can't just lump all the issues together. We have states that may have become humpty dumpty in the short-term. I mean in some ways you have to acknowledge it.

I think once a state collapse, it's very difficult to put it back together. And that's why I think we in the international community we really don't have another avenue to stability and security other than states, and when states collapse, we're up in trouble. I think we have already a couple of cases like that. So that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. And I think we have to do it from the outside in rather than the inside out.

But I don't want to leave the impression that the Iraq war is the principle and only reason we have instability in the region. That's one dimension that accelerated and unleashed it, particularly inviting groups like Al-Qaeda in.

I think there's something profoundly important that's happening. You have to ask, you know, why did the Arab uprising not happen in 1990 or 1980, why did they happen in 2010? It's not because, you know, people were happy with the governments then or they had, you know, less -- fewer economic problems. They weren't.

So what happened particularly in the decade prior to the Arab uprising is the globalization reached the Middle East and it had two dimensions to that that were incredible both in terms of discovering themselves in the world and being empowered.

One dimension is the economic dimension. We've all -- you know, we talk about how we have the anti-establishment mood in America, the anti-establishment mood in Britain, in Europe. Well, there is an anti-establishment in the Arab World. Well, of course, it was long standing for a whole lot of reasons, but it was intensified because we discovered that globalization instead of leveling the playing field for everyone leveled the playing field for elites.

So the elites in the poorer countries like -- or richer countries -- or the poor countries of the developing world linked up better to the elites of the developed countries and they made off well and the gap increased between the elites and the rest everywhere. And that's one of the pressures we see.

But the more immediate impact on the Middle East was the information revolution; initially, the rise of satellite -- the regional satellite TV like Al Jazeera that took away monopoly of information from governments, then the huge and rapid expansion of the social media. I trace that in my public opinion polls for the decade prior to that. It happened so quickly that the internet expansion happened really five, six years just before the Arab uprising.

And that was empowering, empowering both because people discovered the rest of the world and what it had to offer because they linked up with other people and because they were new instruments of mobilizing political action without the need of having official parties, as we saw in the Arab uprisings.

Now, that part is hugely destabilizing. And you don't need sectarianism for that to be destabilizing, as the ambassador correctly mentioned. You look at Libya or Tunisia or Egypt where we have instability and they don't have sectarianism.

MR. BERGEN: Yeah.

MR. TELHAMI: So that's a force that is with us

to stay; we're all going to have to deal with it. It doesn't mean, you know, that it can't be dealt with, but that means that we're not going to reach any point of equilibrium in the region anytime soon.

MR. FAILY: So let me give you a complementary example. Here, in the US, you will keep being a strong power, if not a super power or only power, because your infrastructure allows for entrepreneurship to develop. In our region, the entrepreneurship is still not there to allow for the youth to be able. And the good examples are always when the youth are able to experiment with new technologies and new methods of providing services.

That was the support we need as well. It's not the military, it's not the boots on the ground. If anybody tells you that the solution is nuke them or put boots on the ground, they are looking at the wrong solution. It requires infrastructure development and human development and so on.

MR. BERGEN: Great.

MR. FAILY: So soft power.

MR. BERGEN: Let's open it to questions then. If you have a question, wait for the mic and raise your hand. The gentleman in the back.

MR. MARKS: Jonathan Marks, Candy Group.

MR. BERGEN: Can you wait for the mic, sir?

MR. MARKS: Jonathan Marks, Candy Group. If America and the West have left a strategic vacuum in the Middle East and America, particularly, and the West reaction is purely reactive, how easy will it be for the leaders in the Middle East to manipulate to the reaction of the United States by flirting with Russia and China?

MR. TELHAMI: Well, if -- I'll start with that on the Russian issue. I don't think anybody -- I think initially some people thought that they could play that card. I think certainly Egypt thought it could play that

card when President Sisi came to power. I think even up to a point even the GCC think it. And by the way, even the Israelis think it. I mean, you know, they have a close relationship with the US and, you know, they play the Putin card and have pushed that, particularly the foreign minister now defense minister, who is a former Russian himself.

And so they -- people play it. But I think they have all reached the conclusion that it doesn't work and I think it's not working in Washington. When I -- I just came from the Middle East. I won't mention though, I spoke with some high level officials. And when push comes to shove, they don't assess Russia to be a major player in regional politics.

And if you look, frankly -- and we make a lot of it ourselves. Sure they are supporting Assad. But frankly, we were half hearted about Assad ourselves because we certainly -- I mean one reason we didn't intervene in Syria was not fear of Russia. It was because we didn't want the Syrian army to disintegrate like what happened in Iraq. And let's be honest about that. I mean even separate from public opinion, we reached a conclusion that standing between jihadi groups and control of Syria was the Syrian army, and even we didn't like Assad and we wanted to see him go, we don't want to see that collapse.

And if you look even now at the picture with Syria and we say America is not playing a role -- frankly, you know how many airplanes they have and how many we have? Even in Syria where we're not supposedly playing a major role, you know --

MR. BERGEN: But -- so you're saying that de facto American position was the maintenance of power of Assad?

MR. TELHAMI: The thought what?

MR. BERGEN: The de facto American position, whatever we've said publicly was the maintenance of power of Assad is what you're saying?

MR. TELHAMI: Up to a point. I mean I think -- and that's to the liking of the Egyptians. By the way, the Middle Easterns are not united on this issue -- keep that in mind. What you're going to hear from the Saudis is they want to see Assad go. What you hear from the Egyptians privately, they don't want to see him go. And by the way, the Egyptian army is still called the second army because the first army is the Syrian army dating back to the days of the union in the 1960's. And the two military establishments are very close to each other.

So they don't see eye to eye on that. In fact one reason why the Egyptians are close to Russia isn't just in order to play that against the US, but because they are actually closer to Russia on objectives in Syria. They are actually closer to Russia than they are to Saudi Arabia. And I've heard that directly from Sisi himself, where he said he was initially worried about the Saudi's, you know, maybe pushing too hard in Syria.

MR. FAILY: I mean I wouldn't use the word flirting, but I think you need to look at it from the need perspective rather than opportunity. The need, for example, in Iraq is for energy, and therefore, the Chinese have ability to invest faster. Or the need for, for example, helicopters -- if I had difficulties getting Congress to approve Apaches and the Russians can give us their weapons faster. So the US lack of agility in dealing with the needs of the ground does allow opportunity for others to come in.

MR. BERGEN: You dealt with the Obama administration for how long, three years?

MR. FAILY: Three years, yeah.

MR. BERGEN: And what was your experience?

MR. FAILY: Not easy.

(Laughter)

MR. BERGEN: Why?

MR. FAILY: Decision making was very -- sort of very small circle, and therefore, influencing it or understanding the key drivers behind it was a key challenge for me.

MR. BERGEN: You're out of office now so you can be frank.

MR. FAILY: I'm always frank.

MR. BERGEN: Do you think it reflects --

(Laughter)

MR. FAILY: (Inaudible).

MR. BERGEN: Yeah, yeah. So do you think that reflected -- I mean to what extent was that just President Obama not wanting to get involved or was that --

MR. FAILY: No, there was a -- as I said just in an article, there was a mental block against Iraq and that was clear from 2008 onward, physically 2011 onward. So when you have a mental block, you have other challenges. And as they said in their own article, Iraq was the cause of every problem they had. So hence they didn't embrace it and their embracement was a bit late as well.

MR. BERGEN: This gentleman here.

SPEAKER: My name is Tom Korologas (phonetic) from Washington D.C. I served in Iraq in 2003 for the coalition. My question is Peter talked about the future for a minute. Tell us about the past. Did we get out of Iraq too soon?

MR. TELHAMI: Did we what?

MR. BERGEN: Did we get out of Iraq too soon, Ambassador Faily?

MR. FAILY: I think viewing Iraq in a very binary way was a mistake from the beginning, trying to pigeonhole into Kurdish, Shia, Sunni in itself was a



mistake, not doing enough homework was a mistake, things moving from DoD to State to White House and ping-ponging that sort of country was also a mistake. So to that effect, strategically I would say the homework was not done. So that's a big mistake I will say.

In relation to staying or out, the Iraqis were confused as to what's the purpose of US. Somewhat they had mixed messages. And to that effect, we had clarity after President Obama saying, "I will not" -- "the troops will not be there." And therefore, the numbers of 10,000, for example -- let me give you an example. They said we will have 10,000. Prime Minister Maliki's perspective, 10,000 was too little a troop anyway to do significant influence. Would he want to lose his politics as a result of that, domestic politics?

So to that effect, I think I would say we all lost out because we were shortsighted.

MR. BERGEN: Well, if the Americans had stayed in some -- whatever number, 10,000, in December of 2011, would ISIS have been as successful?

MR. FAILY: No, certainly not.

MR. BERGEN: What would the ISIS --

MR. FAILY: I mean for over a year they started having camps in the desert.

MR. BERGEN: Where were these camps?

MR. FAILY: They were in Anbar.

MR. BERGEN: And where were -- and what time period?

MR. FAILY: There were about five camps.

MR. BERGEN: What time period?

MR. FAILY: We're talking about mid-2013 onward.

MR. BERGEN: And you were asking what?

MR. FAILY: We were asking it to be -- sort of destroy it.

MR. BERGEN: By the United States military -- air force?

MR. FAILY: Yes, yes, air force, drones and so on. Yes.

MR. BERGEN: If that had happened, what would the outcome have been today?

MR. FAILY: Oh, it would have been a clear deterrent. That was a --

MR. BERGEN: Yeah.

MR. FAILY: Yeah.

MR. BERGEN: So it was a missed opportunity.

MR. FAILY: Let me give you another example. June 2014, the Iraqis asked for the Americans to get being reengaged. It didn't happen until August. That in itself caused a lot of casualties, communities being destroyed and so on. So to that effect, the Iraqis view this: is this a strategic partnership?

To add to that, we have what we call strategic framework agreement between the two countries. It's nonbinding, but it was sold to the Iraqis as a security pack -- mis-sold to the Iraqis.

MR. TELHAMI: Yeah. You know, I'm not sure I agree with that to be honest, with all due respect. I mean obviously we're all speculating in some ways. We don't know for sure. But here is what I would say. I mean the American presence sure was effective when it was there -- Ambassador Ryan Crocker is here -- and, you know, they did a very good job with a very limited hand to make things as good as they could, particularly building a coalition.

We know that a large part of the problem is also political will. It's not just about military intervention, which was limited to begin with. And the US presence was the biggest draw of mobilizing people, particularly Al-Qaeda like, against the US.

And we also know that part of the reason why there was this empowerment of ISIS was that -- if you look at ISIS itself, well, it is a derivative of Al-Qaeda. And remember if you say it wasn't there, you know, Zarqawi was there obviously while the US was still there. So if you look at the creation of ISIS being Zarqawi, Zarqawi was there already prior to that. So there was an infrastructure related to it.

But I think it was fuelled by the Arab -- by the backlash from the regime against the Arab uprisings. I think they realized that there were some pressure there, like anti-regime pressure in the Arab world. Everybody was fighting the regimes.

If you look at ISIS itself initially, it didn't declare its principle enemy to be the United States of America. It declared Arab regimes to be its priority. That was the differentiating factor between it and Al-Qaeda. You are an expert on this issue. Obviously, it moved away as soon as the confrontation evolved.

So I would beg to disagree. I think it's far more complicated than that. I'm not sure that a continued American presence would have helped, and frankly, I don't know how much pressure we would have had here domestically -- so a President who was elected to pull out of Iraq. And the public opinion certainly didn't want to see more American casualties there and we would have seen more American casualties there.

MR. FAILY: There was no American infrastructure on the ground to help the fight against ISIS, that's what I'm saying.

MR. TELHAMI: Yeah.

MR. FAILY: Very little.

MR. BERGEN: We have time for another question. Any more questions? Okay, so over here.

SPEAKER: Thank you. Hi. Joseph Schneider from -- I'm a consultant in this industry. Given your expertise in the subject, I'm curious more about how you view the future. Do you see the establishment of nation states in the Levant? Do you see potentially the Somalia experience, where you just go and degenerate into a number of fiefdoms run by warlords? Or do you see the establishment of greater power by the regional powers like Iran and Turkey and Saudi Arabia to fill the vacuum left by US disengagement?

MR. FAILY: I think if the future identities are different from what we had before, then, yes, there will be change. If Shiaism, Sunnism becomes a key identity issue, then you will have a change in the geopolitics. If globally there is no focus on it, then you'll have an issue. If Jihadist Salafism is not addressed, then you will have ramification in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf countries and so on.

However, nation state as a concept is not the issue. It's the social contract between the citizens as to what are the benefits they get from the state. Decentralization is a key theme which we have to promote. Federalism and other stuff of that need to be there.

So I will say the story is still not being fully told. The jury is still out on that one. And if Iraq or Syria themselves are disintegrated, which I don't think so and I don't hope so, then I would say the knock-on effect will go across -- that's a ripple effect. And I don't think that's helpful to any party, let alone global geopolitics.

MR. TELHAMI: Well, I would end where we started, which is we started with the idea that Sykes-Picot may have impacted the collapse. Sykes-Picot was criticized not only because it was essentially a Western power conspiracy to reshape the Middle East, but because

the boundaries of the states that were established didn't fit into the existing identities which are important in the region.

I would say that is no longer the fundamental problem of the day. A 100 years is a long-time. We've had identities emerge. Most of the states didn't exist, but they have them. And what is heartening in all of this is that when you look at places that are more sectarian like Iraq and like Lebanon, the two more sectarian in the Arab world in terms of composition, despite the sectarianism -- that's obvious and we have even sectarian conflict and confrontation -- when you poll them and ask them what do you consider yourself first, are you first Sunni, are you first Shia, are you first Muslim, are you first Arab, are you first Lebanese, are you first Iraqi, the remarkable thing is that in Lebanon and Iraq they say I'm Lebanese first or Iraqi first more than any other place in the Middle East.

And the reason for it is that people are hungry for the state. And so the state is not dead. The state, people want it if it's possible. But I think it's not just the security of the state, which has to be there, but also the social contract.

And I think what we will see is that the international community, both our foreign policy and other powers' foreign policy are going to start focusing on strengthening the state rather than weakening them. But the trick will be: how do you reshape it, the relationship, the social contract between the state and the public at a time when the public feels empowered? Every governments are going to be pressured to give in and they will resist that in the short-term in the name of security.

MR. FAILY: The other issue, which I think Shibley mentioned a few times, which is technology, that has been -- had somewhat an adverse impact in relation to this because they were not prepared for it. And moving forward -- it depends what's the next generation, what's the next sort of -- what's the next globalization theme which may adversely impact or not the region. So here

we're saying that the region is fragile, it's able to be influenced in either direction.

MR. BERGEN: Okay. Well, thank you very much, Ambassador Faily. And thank you very much, Shibley Telhami.

(Applause)

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