

## SMA Reach-back Report

### Third Discussion Session with Naval Postgraduate School

**11 May 2017**

On 11 May 2017, NPS convened a panel session and discuss areas related to the 4<sup>th</sup> round of CENTCOM Reach Back Cell Questions. The speakers are listed below, and their biographies are available in Appendix A.

#### *Speakers:*

1. Dr. Craig Whiteside (ISIS)
2. Dr. Hy Rothstein (Afghanistan)
3. Dr. Afshon Ostovar (Iran)
4. Dr. Ryan Gingeras (Turkey)
5. Dr. John Arquilla (General Strategy)
6. Dr. Glenn Robinson (Middle East)

*Transcript Prepared By: Nicole Peterson, NSI*

### [START OF TRANSCRIPT]

**Sarah Canina:** Today we welcome experts from Naval Post Graduate School to respond to, and discuss, the fourth round of CENTCOM reach back questions. Glenn, this is the third time NPS has convened a panel to discuss these questions, and it is deeply appreciated. I want to hand it over to you now to introduce the panelists and get things started.

**Glenn Robinson:** Thanks Sarah, and it's truly our honor to help folks think about some of these issues. We are honored and glad to do so. In terms of the logistics and scheduling for today, this is what I propose to do; we'll start out with Craig Whiteside who is an ISIS specialist. Craig actually has a class to teach so he'll give his remarks and then entertain any questions right away and then he will depart. We'll turn it over to Hy Rothstein who will talk on the Afghanistan. Then after that, Afshon Ostovar who is our new Iran specialist that has come over

from CNA and who's just written an outstanding book on the IRGC in Iran. After that Ryan Gingeras who is a Turkey specialist. There weren't Turkey specific questions on this but I asked Ryan to join us just to say a few words on the terribly important connections that the Turkey has to some of these issues. John Arquilla, who you of course know very well, will then talk about some of these strategic considerations that you have raised in your questions. Then I have a few remarks on several questions as well. We'll follow that up with the general Q&A discussions and then we will finish up at 1400 your time. Does that sound like a good plan?

**Sarah Canna:** Sounds like a good plan to me.

**Glenn Robinson:** All right, so I'll begin with Craig Whiteside who is Naval War College student here at the Naval Postgraduate School.

**Craig Whiteside:** Hey Sarah, this is an answer to a question number four, what is a successfully completed campaign against ISIS look like? Is it a success because of the balance of partnership towards others? So, my findings in my own research, which is what I know, so I'm going to talk about it, but I think it does help us understand a couple of the aspect to this question that are important. How do we measure the success of the counter-ISIS campaign? If you look back at the return or resurgence of the Islamic state in anytime between 2011 and 2014, I studied their war against the Sahwa (Sunni Awakening) and their irregular warfare campaign both in Syria and Iraq. If you look at Mosul in June 2014 and started maybe paying attention to that, and maybe some people were paying attention after Fallujah in January 2014 when it fell to ISIS, so close to the capital. But if you look in the rural areas South of Baghdad, if you look at the rural areas in the Diyala province and certainly in and around Mosul, they are already under ISIS control as early as 2012-2013. By 2013, ISIS conventional platoons are entering towns and staying there for a while and then retreating carefully just to test government reactions and see what the population's reaction is to this event.

In 2013, they were claiming over 300 attacks every two-week period to the point where they have a monthly reporting period normally for all the other provinces, but have to do a two-week period for Mosul because there are so many attacks. My point is, we were not looking at the right things and so that frames my answer to this question about what a successfully completed campaign against ISIS looks like. It is not simply about the control of population—although that's an important consideration to be sure from a counter-ISIS campaign perspective. It is not the number of attacks—which often can be manipulated or surged to imply strength when they are really weak, or vice versa. If you look at what we thought was a very successful post-Surge period and reason why we thought it was so successful was the dramatic drop of attacks. It is not necessarily a good indicator. So not long before the Surge, they were in a very strong position (especially in Anbar province) according to our own intelligence products in 2006, but due to the flip of the Sunni tribes and

select resistance groups and the associated removal of their sanctuaries, and the penetration of their own ranks by a lot of informants/defectors, you have a drastic change where they had to adapt organizationally and that's what they were doing. It's better reason for why they are very subdued during this period: the lack of capability and the need to reset.

A few years later, in 2010, ISIS generated spectacular attacks against government facilities and a church in Baghdad, which really is more of a demonstration of weakness on their part since the Awakening tribal elements were still very strong in Anbar. But the Sunni anti-IS/AQI alliance wasn't as strong in other areas, and that's why you see IS pick up ground in their old core areas. If you look at their captured documents from 2008-2010, a lot of these activities are about trying to get defectors and deserters to come back to them to fight for the cause. These former fighters all have good reasons why they are not fighting, but the goal of the terror attacks is to try to convince them to come back to the fight, that there is hope still to create an Islamic State. The bottom line, a different metric is needed. We are in a similar situation now where we are defeating ISIS in the large urban areas but not necessarily in the rural areas. What did we do wrong last time? First, the host nation detention facilities. They are riddled with corruption. The screening criteria are mostly guesswork; who is in these facilities and how do you know good from bad? In the past, the majority of ISIS senior ranks from 2013 on (particularly after the Abu Ghraib breakout) are filled with former AQI/IS veterans. These breakouts could have been prevented. You also have the government amnesty program, which you can see the current Iraqi government possibly thinking about for the future as they try to figure out who is a real ISIS person and who is not. If you look at people like Abu Ali al-Anbari, he was a huge political figure in the movement captured in 2006. He is released in the 2012 amnesty and they didn't even know he was a top AQI and MSC operative, despite the U.S. and Iraqis holding him for six years. Same with Mohammed Al Adnani who was their flamboyant spokesman since 2009—he was released just as a normal fighter despite the fact that he was close to Zarqawi and was a Syrian posing as an Iraqi.

The networking that's going on in the prisons right now especially since you have an even larger net of people being detained and brought in into close proximity with real ISIS actors there is an issue of concern. Some measures probably should be taken, and some energy needs to go into this particular problem. I would argue that success at this point is looking at the networks and the people and finding out more. Success to me is successfully mapping as much of the network as we can know. I've been reading a lot about current Iraqi efforts to maintain all of these captured fighters and I've heard from top Iraqi sources (Hisham Hashemi) their lists are fairly questionable, if reliable at all. I think there's some major help that needs to be given to the Iraqis there, tools like social network analysis and even programs that can help map out the network (even into the past) are really a good place to put some energy now in

calculating this measure of success, right? The use of defectors and informants to get a good understanding of the network as it goes back into time and answering questions like who's migrating to other groups like HTS? Who's going home to Europe and North Africa? Who's headed for refuge in Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia? Those are the questions and that's how I would judge your success right now in defeating ISIS.

A second tier metric of measuring success might be in the development of local city politicians, I know that's not a skill set that jumps out for USCENTCOM but it really is the root of the problem. We always talk about politics being the answer here but I would make a fairly strong argument that the failures are not necessary simply about sectarianism - in the sense that the narrative of the rise of ISIS in 2014 was that the Iraqi government was so sectarian that they somehow enabled ISIS to come to power. It is equally possible that a large impetus to ISIS was the fact that the senior (Sunni) politicians who run large parts of Anbar and some other Sunni majority provinces, failed miserably from a corruption and government capability standpoint. Sunni discontent with their own political leadership in conjunction with the Islamic State's successful campaign to eliminating or coopting their Sunni rivals (both political and military)—like the Iraqi Islamic party, the Sunni Sahwa, and the other Sunni armed groups—was a motivating element. In the end, ISIS was successful in defeating all other senior actors for power in the areas they care about. They were the only organized, capable, and motivated actor with the desire to govern.

This is an area that local and regional actors can help in supporting local governance. That's probably going to be a better metric of a successful campaign against IS—who is left to run Sunni Iraq. Again, measuring territory, numbers of fighters, you know rank and file, fighters that go home, etc., all that is fine and normal accounting.

Finally, to answer the second half of your question: is the defeat of ISIS going to give other actors an advantage? My answer to that is NO. It is a good question but it's almost too clever. Again, the Islamic State has succeeded by defeating the other Sunnis, not necessarily the actors you are worried about gaining in the absence of ISIS. If you can reduce the capability and the power of the Islamic state, if you have change in the communities large and small, I think you set up the possibility that other regional actors will see it worthwhile to support local actors against the Iranian backed elements and the like. As long as ISIS is the strongest actor in the Sunni community, there is no chance of the successful development of a Sunni political movement that is able to reconcile with the government and form an independent state that can withstand external influence.

To conclude, the strategy and the talking points that I hear coming out of the organization are good ones, I wouldn't do it differently to be honest as a side

line observer here, but at the same time I hope you don't believe all that you say because it's not existential whether or not Mosul falls or if the ISIS rear guard in Mosul is defeated. It's an important psychological victory but, in reality, these folks are a rear guard and their important folks have gone other places. I think we are trapped in the thinking from the last go around against this particular group with an idea that we had defeated them fairly badly, that they were out in the desert around camp fires and the truth is, they just went to very hard places for us to find them (not too far from urban areas, just difficult to root out). And we, as a coalition and with our local partners, did not want to really go in there and dig them out of some these deep holes because of the casualty concerns. Letting them rot out there didn't work when the political efforts to put the country back together failed, and they had fuel for their fire so to speak. They came back because of it, so that's something that we should be thinking hard about right now.

**Glenn Robinson:** Thank you very much Craig. Since Craig has to leave we thought it would be best to entertain questions that are directed to his remarks right now instead of waiting until the end for the Q&A. Any questions for Craig?

**Male Speaker 1:** Given what you just said, if we were able to disrupt the network and leave them in place with territory and intact, would that be successful?

**Craig Whiteside:** I don't believe so, so if you are able to distract the network, are you talking the external or internal aspects of the network?

**Male Speaker 1:** Let's say both.

**Craig Whiteside:** Yeah, both?

**Male Speaker 1:** I think that all of the things that we said are important—it's not the terrain and it's not the number of fighters. Those are easy things to count and are easy to capture and focus on. If we were able to put them in some kind of box and disrupt the network continuously so it could not operate or frustrate their operations while still leaving them without terrain. That's not success either, right? It's a combination of all of those for success, is that correct?

**Craig Whiteside:** I think so, terrain is important to them; they need to have sanctuaries. They had sanctuaries in 2010 when we were very successful at disrupting the network just as you described. In 2010, the very top third of the network disappeared. But because we have sanctuary terrain inside of Iraq, not in Syria, inside of Iraq in the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys, they are able to regenerate and eventually push out from there. You can continue on with the continual disruption of the networks. I guess the question is how much territory is significant because they can exist in very small amount of territory. If the level of disruption is high enough, and enough of the network is taken off the battlefield, then I think you are closer to success, yes.

Male Speaker 1: Okay and to follow on to that, how accurate do you think our current mandate of their network is?

Craig Whiteside: Well, I just read an article by an Iraqi expert on ISIS that was very disheartening. He was very critical of the lists that the Iraqis have of the ISIS members that pretty much determine who they are keeping in the jails, etc. This is from a source that has an extensive knowledge of the network. I thought the Iraqis had a better read on the ISIS network in Iraq and Syria due to superior sources and old interrogation files, etc., but this source was very critical of the lack of knowledge. I've also heard that echo from a couple other sources that there is one list of ISIS people but that it is not accurate and there are a lot of people being detained for various reasons which leads to the problem that I mentioned before about recruiting for the networks, etc. I don't really know, I stay off of classified sources so I can write and research on it (in the Open Source) and I know the old guard, almost to a man, but from my understanding about the organization is that they have a core group of unnamed men who have very low profile and for the most part it's hard to know who they are and what their past is. I would guess that even in 2010 when we thought we had gotten X number of folks and we were somewhat optimistic about our prospect of taking the network down for the long term means we were probably wrong that there were a significant number of folks that were out there operating off the radar. We know this because Abu Bakr was out there at the time, he is still here, Mohamed Al-Adnani, their spokesman/media man since he was released in 2009 was there, he survived the 2010 bloodletting, and then there is the large number of folks in the prisons. I would say (without any access to classified information) that we probably understand 60% of the network at best and probably 40% in the worse case.

Male Speaker 1: Okay, I appreciate that. Just a comment: it's just very amazing from what you see from open source. ISIS is not just a network; it's a living organism, it's self-correcting and self-generating. As soon as you attack one portion of it, another portion takes up that task with names and fractions that weren't in the previous network. It's very interesting, and it's a challenge how we attack and then degrade them. Like how do you stop cancer?

Craig Whiteside: I would agree, the thing that's been my research interest lately is, following the Salafi network that goes back in Iraq to the 70s/80s and looking at the number of senior ISIS folks that studied under the clerics that were influenced by the spread of the ideology then. That might be an area worth spending time with analysis towards is building a network from who they studied under religiously because, again, a lot of these figures—even some of the former regime members—were under the sway of these clerics and the crossovers of the network going back in the history.

Glenn Robinson: Perfect, thank you Craig, very much. Craig has to leave now to teach his seminar. By the way, when I do my response I'll have a little bit more to say

about question four as well. Right now, let's turn the floor over to Hy Rothstein who is going to lead, responding to questions on Afghanistan.

**Male Speaker 2:** I would say for our successful campaign, from a long term point of view, we will be better able to address this kind of societal problem by avoiding emphasizing differences between Sunnis and Shia. Support from the population is probably one of the key factors that will make us successful. Clearly, Sunnis has a lot of grievances that need to be addressed. I would say addressing these kinds of problems would add to our success in the long term.

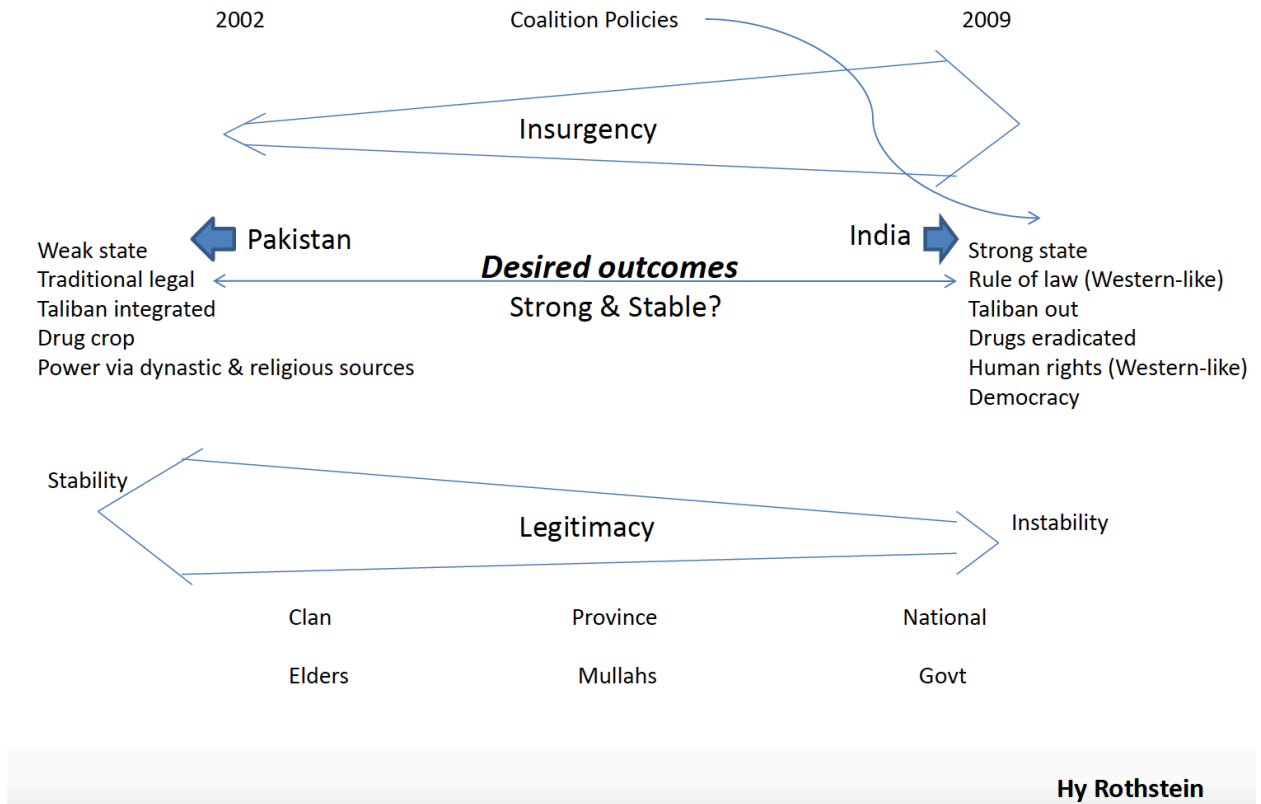
**Craig Whiteside:** I would agree with everything that you said and want to make a point about propaganda. When ISIS took over Mosul, it spent a lot of its time talking about how terrible things were before, how sectarian everything was before and how great everything could be in the new utopia. That should be reason for the coalition to make that kind of information campaign right now and not just rely on the obvious, which is that everyone knows that ISIS is terrible. This is the time to hammer it home with an information campaign on how life was terrible in the caliphate, despite all the promises since 2008, even 2006 when the Islamic State was founded. When ISIS promises you this again in the future you know what you will get – the fake utopia, and death and destruction. Thank you.

**Glenn Robinson:** All right, thank you Craig. Everyone, Hy Rothstein on Afghanistan:

**Hy Rothstein:** Good afternoon. For me, let me start by talking about what our aim was in Afghanistan late 2001, and that was to bring to justice those responsible for the 9/11 attacks: Al-Qaida. Since early 2002, we've been at war with the Taliban, who had nothing to do with 9/11 and seem to be make a seamless transition from Al-Qaida to ISIS, and we are still fighting them. At this point, I'm a little skeptical about what the United States or any other outsider can do in Afghanistan. The Americans seem to be overly optimistic about our ability to fix things and sometimes we don't address the cost associated with doing that and, in this case, there is fundamental incongruence to put in our approach in Afghan in reality. More force is not the answer. We are now, after 15 years, recognizing the problem that we have created. You can't fix things if you won't see what's wrong. So, we created a situation that we must now circumvent or fundamentally alter to achieve any reasonable outcome in Afghanistan, and I want to just suggest that reasonable outcome might be some sort of stability.

The most serious obstacle to progress is the flawed Afghan government design. We have created this mega bureaucracy western style, which has merged with more traditional forms of corruption in Afghanistan. We should encourage more local governance to overcome the beast of a government we created at the center that is increasingly irrelevant to the periphery. So, at this point, we have to ask ourselves for what purpose is the US in Afghanistan? That said there are practical and ethical reasons to stay involved, but for how long? Are our ideas and concepts of justice in congruence with those of the Afghans? The parameters for creating any type of change really are dictated by the target

audience not by the United States. Let me refer to the chart that was sent out the email (see below).



**Glenn Robinson:** They have it.

**Hy Rothstein:** Okay, if you look at the bottom portion of the chart issue of legitimacy: this is more of an assumption, but legitimacy and governance or legitimacy and stability are linked. In Afghanistan, high legitimacy is on the left side of the chart where you have leaders who are considered legitimate based on dynastic or religious sources of legitimacy. On the right side of the spectrum we have national government and you have elections. Those things are not considered particularly legitimate in Afghanistan and, therefore, you can draw one conclusion that security will be very low if by the legitimacy of a lack of officials is high. If you look at the desiring outcomes in the middle of that chart on the right-hand side is what we want and on the left-hand side is what was traditional in Afghanistan. Our policy is again focused on the right-hand side and sometimes we ask ourselves why has the insurgency increased over the years, and that's on the top side of the chart.



This chart by the way, comes from a book that Will and I put together several years ago called, 'Afghan in Games' this is a crude version of the chart but this essentially outlines reality in Afghanistan as a problem that we created. It really is based on what we hoped to do, which was in congruence with the Afghan reality because legitimacy that we tried to create Western style was incongruent with what legitimacy really is in Afghanistan. Let me conclude that chart by saying tribalism is incompatible with nationalism and legitimacy and stability that we wanted; it is incompatible with the US design. Let's compare this against another plan that the United States had that was successful at one point, and that's the Marshall plan.

The Marshall plan had a very clear purpose: to rebuild a devastated European economy and infrastructure. There was a clear US National interest in the Marshall plan. The probability of success was very high primarily because the European countries had well-established institutions. There were legal and institutional procedures that were based on elections and a consent to the governed so, therefore, it worked and the source of legitimacy in most western governments is some form of elections. The Marshall plan had a high likelihood of success. What's going on in Afghanistan probably doesn't.

Let me talk about the situation in Afghanistan today. The US acknowledges the Afghanistan government as legitimate based on elections, something the Afghan people do not recognize. We have attempted to create an Afghan army but then that's modeled after our own army. The army cannot adequately defend the country; we see that on a daily basis in Afghanistan. They can't support themselves and desertion is very high. Afghans enlist in the army for a job; they don't enlist to serve their country. Taliban momentum is on the rise, at least one-third of the country supports the Taliban, and that percentage is growing. You are setting the conditions, possibly, for a civil war down the road.

Again, just a little history: after the United States left Vietnam, the South Vietnamese government lasted three years, the government we left behind in Iraq several years ago lasted only two years, the Soviet regime lasted three years after the Soviets cut funding and even a program that we really counted the VSO program collapsed completely after the United States withdrew from Afghanistan. It's not too farfetched to say that state failure is at the end of this tunnel for Afghanistan. Let me just talk about Afghan motivation for a second. Where does it come from? The Taliban seems to be very well motivated as far as the Afghan Army is concerned. I'll just refer to something John said many years ago. Now, the Afghans are the world's best natural warriors, but we put together the worst army in the world in Afghanistan. Why is that? The explanation is this issue of legitimacy that I talked about a little while ago.

If you look at types of legitimacy, there is traditional, which is based on cultural dynastic travel issues. There is an allegiance legitimacy, and that could be based on charismatic religious leader with some sort of strong religious ideology. Then

there is legal or institution legitimacy, again based on elective representation. The Afghans recognize the first two, traditional and religious while we focus on the third: legal and institutional. Our core policy at the creation of the Afghan government right now is standing in the way of partnership. We absorbed the two recognized sources of legitimacy in Afghanistan and went for one that was not considered a legitimate. This helps explain the resurgence of the Taliban but don't confuse the resurgence with the fact that the Afghan people might like them. They don't like them, but they do respect their legitimacy and in some ways their lack of corruption.

Just a few facts, Afghan civilian deaths were at an all-time high in 2016. Afghan poverty level has reduced 10% since 2002. Life expectancy in Afghanistan is down; infant mortality is up. The Taliban is on the march. They control absolutely 35% of the country and 60% of the rural areas. And by control, I don't necessary mean physical control, I mean more psychological control where they have their way with the population. The Taliban control more in 2017 than they did in 2016, and this track is unlikely to change. In 2014, the ceremony that ended... the ceremony that marked the end of Operation Enduring Freedom had to be held in secret location out of concern that the Taliban would attack it. Last month, the Taliban attacked an Afghan army base killing 140 Afghan soldier and wounding 160.

ISIS is growing in Afghanistan, we may say ISIS in Afghanistan might be, and probably is to a certain degree, rebranded in the Taliban but it's probably tied to this notion of the Afghan government is not legitimate, and there needs to be some sort of legitimacy whoever is running the country.

Here are some of the obstacles that I think stand in the way of a clear adjustment. You know a terrain commander always expresses confidence in victory; it's just part of the war. It's just not good for a military commander to say anything but victory is on the horizon. There is a natural tendency by a chain of commands to establish matrix that appear to support apology of momentum. We are overly optimistic about these assessments, and we've been overly optimistic about readiness of the Afghan army and the Afghan police. I never really look at assessing their willingness to fight, in most cases, their fellow Persians. That leadership creating positive talking points results in another belief based on their inaccurate assessments that another 3000 troops will make a big difference in Afghanistan. Again 3000 more troops will give us about 12,000. I'm just not sure how 12,000 will succeed when 150,000 didn't a few years back. Of course, there is no nation, everything is local and tribal and we've created a monster at the center.

With all that said actually think there is some reasons to be hopeful and optimistic. Afghans, based on my experience, are the most practical people I've ever met. They also have a great sense of humor. I'm relatively confident that they'll sort this thing out and create some sort of legitimate government. There

will be more to the left on that spectrum in the chart that I showed you than we might want, but it will be organic. The Taliban will have a role in the future, and that's might be what needs to happen. Perhaps our best approach would be to prepare for that eventuality, where there is an organic government security structure that really will benefit the Afghan people. Again, let me suggest that we are getting in the way of a durable Afghan solution. In this case, less US involvement may result in a better outcome.

**Glenn Robinson:** Any clarifying questions for Hy?

**Male Speaker 3:** We hear this discussion a lot: that it is a very key centralized area without a national identity. However, there are a lot of places around the world that used to be that way that are now state. So, with the current threat that we have globally of people looking for weakly governed space to exploit and your analysis of this place not being traditionally not centralized and fractured in its governance, how do we achieve prevention in this space without some model of centralization or organized participatory control of the region?

**Hy Rothstein:** Okay, so first of all there may be a future for a more centralized state in Afghanistan. The question is, do we want to be involved and spend money and blood until that takes place? The other issue is even before 9/11, the Taliban had their ties with Al-Qaida. Al-Qaida has had a dominant rule in Afghanistan since really 2002, so it's very inconceivable now at the local level, I mean the Afghans don't like outsiders, so it is conceivable at a local level that we can cut some deal to keep outsiders out. The Taliban are not outsiders. They come from those villages; they don't like outsiders. I think in a decentralized way we can in fact create an environment where there are safe havens and that there is some sort of local accommodation made with Afghans to keep locals out. Maybe that at some point loss to the center but I think starting at the center you know right now creates this illegitimate government that creates fighting between the government and the Taliban which creates those safe havens because with the fighting going on there are spaces that the outsiders can't move into. Let me suggest that those spaces wouldn't exist if there was some sort of accommodation made at a local level to control around the areas.

**Male Speaker 3:** I agree with you. I acknowledge the difficulty with our solution being ever viewed popular legitimacy in the Afghan population. How do you foresee the change in Iranian and Russian and now tending towards supporting the Taliban instead of countering the Taliban and that external influence and the resultant development in Afghanistan as a result of the Taliban being backed by foreigners. Does that challenge their legitimacy?

**Hy Rothstein:** I think it could, I mean the Russians backed the Taliban at their own risk because the Russians have their own Islamist problems. I think that may be able to be worked out diplomatically. I don't know, but I would be surprised if the Russians invest heavily in radical Islamist factions in Afghanistan because that can only hurt them in the long run. I think there are ways around that. There are

obviously complications to it but I can't see why the Russians would support Islamists anywhere because that would eventually hurt them.

**Glenn Robinson:** Thank you very much Hy. Next up is Afshon Ostovar, our newly hired Iran specialist.

**Afshon Ostovar:** Let me address question six, which is one way of alleviating US/Iran tension to mutual satisfaction. I'll put bottom line upfront. I don't think there are ways to do that right now. I'm more pessimistic on this issue than I've ever been. I've worked this issue for a long time, for a good decade, I've been working on this question. There been times when I have been optimistic about it. I'm not optimistic about it now, and I'll tell you why. Given the context of US/Iran relations, Iran still blames US for everything. There is enduring mistrust. The conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen are still in the tempo for the US/Iran relations. US and Iran are obviously on opposite sides. It's clear in Yemen but we overlap in in other areas which is interesting. The JCPOA nuclear deal is something that Iran wants to preserve, both hardliner reformers agree on this, but it's also a source of tension, particularly the insufficient opening of Iran markets to banking systems and then also the threat of new sanctions with the new administration.

The nuclear deal required US to give up most of our political leverage on Iran. Iran militants know this and are acting accordingly. Iran several central interests. One is safeguarding its regime—both for domestic and external defense. United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia in particular are adversaries, but other can include UAE, Turkey, and ISIS. Iran wants to expands its influence and develop allies. This important for Iran because in order to expand its influence, it needs allies but it's not easily able to ally with other states, so it develops allies at different state levels particularly along military groups.

Finally, what it wants more than anything is to push US military forces out of Middle East, so this is a glaring difference between US objectives and Iranian objectives, and is hard to square. It's important to know that Iran stands on the ascent since 2003 but even more so since 2009. Its ability to advance its goals has increased. What do I mean by that? Well, it has kept its regime secure since 2009. The nuclear deal also was a success. It expanded its proxies in the wars of Syria and Iraq and Yemen to a great extent. It has expanded its influence between Yemen, influence they didn't have prior to the wars in those countries, and it has increased its influence in Iraq, which is important because it's much more central a power in Iraq than it had been even before ISIS. Its project have developed its military so, to me, this is an important distinction and to think of this malicious as militant groups, as terrorist, as terror operatives, but they are not anymore, they are military. If you look at the one in Iran, they drive Humvees and use a lot of the American military technology that we've given to Iraq. They operate as militaries on the battlefield; they've taken whole territories, and they are far more sophisticated than they used to be.

Iran has also found its strategic alliance with Russia, which is important because Russia has helped Iraq overcome its military weakness in Syria. It was a game changer in that war. Inner power that Russia presented is something that Iran doesn't, it's been important. More than anything, Russia has been able to check US pressure at the international level particularly at the UN Security Council. Finally, through all of that, Iran has been able to curb the advances of its adversary in Iraq and Yemen through proxies. The US presence is a lingering threat to Iran and this is, again, I think one of the main problems between the Iran and the US and one that's hard to get past. Iran wants the US out of the region full stop. US military presence remains a threat to Iran. The US cooperation with air space with Saudi Arabia, UAE, our defense sales are all threatening to Iran. Iraq is important because Iran needs the US in Iraq to help defeat ISIS; however, Iran fears that ISIS will be used as a pretext for the US to return massive of troops and they are going to have a long-term military presence in Iraq, and that's something that Iran wants to avoid.

Iran's proxies in Iraq routinely threaten US forces and that is a reminder of what's to come or what could happen should Iran decide to sort of unleash as it were. In Syria, Iran fears the growing role of Syria against Assad. It's less concerned about what the US is doing against ISIS but it is an affirmation that after ISIS US strategy in politics in Syria will change. In Yemen, I would argue that Iraq doesn't care all that much about Yemen. Yemen is a low cost high reward, low risk high reward scenario free run where they can send some weapons, send some advisors, even sort of exaggerate their relations with the rebels and in return they distract their main adversary into a war in Yemen. So, the Saudis, the Amorites and even the Americans are all of a sudden pressured into this war into the Saudis and the Amorites has distracted them from Syria. The longer that Iran can keep Yemen burning, the better it is for Iran prospect in Syria and in other places.

Prospects for reduction of US/Iran tension, I would argue that the US made a strong effort over in the last administration to reduce those tensions but Iran did not fully reciprocate. We were able to achieve the nuclear deal, which was something, but Iran attitude toward the United States even up to and after the nuclear deal had necessarily been one that had sort to reduce tensions further. The Iran regime is split between factions that are open to improving US ties and are open to having a different relationship with the United State. Unfortunately, the Iranian government only has the power that it is given by the supreme leader, and it was empowered to make the nuclear deal. It's not empowered to change US policy or to change Iran policy in the Middle East, and I think that's a main point here. The IRGC, which does have much more influence regarding Iran policy in the Middle East, is far more important to Iran strategic behavior and it has been increasingly opposed to improving state ties with United States.

It has also been against establishing official mil-to-mil ties. We know this, know this particularly from trying to establish a phone line with Iranian to de-conflict a

military operation in the Persian Gulf. The IRGC has always been against and it continues to be and I haven't seen any change to suggest the IRGC is more open to that. The IRGC wants above all the US to accept Iran's role in the region. It's not really willing to negotiate except at the very margins of conflict. Iraq, however, I think is an area where cooperation has benefitted both sides. I think over the long-term, Iraq will be important for somehow bringing the US and Iran closer together. However, that moment is not now because the IRGC fears the US military presence in Iraq, and so it's something that the IRGC or even the Iranian government is not really willing to entertain but I think US retains good relations with Iraq is important if we ever want to have reduced tensions with Iran.

Of course, US policies in Syria and Yemen run against Iran, both of those countries. So, are there any options for the US, the US can do lots of things to make Iran happier. To me, Iran is kind of avoiding time to explore. The US can play by Iran's rules and get the expected results. You see this over and over again. We try different things but Iran has been fairly consistent. My suggestion would be that the US and its politics also need to be consistent, and we need to stick to our goals and objectives whether they run against or correspond with Iran's own goal. As long as we are consistent in the Middle East, then Iran at least knows what it is dealing with. But if we show that we are willing to back away from certain things or if we work along certain issues, Iran is going to try to take advantage of that cognitive hesitance. US policy and will matter more than anything else.

Yemen I think is a total waste of time. Iraq would mean again the best opportunity taking advantage of overlapping interest over the long term. A stabilized Iraq will be used as an intermediary, especially with the IRGC, as we all know Iran's new ambassador to Iraq is a former official who was actively involved in undermining US military forces and targeting US forces during OEF. The IRGC have become, basically, the political line from Tehran to Iraq, and it's important I think for the US to understand that and to act accordingly.

More than anything, and this is sort of my bottom line, is that the US needs to start seeing Iran as a long term strategic and not in the near-term threat. You guys know this more than anybody else. Iran has been a perennial inner term threat long enough, that's not willing to invest in not intellectually and not in terms of defense investment. We keep thinking that Iran is sort of the problem that we are going to take care of for the next four years and yet at forty years after the Islamic Revolution just about, we are still at the same place that we were in 1979. It's worth particularly thinking on what that mean, what is the long term strategic challenge with Iran mean? It's not the same as China, it's not the peer-to-peer challenge, but it does mean that our behavior needs to be considered and that we need to have a strategy for the greater Middle East, what our objectives are, what our goals are, what we want to achieve and how Iran has been with that.

Finally, potential flash point you didn't ask for but I'm going to talk about it anyway. Syria, of course has a conventional flash point particularly as pro-Iran militia gain strength and are able to dominate the Israel border region. If they are there, that's going to set up a potential conflict between Israel and Syria, which could potentially involve the United States. If the US targets Assad anymore than we have that of course can trigger an Iranian response either in Syria or in Iraq if Assad weakens. If Assad or Iran's position becomes weaker in Syria then, again, Iran behavior could change.

Iraq after ISIS, I think, is also going to be an interesting period because Iran will then want to turn to prevent large US military presence. The US military presence there is to defeat ISIS. If ISIS is no longer there, then Iran is going to put pressure on the US to leave. The Shia militias could be involved in that.

In Yemen there's potential for miscalculation and unintended escalation in Yemen. We know that the Houthis have been willing to attack perhaps with Iran, perhaps not. US and Saudi maritime vessels ... could happen again and that could draw us in.

**Glenn Robinson:** Unless there are clarifying questions for Afshon now, let's move on. I know there's no Turkey specific questions, but given the very important role that Turkey plays in the end game in Syria and Iran, and even broadly, I invited Ryan Gingeras back who was with us last time to take a couple of minute to share on how Turkey may play into some of these issues that are on the question list. Ryan?

**Ryan Gingeras:** All right. Good to be back again. I'm going to keep my comments really brief, just three main points. The first one is about the post referendum environment. I think it's clear that the referendum will not create much stability. In fact it's probably arguable that the outcome of the referendum will decrease stability in Turkey, and you can see this in multiple ways in terms of the structure of the government, continued purges, potential for violence in a number of different ways, further as a result of increased PKK activity but also the growing paramilitary. There are multiple signs that show that there will be de-organization of government or changes with semi-government militants in the near future in the country. I think deep down, on the economic front, things are looking really bad, so in the short term, I think we are really in a very dangerous state now where state underneath AKP is expecting to come out of the referendum stronger and that's not necessarily clear.

The second thing I want to talk about is Syria and I really want us to just emphasize the general direction of Turkish strategy right now. I think it doesn't take a lot of expertise to see that Turkey has been painted into a corner in terms its involvement in Syria. I think, generally speaking, it's unclear what Turkey is going to do with respect to Syria, and I think it's very possible that a really wide range of policy is being contemplated, varying from doing nothing to taking rather extreme action. It's largely dependent on two factors. One is it's said

Syria policy will affect the domestic stability of the AKP. I think policy makers in Turkey know that Turkey won't speak right now with Syria, a network we've interrupted well within the electorate as large, similarly people where generally it's true about.

Secondly, I think it is a policy in which Turkey looks to be the loser and I think that familiar, it very much affects public opinion. Ironically that's cut across the political divide of Turkey. It's just a day when a major opposition, the most prominent opposition newspaper call for Turkey to resend American and NATO to interdict. It's even sort of by taking violent action the United States as well as the allies and the YPG. It's difficult to interpret that. I can sort of entertain that going forward but I think Turkey is totally unclear about what's going to happen next week when everyone comes to Washington.

The last thing about US/Turkey relations: I don't think it'll take real convincing for anybody on this phone to say that US/Turkey relations are really difficult moment. The US relationship with Turkey could plummet to a depth that I think we probably would have never imagined. I don't want to have to sound like Chicken Little to predict something like a partially ruptured relationship but I think something like further degradation is not only likely but it's almost certain. I guess the real question remains to the extent to which Turkey will be at the leader whether we will, not until we give our policies to Syria but in terms of our overall approach towards Turkey as both a strategic ally as both as a tactical operational partner in Syria and in the world at large.

**Glenn Robinson:** Great, thank you Ryan. Let's turn the floor over to John Arquilla to talk to us about some of the strategic issues imbedded in your questions.

**John Arquilla:** Well, thank you partners, and thanks to everybody on the team here. I think I get as much out of this as our guests at CENTCOM and back in the Pentagon, so I just say thank you all. I'm going to be touching on a number of the questions from the list, from a kind of strategic point of view and will try to address briefly three things with regard to the question about the conclusion of the campaign against ISIS. I want to suggest that when you are at war with a networked organization, conclusion probably is a word that should not be in the vocabulary. But this could be an inflection point or a transition, much as Al-Qaida had to become a far more dispersed network after being driven from Afghanistan late in 2001. Tomorrow, ISIS is going to be flatter and more dispersed in the wake of defeat on the ground in Iraq and Syria. I'd like to go back to a point that Colonel Sperling made earlier about the question of strategic emphasis: whether to try to disrupt the network or focus more on the denying territory or capturing ISIS controlled territory. While it would be nice to do both, there is, I think, an interesting tension between the two and we might want to think strategically by focusing more on the network and less about the territorial issues. I'll come back to that in a little bit.



The third point or theme strategically I'd like to raise is that, we've now been militarily engaged in the Middle East for a long time. It has been 27 years since I was sent as part of a small team with Zalmay Khalilzad and Paul Davis from RAND to work for General Schwarzkopf during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. We have thus had in this region a highly militarized power strategy for over a quarter of a century, and yet I think few of us are happy with the situation. Somehow, we must continue to dial down the pure military elements in our strategy and dial up the diplomatic and informational aspects to that strategy. We have gotten a little bit out of balance and so my third theme is about re-balancing. Let's go through each of these things a little bit. ISIS clearly has been on its heels on the ground for some time. We've seen they're losing territory regularly, we see gains of the coalition fighting them but we have had for these past seven months this kind of Arab Alamo in Mosul, east and west Mosul. As you know my own comments, from earlier sessions, for those who've been tuned in, have been maybe we didn't want to create this grand confrontation in one city with lots of civilians. In fact, there were other things we could have been doing to the network.

There were other ways even to approach the Mosul issue: treat it more like Lawrence treated Medina in the First World War, leaving 40,000 Turkish troops to wither there. Well that's water under the bridge, and we are in the seventh month of a hard city campaign. It's going to be hard to make political capital at the end of the battle for Mosul. We are destroying most of the city in order to liberate it, especially the narrow and old streets of west Mosul. The humanitarian suffering has been just awful and most civil society organizations and indeed some official governmental reports suggest that well over half the casualties have been to noncombatants. In Mosul we have to factor this in with the very small number of ISIS fighters who have held on and fought street by street for seven months. This is their heroic, symbolic Alamo, and if there is the organizing principle during the transition of ISIS, it will point to what they will see on undoubtedly as the heroic ISIS fight in Mosul. We may have a military victory there at some point. They will turn this into an informational victory just as the Texan stand at the Alamo was a tactical defeat but a great strategic and galvanizing informational victory. The ultimate question, though, is, "How are we to think about preventing the transition of ISIS into a much flatter and more dispersed organization?"

ISIS is in Afghanistan and reaching out there we know that, we talk about havens for them there maybe some remote rural havens but there're also havens like European Union where movement is still very easy and there is a relatively large sea of Muslims in the general population within which they can train and recruit.

The ISIS transition is well underway and I would come back at this point to Colonel Sterling's observations that maybe our drive at the moment should be to try to illuminate the networks of the nodes, the cells, the links, the flows, and

look at this network as an emergent system and think in terms of its disruption. If that's where the Colonel was going I would strongly second that idea. Then comes the question of how we try to finish up the Iraq-Syria situation and I would suggest, if our strategic goal is to try to prevent ISIS from making a successful network transference or transition—remember that we failed to do this with Al-Qaida—we have a chance to do that with ISIS. What we do right now is to begin focusing on that. One of the things I would say is we could curtail the campaign on the ground after Iraq. We finish up the endgame in West Mosul, and yes they will be secluded here and there throughout Iraq no question of that, but we can pretty much declare the campaign over in Iraq. If the goal then is to prevent the ISIS transition to a network, the focus at that point should be stopping at the Syrian border, rather than going on to a major campaign in Syria.

By the way, we know that our Turkish friends do not like the idea of lining up the Kurds to come after Raqqa and that's going to create considerable tensions for us as Ryan has already eloquently pointed out. We should stop at Iraq, we keep a small foot print there, so it doesn't overly alienate Iran but also to make sure that the Shia-led government doesn't engage in crime with the kind of excesses that fostered the rise of ISIS and its 2014 blitzkrieg throughout western Iraq. What that also means is that we give in on another aspiration of ours that antagonizes Iran, which is our call for Assad's overthrow. Let's stop doing that. Let Iran and Russia work with Syria to bring an end to the civil war in Syria. Let us write off the hopeful policy of president Obama that Assad must go and just say "Okay, it didn't happen the way we wanted (to see Assad fall)."

In the name of ending suffering to innocent Syrians after nearly half a million of them have already died. Again, we become less militarist and more diplomatic if this would ease some tensions not only with Iraq but also with Russia where we need to do so. I think also our Turkish friends would help to eliminate those ratlines by which ISIS fighters are going to try to get out to that dispersion to make that transition to becoming a flatter and far more dispersed organization. If we recognize that the real dynamic, and again this goes to something that was said about Iran, they were very good at making alliances, with states *and* networks. Let us realize that since 9/11 we have been in a great war largely between nations and networks, and even people we view as adversaries, Russians and Iranians are allies, are in a fight against ISIS network, or can engage even Al-Qaida and others.

Then that goes to this point about the rising or should be the rising importance of diplomacy as we move ahead and I want to say a few more words about that before concluding here. That is if we recognize our limits to what can be done militarily and what can be used to persuade. I remember the late William Colby in his memoir, *Lost Victory*. He talks about the American public that is willing to support small interventions for a long time and major interventions for only a short time especially if the results are not swift and decisive. I think the Obama

doctrine is going to be referred to as about operating in a world with a smaller military footprint and a larger informational and diplomatic imprint and of course working with local allies in terms of providing a lot of the military muscle and I think he was on the right track there. The idea of calling for a regime change or supporting it through our military forces created more unrest than stability in the world. If we take this point we would be working with much smaller footprint as Rumsfeld suggested initially in Afghanistan. What would the diplomacy there look like? Well, I think the Russians are already giving us a reasonable example of trying to reach an accommodation between the Taliban and the central government of forces.

This is something that I think has relatively modest risk for us and potentially high return and again fosters and stirs up this notion of nations working against the networks that would seek to destabilize. It doesn't mean that Afghanistan would be a perfect place and I don't think stability and democratization can really be hoped for anymore but to keep unrest within acceptable levels, that is I think muddling through solution that we're going to see a number of places around the world and it is far more desirable than the effort to try to reroute the currents of history and culture by armed force as we have these past decades after a great clash and little results. In terms of this shift from all militarized strategy to one that is much more blended between military and informational and diplomatic methods. Well, we've already suggested a more temporary approach to ISIS, focused more on the network and unless something like operating in Syria and overthrowing Assad will ease some tensions. There are also things we can do with regard to Iran that I think are fairly simple. Their top goal has to be keeping the regime secure, our top goal is making sure that that regime doesn't have nuclear weapons. We have a deal in which we've eased sanctions and they have given up about 98% of their fissile material. We have a kind of equilibrium there.

I think the icing on this cake would be for the United States to give a similar guarantee to Iran that it gave to Cuba long ago. The Cuban Missile Crisis ended, amongst other reasons, by Cuba's agreement that it would never again allow nuclear weapons deployed there. We agreed we'd never again try to overthrow their government. I think the simple measure on our part that we do not seek regime change in return for guarantees and verifiability, that the proliferation effort is over, would be a useful gamble to try and would put the United States in a very good light. Back to Syria, just closing a loop on diplomacy, it seems to me that the Russian effort to think through the de-escalation zones makes a great deal of sense. That is something that we should think about, again if we're to embrace this policy of curtailing the active military campaign against ISIS beyond the Iraq border in Syria. The notion of supporting de-escalations and reducing the human suffering in Syria is a very sensible policy to pursue and I'll just close by looping that back to Mosul about which I have been concerned for those who innocents who have suffered for many months.

The suffering of the innocent who remain in west Mosul is close to beyond description today even as that campaign nears its end. I'm here to suggest that instead of continuing to have Mosul to be an area of destruction, let us make it an "Aleppo 2.0." There is an opportunity today to jump start a more diplomatic informational story by allowing humanitarian aid to come in buses to take innocent people out including ISIS fighters if that's what they wish to take them into some ISIS territory. Much as the level of truce at Aleppo allowed a similar kind of evacuation, this is something that I think is strategic. Military interests are also diplomatic and informational interests are also I think at this point after seven months of fighting, the most ethical solution left on the table. With that I am going to pass over to Professor Robinson who again I want to thank for organizing the discussions over these many months.

**Glenn Robinson:**

Thank you very much, John. I'll just say a few remarks, and then we'll open it up for Q&A. I'm going to make three sets of remarks beginning with the question four, which I think everybody has weighed in on it at least to some degree. On the ISIS conflict, what does victory look like? How do we know? I want to underline, there's been a lot of discussion, I think absolutely important discussions, on networks. Both Craig and John have underlined ISIS networks and the importance of the role they play and I absolutely agree with that. But is also really important not to lose sight of territoriality, the symbolic importance of ISIS losing its state. Remember ISIS's rallying cry, *baqiya*: remaining, enduring. The issue of territoriality, of a claimed state, is what sets ISIS apart from other jihadi groups out there, including al-Qaida.

So, I do want underline the importance of defeating that territorial state and how that happens, I think there're a number of ways that can go about occurring. But taking *baqiya*—remaining, enduring—off of the table and showing ISIS as having been defeated at its foundational claim—a territorial state—is very important; it's going to be very important for future information operations. Again, how that happens I think there're a number of subtle and more nuanced ways that can happen, but the territoriality defeat for ISIS is very important.

I think there's a lot that can be made of that victory, again, done in a civil and humane way, that sends a message to the rest of the Muslim world. The optics, the information operations of how the concludes are very important—not American soldiers climbing on statues and tearing them down but focusing on how horrible rule under ISIS really was. The more of that that can be publicized the better. The end will not mean a signing ceremony like in Tokyo Bay. There will be things that remain. There'll be folks that identify with ISIS here and there that will pop up from time to time that will commit acts of terrorism. This means again going back to Abu Musab al-Suri: personal Jihad is still very much on the table. I think it's in many ways the dominant theme in the current era that we're in. That will continue as well. There're some things that can be done to limit

these attacks of “leaderless jihad” but it's not something that can be entirely stopped.

But what ISIS has achieved in doing so is putting the idea of re-establishing a Muslim caliphate on the front burner. Most versions of a caliphate will not be the blood soaked version of ISIS. So the US should not be automatically opposed to talk of re-establishing a caliphate of some sort, because it has become popular. We need to be nuanced and subtle in our response because not everybody that talks about re-establishing the caliphate is going to an ISIS supporter.

On question six, I share Afshon’s pessimism about the ability of the US and Iran to work in harmony any time soon. I also share the view that we need to be thinking, kind of take a long term approach, as opposed to a short term approach. But I do want to put one thing on the table as we kind of think through long term issues because there is one really important thing that Iran and the United States share. That is, if you take a step back and think about what is the biggest problem when we talk about security, national security issues. What is the biggest problem facing the region when it comes to US interests? That I would suggest is the collapse of the Westphalian state system. The rapid weakening over the last six years of states in the region that have created all kinds of problems from civil war in Syria to endemic instability in Libya, etc. The undermining of states and state institutions has been the most significant security challenge in the region for the past 6 years.

The US and Iran share an interest in strengthening the state system, in securing the Westphalian system in the region. Chaos and instability are the alternatives, and Iran does not want that any more than the US does. Iran is one of the few real states in the region, with real history, real institutions. Iran and the US share an interest in stability in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, two states on Iran’s borders. Chaos and instability lead to lots of bad guys, civil wars, criminal networks, Jihadi networks. Looking down the road, there are clear areas of overlap of interest between the US and Iran, which could be useful to explore when the time is right.

The final point, a forgotten issue, is on question 11: Yemen. When it comes to Yemen, I think we're taking a beating in regional public opinion, and we don't even know that we are. US policy on Yemen appears to be essentially a payoff to the Saudis in exchange for the nuclear deal with the Iranians, letting the Saudis know that we still have their back. It appears to me to be something of an American involvement in the Yemen civil war without an obvious strategy. I know you guys follow the media in the Arab world, this is a humanitarian disaster and it's not something that is doing the United States any good other than some of the leadership circles in Arabia. But in terms of what's happening on the ground, again, we're not doing ourselves any favors in the perception business with what we have done in terms of assisting that Saudis in that

campaign. We should seek to quietly ease our way out of that assistance to Saudis and what they're doing in Yemen.

We've got half an hour for Q&A and discussion. CENTCOM, over to you.

**Male Speaker 4:**

I have a question about strategy, fighting Daesh. Everybody has agreed that we're just about to defeat Daesh: probably targeting more its territory, its hardware to fight, the ability to fight in its territory. We have addressed that but what about addressing the underlying condition that has created Daesh (a symptom): it's the first war. The second war is, have we addressed very seriously the religious ideology. We got the reasons why it has popped up, underlying conditions, and we have the reason why it is existing versus ideology. I am not sure we're fully addressing that, is it something not a military capability can do that? I do fully acknowledge the fact that the military should be part of it but isn't enough, not the major part. We can contain, we can't absolutely defeat.

The second question is relating to what you said about the Westphalian system. Between 1916 and 1996, the world has created 130 countries, half of them in Middle East and Africa. Step by step we've discovered that the system was created to support western systems. This system has collapsed step by step particularly in the Middle East and Africa because we've been unable to face the challenge and so creating a void that more and more lone state actors have failed.

**Glenn Robinson:**

All right, great questions. Let me deal with the first one first, that is the underlying conditions that help promote Daesh in Iraq and Syria. We spent a good amount of time on this issue in the last conference call because of the centrality of it. I think this is absolutely important in both Syria and Iraq. ISIS has been able to get a foothold primarily because it has been able to play around certain areas of grievances against the central government in Iraq. Arab Sunnis used to run the show in Iraq, and now they have been clearly marginalized since 2003, and particularly under the Maliki government. We've had sort of Shia revivalist government that went out of its way to alienate some of the Sunni Arabs. You had a population in Iraq that may not have gone along with the much of what Daesh had to say but they were at least representing their interest, and therefore, had a sympathetic population that Daesh could take advantage of.

The exact same thing is true in the case of Syria where Sunni Arabs make up about two thirds of the total population but have felt essentially cutout of power since really the 1960s by regime that is seen as primarily representing the Alawis and minorities more broadly. The long drought and the regime's response to it helped launch the civil war as hundreds of thousands of farmers had to pull up stakes and move to eastern Aleppo primarily. The key thing is that Baghdad and Damascus must seek to incorporate that segment of the population and not seek to deliberately excluded and marginalize them. It

doesn't have to be Daesh—some other group will come along after Daesh that represents Sunni Arab interests against being marginalized by Baghdad or Damascus. Some other versions that will come along, no doubt if these underlying problems are not addressed.

The second question yet another great question, I'm reminded of Winston Churchill's famous quote that democracy is the worst form of government except all of the others. Same applies to the Westphalian state system: it is the worst form of organizing the world's territory, except for all of the others. I don't know if that is a system that is plausible, that's around that can effectively provide for people's well-being and security if undertaking reasonably, well certainly living in a world of statelessness without government is the thing that we're seeing in Syria and Libya, a few other places, Somalia for a long time. That does not produce good outcomes, so having a Westphalian system, having strong states, does not guarantee good outcomes because you can have predatory states and you've seen some of those in the Middle East. But the absence of state guarantees bad outcomes, and so creating states or recreating states having, doing the best you can to try and have decent governance and inclusion is much as a sort of a good outcome in general but it's very much a good security outcome as well.

**Ryan Gingeras:**

I think you've actually going to disagree a little with Glenn's point about the breakdown of the Westphalian system. I think you could take it apart a little bit more in that there is a break down in terms of certain territorial and structural elements of states in the Middle East. What I feel is so surprisingly durable as a vessel is nationalism. I think that's a really important element of continuity even in this time of real uncertainty. There is still a sense of national identity in Syria and Iraq. I think in both cases, the identities are enduring, but they're changing. I think that is not uniquely Iraqi or a Syrian issue, I think that is a case with all national ideologies that are taking a new contour and are being contested in a way.

I think this is where diplomacy comes in. I think it's helpful to not strictly think about the Islamic State as a bureaucratic or religious movement but also the national movement. But it is strictly a traditional national movement. One that has been very evocative among certain subset of Muslims in the Middle East and outside of Middle East. I think that one way of trying to combat this kind of movement is by developing nationalisms that are more inclusive and that are more representative. Unfortunately, this is not a project of the United States can actually directly invest in primarily because the United States is universally seen as a foil. Whatever the United States creates in general is seen as artificial in nature and therefore illegitimate. But we can provide spaces for people to meet for that full kind of articulation.

It actually has those kinds of opinions and develop some kind of identity. This is not something that I think shows return in the sense of visible immediate

outcome. It's something in the long term once is invested. To the last point about diplomacy and means of self-power I think this is where the United States has a role to play in terms of emphasizing self determination, emphasizing issues of self-expression and tolerance.

**Glenn Robinson:** Hy Rothstein also wants to jump in here.

**Hy Rothstein:** Let me just say that the fact that the territory that made up the caliphate is disappearing is really good because one of the things that many Islamic states differ from Al-Qaida is this lure of the fatality. They actually had states, so as it disappears, their allures reduce. The issue of religious ideology you raised and I think it's an important one. In many ways the Islamic states is very religious. I mean they literally take portions of the crime and they use them in a very literal way. Fortunately the majority of Muslims don't agree with that interpretation. Unfortunately the United States or any Western country is not in a position to counter that message on religious grounds. One final thing about these conditions that led to ISIS, you're right in the notion of legitimate and effective government at a local level is very important. And the United States right now is in a position where we have leverage, leverage that we didn't have before, and that leverage with regard to coming up with some sort of better governance at a local level. That leverage would be lost if we don't do something now.

The Iraqis have not had incentives to change things at the local level so before we go too far in eliminating ISIS as threat to Iraqi governance, we should use that leverage to try to, as John said, use the diplomatic means to try to create better local governance, Iraqi style in the periphery. That's what you see in the military instrument providing lubrication for that diplomatic and instrument. Without the military instrument, I don't think the diplomatic instrument in this case would be feasible, but we're at a point right now where we can in fact perhaps switch to the diplomatic instrument as long as credible capacity to cause coerce exist in the background.

**Afshon Ostovar:** If I can react to on Iraq. First of all, on the religious ideology, what is interesting is, in the making of a caliphate, it's written into **[1:40:44 inaudible]** of three I think about **[1:40:47 inaudible]** seven steps. The step four has been attained by **[1:40:53 inaudible]** and the military defeat we are now witnessing. We bring them to step three. It doesn't kill anybody, it just withdrawing from step four with in terms of a caliphate. Whereas in step three, which was also the step reached by Al-Qaida. Now Al-Qaida and Daesh are on step three to their goal which is for both of them the same. That cause of **[1:41:20 inaudible]**. That's my first remark. My second remark is the **[1:41:23 inaudible]** agreement. The **[1:41:25 inaudible]** agreement is a combination of two elements, the first is nation territory, nation states plus a system of agreement.

It has been relayed after the recognition, enacted by United Nation. **[1:41:39 inaudible]**. When you create wealth in the Saudi states, especially all the Middle East, one interesting thing is **[1:41:45 inaudible]** agreement has been created by



nation where fought for their borders for centuries like France, Germany, Italy and so on. All the countries now we're thinking about... have been given their borders they never fought for. When suddenly they're freed from the bi-polar era, then bi-polar era, they're freed with its borders that have created no loyalty from outside. To make loyalty from outside or very inside some part of it that never loyalty for the capital. So, to say of the west side system not because, [1:42:25 inaudible] good works but because [1:42:27 inaudible] country we have never been a nation state before. It can't work. That's it.

**Glenn Robinson:**

This is Glenn Robinson. Let me respond to one of those points raised. Getting back to the Westphalian system, which was generated organically in Europe and so the nations states created there were more organic, but also included significant violence and upheaval, including the displacement of tens of millions of people during and after World War II. Its application to the rest of the world has been less organic, where you create borders that are more arbitrary, I mean look at the borders in South America, how much did they make sense? The only thing is South America, they're older, they've been around for a couple of hundred years now for the most part and so, therefore, they just have more legitimacy because of age. Those in the Middle East and Africa almost all have been created in the last century and are very, very arbitrary. This is again a strike against them. In the case of the Arab world, most of the states are all brand new, and to make matters worse, had a strong ideological argument made against them for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Arabism).

So, it's difficult to create stable viable states that make some degree of sense. There's an endurance to these institutional mechanisms that is actually astonishing in some way. The fact that Jordan is still with us, Jordan is the most arbitrary state you can imagine, and yet it's still with us, and doing reasonably well. Part of it is a matter of time, part of it is creating new national solidarities, again agreeing with Ryan. They are more inclusive than the people within those boundaries. There are all kinds of problems with the applications of the Westphalian model to the region but in the absence of alternatives and given the security and other questions that are really reliant on a functioning state system there, the best option we've got to the degree that we can be helpful, more as a long-term issue obviously. That's the way we ought to think about it.

**Male Speaker 5:**

I would like to come back to question number six. One requirement I heard from some speakers is that we need a consistent policy against Iran. I think that is not enough. I think we all know or could agree that Iran is a key for the solution in the Middle East or they need a way to bind Iran into the solution. But out actions, sanctions, have the opposition result. I think we need to bind Iran economically to a new system in the Middle East.

**Afshon Ostovar:**

Over the long term I think you're absolutely right. Iran wants more than anything to recognized to be a strong and important—if not the pre-eminent—power in this region. It's not incorrect to say that of it were more engaged, if it

were more intertwined, were connected it would have more effect than just the stability and security of this entire region. The problem is the Iran doesn't see it that way right now. The regime just frankly doesn't see a reason to invest in the security of the region the same way that we would like it to. The reason is because they feel that the fundamental problem in the region is American influence and the longevity of American power. It's so long that it remains the Iranian regime I should say is going to be forced to undermine and right now they are success at undermining it through kinetic or military activity. Does Iran even want us to be involved in this engagement with the rest of Middle East? Iran wants to dictate those terms itself and with its neighbors not to be directly involved. So long as Iran doesn't want the US involved, the US isn't going to find much currency in getting Iran to sign up for anything that the US wants to do in the Middle East.

That's not to say that long term prospects are dim, I think the long-term prospects are actually quite good for the US and Iran to have better relation than not any relation and that the Iranian population is quite predisposed to the West and to Western values. Iran is the most democratic state in the Middle East and actually has a very robust democratic system and infrastructure and culture even if its democracy is not as fair and free as other and I think part of the Irani regime too wants to have better relations with the United States. The problem is, and I'll emphasize this again, is that part of the regime and those people and all those cultural impulses are not what controls Irani's policy in the Middle East. What controls Irani's policy in Middle East is a small fraction that has the whole power in the regime, that sees what is trying to do in the Middle East is much more black and white terms than we'd like them to.

If there were great visions of gray within Iran perspective, those were things that we can take advantage of but we have tried, CENTCOM have tried for well over a decade to establish even a simple even a navy line in the Persian Gulf just to be complete misunderstandings within the Americans sphere. The IRGC is totally against this. Why are they against this? Because in exercising that military line, they would be normalizing US presence in the Persian Gulf and that's what they don't want to do. Again, I absolutely agree with your assessment. I think those things are important and this to be able to be achieved would be fantastic but you need to defend them. I don't think that Iran is interested though.

**Glenn Robinson:**

Okay, well CENTCOM, do you have any more questions or comments?

**Male Speaker 5:**

Just one more. Also, focusing on Iran and the region and the role they play. How do you, acknowledging that in Iran s small faction has a disproportion amount of control over how they play in the international stage, how serious are they on a Shia versus Sunni super track versus an Iranian versus Arab track, and whether or not they are willing to have that dominance across the two divides of Islam?

**Glenn Robinson:** Can we hear the first half so we can understand the question better? There was a little commotion so I'm not sure if I got it clearly. I understood the difference between Sunni and Shia, and Persian and Arab but I didn't quite get the gist of the question.

**Male Speaker 5:** Whether or not those are in their desire to be a head in a regional hegemonic. Whether or not those are issues that they need to maintain or exert on the population that they would have regional influence on. Or if those are just identity matters to them and they don't have necessarily need to have Shia power in the other areas as long as they have hegemonic power. Same thing with the Persian Arab influence. Whether or not it's fine, those are Arabs, and we're Persians. If we have regional influence that's what we're trying to achieve or not.

**Afshon Ostovar:** Let me answer this so I don't forget it. I would suggest that the Iranians are far more pragmatic about their influence and power than. Frankly, from my perspective, Iran wants to be with friends of everybody. Their regime wants to be friends of whoever will be friends with it. The problem is with that it has a very particular political and ideological world view and not many people want to be friends with it, and so it has made friends, domestically in places where it could.

In Iraq of course, they've been able to take advantage of the unrest. I think unfortunately the Arab states are true to their policies which to my mind are far more security minded at the top and Iran's are creating their own sort of demanding politics and even frankly they're liberated at the state level are creating the opportunities for Iran to expand its influence even greater within the gulf. What I mean by that is Iran runs back as a patron for groups. When it is the sole patron. If there is no competition with any other state, Iran has a good back up. If you look at all of Iran's best friends, they have no other friends, there's no competition. If you look at the friends that Iran has had that have sort of stepped away from Iran, they've done so for a better piece. I think a good example is Baghdad and Afghanistan. This is the group in the 80s that embraced communist ideology, if Shia meets Persian and had a lot in common. But as soon as the United States entered Afghanistan in 2001, was quite willing to drop Iran as its main patron and turn to the United States because the United States frankly just had a lot more to give.

You can look at Hamas in another sphere. Iran broke with Hamas over Syria and is now not able to gain back its influence even if it wanted it Iran just does good by taking off the people that are overly alienated and have no other of friends. This is why it's important for me, for the United States not to have a defacto security policy in the Persian Gulf, which is frankly what our allies in the Arab states want us to have because it... They don't know it but that myopic sort of view of their own populations is frankly creating a scenario in which Iran will have more influence in places like Bahrain or UAE or Kuwait or especially

eastern Saudi Arabia where Iran would not have had that influence. I think even five years ago or ten years ago.

Ultimately, I think the Shia countries are happy to be up those countries and see the Iranians as foreigners, and good patron. I mean Iran can give you guns, Iran can give you little money, and it can give you a world view but it can't give you much more than that. And is certainly is not a dangerous part of the Hamas. On the Persian/Arab thing, Iran knows that it's Persian and it also knows that nobody else is Persian, with the exception of Taji. It's very helpful being in an Arab environment, I think it's less helpful being surrounded by Islamic states than it is being surrounded by non-Persian. That kind of sort of racial element or ethnic element I think is not really a big deal to the Iranians. They've been dealing with Arabs forever. They may not think well of them culturally but as business partners or political partners as they can be justified. I don't think the ethnic element is important to Iran and frankly, I don't think that sectarian element is that for either. However, just to turn the question around, I think most of those issues are far more important to American Arab allies, which makes them more difficult to the US.

**Glenn Robinson:**

Alright, anything else or should we sign off?

**Male Speaker 5:**

One more. Now is it that... in terms of our dealings with them, two considerations, changing our dialogue based on what he said to one where we shift it to discussing Arabs and Persians, versus Sunnis and Shia since they are relatively well aligned along very closely similar lines but one is left contingent than the other. Then, have we at any point offered Iran the same sort of universal protection publicly that we offer other countries? What I mean by that is, Iran being surrounded by Sunni countries that are in an arm's reach and they naturally have at any day still would be a threat, from that arms race from their neighbors. We're supporting their arms raised but we have not at any point said, if somebody overtly aggressively without reasonable cause attacks Iran, will we defend them? I think that that should be something we consider because if we're going to say we're going to be consistent, the person attacked should be able to rely on the larger army system to defend them. I don't know if we're communicating that, like we've mentioned earlier where we said in Cuba, "We won't overthrow you if you don't bring your missiles in." We had these agreements, have we tied Iran to a similar protection of their state?

**Afshon Ostovar:**

Just to your first comment, I wouldn't suggest that we ever use a Persian/Arab sort of distinction when we talk about security matters in Iran and Middle East. There's no reason to rationalize or make an ethnic sort of a [2:03:29 inaudible] nationalism discussion. Frankly I don't think we should talk about Shia and Sunnis either, it's not helpful often times because we know what our allies tell us. Our allies tell us their perspectives but don't think that their perspective is correct or frankly helpful. I would stay away from both of those views and I would just talk about it as states, Iran's, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, just like we

talk about any other part of the world and leave out larger categorization. No, we haven't offered Iran anything in the way of unequivocal assurance and this is probably because Iran hasn't offered that to us either. There is no real reason to say we're never going to attack Syria if they continue to threaten us and our allies.

Frankly, I think we would be happy to do that. We don't want to go out to war on it I think the US has proven that time and again. We're not that interested in regime change although there are quite a few congressmen that do advocate for that so it is sort of a minor part of that record. But ultimately, what we want Iran to do is to lay off Israel and to stop taking up our allies. Frankly, Iran doesn't want to do those things. Iran wants to continue to focus on Israel and so long as it does, it's going to be very difficult for the United States to abandon its stronger allies, its longer lasting allies and somehow make a gesture of unequivocal peace with the Iranians, if there's no actual incentive to do so. Maybe Iran would actively, if we say we're not going to attack it or maybe if we'd act even more so aggressively than it is if it had that assurance. I agree with you absolutely 100% that what Iran is doing is frankly a more or less logical and rational from its perspective. If it's surrounded by hostile states, all of those hostile states have good relations with the United States.

The United States helped build up the defenses and keep the military power, all of Iran's adversaries, so Iran is surrounded. But we also have to understand that Iran is surrounded by hostile states based on its own policies. It's not something that's organic to the Middle East. Previous to 1979, Iran had working relations with all of its neighbors and it was not the same scenario. Iran likes to play the victim, it sees itself as the victim, it's hard enough to convince Iran that it's not the victim or that it's a victim of its own self-inflicted wounds. Just to wrap it up, I don't think ultimately that the United States unilaterally can do all that much to lessen tensions with Iran sort of abandoning a long-standing US policy objectives in the Middle Eastern Alliance.

**Glenn Robinson:** Thank you Afshon. All right thank you very much, we'll look forward to the next generation of this in the future.

**Male Speaker 6:** Thank you all, and we appreciate very much and thanks to all the academia, CENTCOM as well, and anyone else. Have a great afternoon.

**Glenn Robinson:** Thank you very much, over and out.

**[END OF TRANSCRIPT]**

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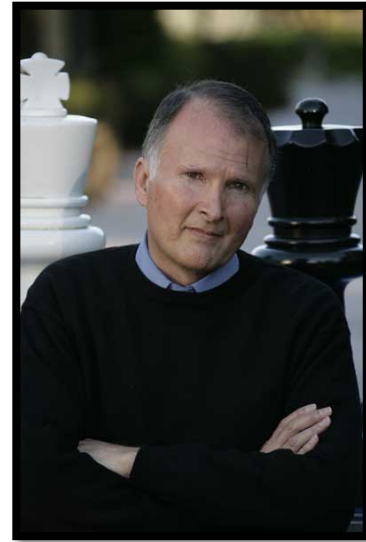
- Revolution in Military Affairs
- Information-Age Conflict
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## Afshon Ostovar

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Dr. Afshon Ostovar is an Assistant Professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School. He has come to NPS after a decade of experience working on Department of Defense and federally-funded projects related to national security and the Middle East. He was most recently a Research Scientist in the Center for Strategic Studies at CNA, a not-for-profit research organization in the Washington D.C. area. Previously, he was a Fellow at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point and has taught at Johns Hopkins University.



Dr. Ostovar's research focuses on conflict and security issues in the Middle East, with a specialty on Iran and the Persian Gulf. His book, [\*Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards\*](#) (Oxford University Press, 2016), examines the rise of Iran's most powerful armed force—the IRGC—and its role in power politics, regional conflicts, and political violence. The book is both the first comprehensive history of the IRGC and a thematic history of the Islamic Republic, from the roots of its revolutionary system in the Islamic revivalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the impact of sanctions and the Arab Spring on Iranian foreign involvement.

Other publications include, [\*The Rebel Alliance: Why Syria's Armed Opposition Has Failed to Unify\*](#), a report that looks at how outside private funding encouraged fracturing within Syria's rebellion and emboldened Salafi and Jihadist groups; and "Iran's Basij: Membership in an Militant Islamist Organization," which explores the recruitment, training, and incentives for membership in Iran's largest pro-regime organization, the Basij popular militia. He currently has three articles and book chapters in preparation examining the visual culture of jihadist organizations, sectarianism and Iranian foreign policy, and Iran's way of war in Syria and Iraq.

Dr. Ostovar is a contributor to *War on the Rocks* and *Lawfare*, and his commentary regularly appears in *Politico*, *Foreign Policy*, *Vox*, *The Guardian*, and other popular media such as *New York Times*, *Reuters*, *Bloomberg*, and National Public Radio. He earned a B.A., *summa cum laude*, in Near Eastern Studies from the University of Arizona and a Ph.D. in history from the University of Michigan.



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