

# CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

## Foreign Fighters in Syria

Public Affairs, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

**Richard Barrett, Joanne J. Myers**

### Transcript

#### Introduction

**JOANNE MYERS:** Good morning, I'm Joanne Myers, director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council, I'd like to thank you all for joining us. It is a pleasure to see so many of you back after this long summer recess. I'd like to welcome you all here, including those I see sitting here and those who may be sitting upstairs in our boardroom. Thank you all for joining us.

The breakfast this morning is part of a new series that we are launching, entitled "The World on Fire: Security Challenges in the Early 21st Century." It is our intention that the discussions emanating from these programs will raise questions about how ethical values are being tested by the challenges of globalization and, in the end, will encourage you to think about what may be needed in order to have a more positive future.

Our speaker is Richard Barrett. He is the author of a very timely report entitled "[Foreign Fighters in Syria](#)." I am confident that you will find his insights and recommendations to be instructive and wise.

Over the years, Richard has had a very distinguished career, as a reading of his bio will indicate. He has worn many hats, but for our purposes today, I would like to mention a few that are relevant to this discussion. To begin with, he was a British counterterrorism chief at both MI5 and MI6. He later went on to head the UN team monitoring [al-Qaeda](#). He was also a founding member of the [United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force](#), also known as CTITF, which was established in 2005 to promote the UN global counterterrorism strategy adopted by the General Assembly in 2006. In addition, he chairs the CTITF's working group on terrorist use of the Internet.

Currently, Richard serves as senior vice president of the Soufan Group, a security consultancy whose purpose is to provide intelligence services to governments and multinational organizations.

Since this summer, it has become more and more apparent how foreign fighters in hot spots such as [Syria](#) and [Iraq](#) are posing a significant global threat. Compared to previous jihads, the flow of foreign fighters streaming into Syria is unprecedented. The rapid [surge](#) of [ISIS](#), the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and its ability to draw so many fighters from almost every continent have set off alarm bells in capitals worldwide.

In fact, the most strident debate among Western intelligence agencies is whether the reported thousands of foreign fighters involved in Syria and Iraq are going to return home and create havoc in their own countries. As a result, nations that rarely see eye to eye are now trying to blunt ISIS's recruitment drive, passing a number of new rules that they hope will stop their citizens from joining extremist groups abroad.

Still, as the number of returnees increases and resources required to monitor their activities are stretched to breaking point, it will be important to examine more closely why an individual went, what happened to him while there, and why he came back. The report "Foreign Fighters in Syria" provides a general context for answering these questions and others.

With increasing international concern, it is a sincere pleasure to welcome a person who has unparalleled knowledge and expertise to advise us on this most urgent of security challenges, our guest today, Richard Barrett. Thank you so much for joining us.

## Remarks

**RICHARD BARRETT:** Thank you very much, Joanne, for that introduction.

This whole issue of foreign fighters in Syria really does seem to have captured the attention of the world right now. Of course, with the [air strikes](#) beginning in [Syria](#) last night, clearly, this is something which is going to run and run. It will run and run because the problem is not going to be solved as easily as that. It is a problem with many, many dimensions way beyond the fact that some thousand foreigners are going to Syria and subsequently to Iraq to take part in the [conflict](#).

Just to start, perhaps, with some brief facts: It's very, very hard to come to any firm conclusions about numbers, origins, intentions, and things like that, but the best guess is probably there's about 12,000 to 15,000 people from other countries apart from Syria and Iraq, who've gone there to join the conflict.

Twelve to 15,000 people maybe doesn't sound very many, but if you compare it with the numbers who went to Afghanistan, for example, in the whole [10 years](#) between 1979 and '89, but then on beyond that while al-Qaeda established itself there and worked up the [2001 attacks](#) and then the [American invasion](#) which drove most of the foreigners out again—in all that period, probably, at the very, very most, there were 20,000. In fact, people who have studied the problem a little more granularly since then reckoned that perhaps the number was only about 5,000. Compared to that, in the relatively short period of three years or so we now have 12,000 to 15,000 people going to Syria and Iraq to fight. That raises lots of different issues which I'd like to try and explore with you this morning.

I should also say that whereas in Afghanistan, most people came from Arab countries, maybe some from Western countries, but there wasn't the great diversity of countries, I've now counted 83 different countries of origin for people who've gone to Syria. And 83 out of a total United Nations membership of 193, that is a pretty significant chunk of countries. Obviously, some of those countries will only have contributed one or two fighters. One shouldn't exaggerate that. But the spread of the message over that geographical and cultural variety is quite extraordinary.

I think this is one of the things that we should remember—even though that great majority of people who have gone to Syria and Iraq are from Arab countries, from the Middle East and North Africa, and that's an important fact we should hang onto.

The age at which they go, their connectivity, their literacy—their literacy particularly with social media is so much greater now than ever before. That is why the whole understanding, if you like, and awareness of what's going on in Syria-Iraq has been able to spread so widely.

The ages, again, in Syria-Iraq are very different from how they were in Afghanistan. In Syria-Iraq you get many people unfortunately as young as 15 who are going. That's extraordinarily young to be

exposed to the violence and horrors that are going on there. The average age is probably early- to mid-20s. Some people who are older are going. There was a fine example of a good British subject who was 41 with three children who blew himself up in a suicide bombing in Syria. But generally speaking, most of them are in their late teens, early 20s. I think that also reflects a sort of youth bulge in Middle East and North African countries, so the demographic fits, if you like, the audience, the constituency.

I guess a key question to ask is, why do they go? I think that here again, you have to understand there are both push and pull factors. They will vary enormously from individual to individual, and in many ways you could say that each individual has his own reason for going.

But if we look at some common themes, there's enormous disillusion among youth in the Middle East and North Africa in particular, but elsewhere as well. A lot of the people who go have this sense of disillusion; and maybe they've gone slightly off the rails as well, maybe with relationship problems, family problems or whatever; or just this general sense that they don't really fit in. They don't really belong. They don't really have any real sense of purpose. They don't really have any sense of identity. They don't identify with the governments that run their countries, with the policies that determine their future. So they are in a way wanting to leave their past behind and have this new beginning—even there's this sort of sense of redemption, in a way, about going.

I want to talk a little bit about the religious drivers as well, but the religion really is a gloss over a much deeper desire for a sense of identity and purpose and belonging, and they want to participate in something, too. It's not just a passive motivation, it's much more active than that. But while wanting to participate, they also want to be led. They want to be told what to do. They want some sort of definite direction to take, which can lead, at the same time, to a very personal internal sense of fulfillment, often a spiritual fulfillment.

With that, the desire for respect, the desire for recognition, all these things are enormously important in countries where there's a vast amount of youth who are all similar. Some may be more employed than others, some may be better off than others and so on. But fundamentally they don't feel that the future is particularly interesting, even if it's relatively economically okay.

Most of these guys are not very knowledgeable about their religion. Obviously, if they've been brought up in Saudi Arabia, or even in some of the North African countries, they will have had a lot of religious instruction, but they're not thinking deeply about their religion.

Unfortunately, the way that the Saudi Arabia education system is set up—and this is true also in many Muslim-majority countries—of course, there's a certain amount of rote learning rather than encouragement at critical thinking, examination of the issues, and discussion in class. But even, of course, were that to be the case, there would still be many people who reckoned that they would go and join this fight in Syria for religious purposes, because the religion will tell you that you should do what you can to support your fellows, support the *ummah*, the Muslim community, and that this is a good way of doing it, because the Muslim community is being persecuted and treated badly, as indeed is the case, by the [Assad](#) regime.

Of course, the reality of what happens when they're there may be completely different, but that religious motivation is a strong one and one shouldn't ignore it. And it's also a good one. These people are not going off there to behead American journalists. They're going off there to do something which they believe is good. They're seeking answers, they're seeking certainty, they're seeking direction, and many converts are going.

I think converts from the West are going particularly because a convert by definition is seeking for some sort of broader truth, and they're being offered it in spades, as it were, by the narrative coming out of Syria-Iraq.

I think those are many of the push factors, and then you have the pull factors as well, in that the [Islamic State](#) in particular, as it calls itself—not very much Islamic about it and relatively little state about it—they are welcoming people from everywhere, from anywhere. No questions asked: "Don't worry about your background. We can understand that you may be in trouble and so on. You just come, you take part, you believe, and then you are one of us."

Also, the Islamic State's narrative is looking forward. It's projecting into a much brighter world. "Forget about what's been going on over the last centuries. This is all new, and you will be part of it. You will be making it happen." Enormously attractive to people.

Clearly Syria and Iraq, not just for us here—for all the guys who are gathering now in New York for the General Assembly—but for the world generally, Iraq-Syria is the issue of the moment, and particularly for these people. It's not [Ebola](#). It's not, unfortunately, climate. It's what's happening in Iraq-Syria.

There's this offer, this bright new world, which is combined with a feeling that there's a sense of great brotherhood, of integration, of, "We're all chums together," type of thing. "We're all doing something, we're all highly motivated, and there are going to be lots of people like me. Whatever I'm like, there'll be people like me." This idea that it's a noble cause, that it's your duty, your obligation, even—the Islamic State, in its projection of course, is quite frightening, quite powerful. It's also quite attractive to some people, and empowering. If you associate yourself with something powerful, you are yourself empowered.

Also the Islamic State is not just looking for six-foot-four guys who are burly and strong and good with a Kalashnikov. They're looking for everybody. It is a state in the making, and so in fact [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#), the so-called caliph, has said very directly in some of his addresses, "It doesn't matter whether you can fight or not. We want people. We want people to help us run this state." This means people who can clean the streets, people who can keep the lights working, people who can bake bread, anybody who can come. Of course, they're enormously short of people with skills because many of them have gone away, quite understandably.

So, the welcome mat is very much out there, the door is open. So much so that if you get into this bubble of narrative put out by the Islamic State, you start to wonder, "Why am I not going? What are the reasons I have for not being there? Particularly because many of my friends may have gone there already, I should go there, I should do this, I can be a hero. If I die, I get to paradise, that sounds pretty good too."

It's very easy, of course, to get there, and I just want to quote from something that the CTC at West Point (Combating Terrorism Center) pointed out. They collected some stories of people who'd been to Syria. This is a Saudi: He says, "My trip to the Levant"—they call it Sham, the greater Syria—"was the fastest one I had done in my life. I departed my city in Saudi Arabia at 10:30 in the evening and reached Idlib at six o'clock the following evening."

It's amazingly easy, then. There's a guy who says, "Okay, I'm going to go today," and he's there by the next night. Of course, if you're coming from the West, it's easier still. You just get down to the Turkish border and you can get across.

Here we have the Islamic State offering people a chance to participate in a moment of history. There's a lot of end-of-times narrative, which is quite complicated in this Islamic projection of what happens in Syria and Dabiq in particular. I think a lot of people feel that what is going to happen there will lead to some conflagration, some major, major confrontation between the powers of good and the powers of evil and that they need to take part in that. There's going to be a fantastic battle.

Maybe they've been watching too many movies, but that is a very, very common belief, and we shouldn't discount that, either. It may sound ridiculous but it's quite important, I think. Of course, the position of the Levant in the Islamic religion as well, is much more significant than Khorosan in Afghanistan was in the past.

I'll just quote you another story that somebody said about the importance of going. Even though it was very easy for that Saudi guy it's not easy for everybody, but you should still persevere. This story is told a lot as an example of how you should try and overcome every difficulty to be able to arrive there.

He says, "A European brother who was poor and had to work in a restaurant to collect the price of his first train ticket—he managed to do that, and that took him from his city to the next station in his trip, where he worked again and so on in each city he stopped at so as to be able to afford to travel on, and eventually get to the destination. It took him six months to cross the border and activate his dream," as they say.

He took six months. This other guy had taken 24 hours or less. This guy took six months by constant perseverance, and then of course ended up joining the Islamic State.

I think that the reasons why people go are relatively straightforward. We can all sort of understand them, even though we're not queuing up ourselves. The thing is, when you get there, you may not have very much idea about what you're joining. You may not even know what group you're going to join. There, the Islamic State, in particular, but [Jabhat al-Nusra](#) as well, the al-Qaeda affiliate, have set themselves up on the Turkish border so that they are particularly well-placed to be the ones who welcome the new arrival and say, "Okay, this is what you need to do. You need to join us."

I want to quote you another story here, because it's a very good illustration of what can happen.

This guy from Bahrain decides to go, so he got himself to Turkey. His family was very much opposed to it, but he managed to get his passport and get to Turkey. He got to Istanbul and he knew he had to get to Istanbul and then get a flight down to the south.

He saw a guy sitting in the departure lounge in Istanbul for this internal flight down south who had a long beard, reading the [Quran](#) and stuff and he thought, "Oh, probably a guy going to Syria as well." He talked to him and sure enough the guy said, "Yes, I'm going to go and join the [Free Syrian Army](#)." He said, "Okay, well, let's go together," and they decided to go together because this guy had a contact down in Reyhanlı or somewhere like that near the border.

When they got there, they met up with their bloke and they got into a house which was run by the Free Syrian Army as a clinic. Because it was being run as a clinic, various other fighters were coming in for treatment. While they were there, an Islamic State guy came in to visit one of his comrades who'd been wounded and said, "If you're coming over, I'll help you join. So why don't you come with us?"

He brought them over the border and left them, in fact, with some other oppositionists, but then came

back to them and said, "You know if you're joining the Free Syrian Army, that's okay, but they have problems and they're not doing a really good job. We're doing a much better job. These are the differences between us," and so on. And he suggested they join the Islamic State.

They didn't really understand what this guy was talking about, the differences between the groups and so on, but they thought, "Well, okay, sounds reasonable. We'll go along with you. You seem to be willing to take us on and we want to get active."

They were immediately taken, of course, into this Islamic State training house where most of the instruction is about religion. So they're taught very, very quickly about what they call the true belief. That's a very Salafist/*takfiri* belief. Once in there, of course, then they're given training with the arms and stuff like that, and then they're embraced by the organization and would find it hard to get away. That can happen quite easily, even to people whose destination is already fixed.

The other thing is that, how do people know about it apart from reading the newspapers or looking at the Internet? Well, there's a huge amount of Twitter exchange about the war and the use of Twitter by people who are fighting there is really much more about messaging than it is about, "Oh, here's a link to an interesting article," or "Why don't you watch this video?" There is a certain amount of that, but there's an awful lot of messaging.

So once you get into that Twitter bubble you start exchanging messages. "So what's it really like? What did you do? Did you see that? You took that picture, where is that?" There's that interaction which happens very quickly which makes you feel engaged. They say, "Well, come on. You're asking about it, why don't you come and see for yourself?"

These Twitter bubbles, once they're in, are really very hard to leave. Well, not hard to leave, of course—you can leave them—but they're very hard for other influences to penetrate. They're shut out, so you don't get a lot of depth of understanding.

Of course, on the depth of understanding, there's almost no interest and certainly very, very little knowledge in the actual issues of why there's a civil war in Syria. Those are not the issues which concern these guys. Syria just happens to be a place where they can take part in this action, where they can begin to create this pure state.

Poor Syrians—the Syrian locals generally do not welcome the foreign fighters. They just bring trouble on them. But too bad for them. This is where the Islamic State is establishing itself. And the Islamic State is an international project. It's not a Syrian project, it's not an Iraqi project. It is an international project, although if you're interested, the Islamic State is essentially Iraqi and much of its leadership very [Baathist](#).

So people go. They have no knowledge of the local issues. They don't have very much knowledge of what they're getting into and so on—the differences between groups and all that—and their relatively soft belief in values and principles allows that their beliefs are edited and consolidated by people who are pushing them towards this Salafist/*takfiri* school.

But you might say, "Well, how is that? How can people not have knowledge of what al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are doing in Syria? It's everywhere." In fact there's an interesting [NBC poll](#) you probably all saw that 94 percent of Americans were aware of the [Foley/Sotloff executions](#). That's way, way higher than the number of Americans who've been aware of any other news event since NBC started doing these polls. The power of terrorism, the visual images are enormously effective and so on. So why wouldn't these guys know what they were getting into?

Well, there's a lot of discounting that: "Oh, well, they're a particular circumstance. You don't really understand, it's a bigger picture," this sort of thing, and "You don't have to get involved, you can sort of isolate yourself from that. You can do all this good stuff." The compartmentalization is quite possible for people going, and they don't really worry too much before they arrive that they're going to get involved in some horrific activities.

What happens when they do get involved in those activities? Well, I think some of them are repulsed by them and probably try to leave, and some of them gradually acclimatize, if you like, or accustom themselves to them and take part. But of course, not all of the Islamic State is cutting throats the whole time. A lot of it is fighting frontlines, trying to build administration stuff, and now clearing up after the air strikes.

I want to talk a little bit now about, what is the threat? Well, the prime threat, of course, is to the stability of the Middle East. That's the prime threat. The threat of the foreign fighters is primarily to countries in the Middle East and North Africa from where they come.

These guys, and there are thousands of them, are going to go home. They may say, "No, no, no, we're going to stay with the State and that's our future." They're not. They're in their early 20s or so. They're going to go home. Things change, attitudes change, and so on, and things on the ground will change. So what sort of impact are they going to have when they get home?

I think that the narrative now is all about the national security of states rather than the international security, as events in the Middle East. That is a problem, because the coalition, of course, is coming together as a collection of national interests rather than the projection of international interest.

I think that it's a difficulty because those states that are worried about the threat from foreign fighters are not actually very good at explaining what that threat is. If you take, for example, the European countries, or even the United States—"Oh yes, foreign fighters could come back and they could cause a problem." Yes, that's a given.

But how do you assess that threat? Is it real? How are you going to affect that threat by bombing people or by doing any other action? If you don't really understand what the threat is, it's very hard to protect yourself against it, and the threat, it's too early—although [David Cameron](#) the other day said there'd been six plots in Europe associated with foreign fighters in Iraq-Syria—in fact, well, I can only count five, not six, or he knows much more than I do, of course. But those five are, I would say, are peripherally connected, not directly connected. They're certainly not organized by the Islamic State.

I'm not saying the Islamic State wouldn't do that, and certainly al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra, would do that. But let's keep it in perspective. Because the objectives of terrorism, of course, are to terrorize, and not to kill you. They're to terrorize you and to change policy as a result, and that seems to be happening.

The more that the international community is drawn into this fight, the more the international community becomes part of the enemy; not necessarily part of the solution, but part of the problem.

I'm going to try and bring out one or two more points now. I think that the phenomenon of the Islamic State is extremely interesting as being a fundamental challenge to our international order. We all grew up in school with maps on the wall with nicely colored countries with clear boundaries and all this sort of thing. That is not actually really how the world works, and the Islamic State I think is demonstrating that by showing how weak these borders are; not just between Iraq and Syria, but possibly in the greater Levant area as well, and beyond.

Also another point I'd just like to make briefly is that terrorism has an interesting elasticity from being a terrorist group to being an insurgent group to being a quasi-state. But it can go back again, it can expand, it can contract. If you knock it back from the state, it then goes back to being to an insurgency, and if you knock it back, it goes to a terrorist group. In a way, I'm not advocating that we allow the Islamic State to thrive, but you've got to expect that the more you attack it, the more it becomes a terrorist group rather than a quasi-state, which is something we all need to consider in the 13 years that we've been tackling this problem so directly since the attacks here in 2001.

So, we have to deal with the reality, and we have to deal with it in proper proportion, I think, and we have to deal with it with a huge sensitivity to the narrative consequences. Not for us, not for policymakers, but for people who might be tempted to go and fight in Syria-Iraq.

Thanks a lot.

## Questions

**QUESTION:** James Starkman.

Turkey has been the great facilitator of the rise of the Islamic State, selling oil at a discount on the world market, smuggling and so forth. President [Erdoğan](#), who seeks to extend his tenure to the anniversary of [Atatürk](#), is likely to be around for some time.

This morning's news indicated that Turkey had at least a token contribution to the new bombing campaign that started this morning. Where do you see that going? Do you think there could be a turn in Turkey's policy toward the rise of ISIS?

**RICHARD BARRETT:** Turkey is an absolutely critical country, of course, for the future of the region, in many ways. There are probably at least a thousand Turks fighting in Syria-Iraq, and they will be radicalized. If they weren't radicalized when they arrived, they'll be becoming more radicalized, and of course aware of the demonstration in Istanbul not so very long ago by people supporting the Islamic State. Indeed Erdoğan has tapped into that huge, deep Anatolian traditionalism which is quite fundamentalist in many ways, and that's his power base.

But there are other things to remember about Erdoğan. Erdoğan invested a huge amount into the "zero problems with our neighbors" policy that Turkey had when he came into government, and he now has problems with almost all his neighbors. He takes things very personally, Erdoğan, as I'm sure you're aware, and Assad's refusal to talk to him after March 2011 when the demonstrations began in Daraa in Syria was a slight that he couldn't accept. He's absolutely determined that he should do whatever he can to get rid of Assad. It's deep within him, and the Islamic State is the most effective group out there who could get rid of Assad.

The Islamic State's main objective is not to get rid of Assad, it's to create a state. But nonetheless, Assad is in the way.

So, Turkey has lots of reasons to focus more on the survival of the Assad regime than on the survival of the Islamic State. People may disagree with this, but that's what I believe.

Also, the Turks have to skirt this line. Geographically they're there. They can't move, they can't pick up and go home like the United States or Great Britain could. They are there, and they have to balance their concerns about the blowback into Turkey from radical Islam and extreme Islam with their regional objectives, which is using the Islamic State as a sort of proxy. They also have all the

**Muslim Brotherhood** and anti-Muslim Brotherhood issues which put them at odds with Saudi Arabia and so on.

Now, you talk about the facilitation of the Islamic State. Yes, they have been allowing people to go across the border, but much less so now. They do control that a bit.

Yes, oil does go across the border. But if you are selling a barrel of oil at \$25 a barrel, you're going to find plenty of buyers, and lots of those buyers are going to launder it through and sell it into Turkey.

There are other pipelines and stuff to go through, but essentially if you've got the product and there's a market there, the two will come together. I think Turkey benefits from that cheap oil, but I don't think to the extent that they would really screw up their policy with their NATO partners and so on.

I think that Turkey, also with their hostages in Mosul, was a little bit ambivalent about getting out too far in front. Now, the hostages are freed, so that removes that. Maybe they are allowing Incirlik Air Base to be used in the air strikes. It's quite possible. But I think there are many reasons why they wanted to keep a relatively low profile and make both sides think they were helping them.

I think that it'd be wrong to say Turkey is going to get in the way of the coalition or going to be so supportive of the Islamic State that it's going to make it a problem dealing with the Islamic State. But I think we have to accept that they have lots of different currents going on there which they need to take into account domestically.

**QUESTION:** Don Simmons is my name.

You mentioned the importance of alienation and lack of economic opportunity in inducing young men to come to the Islamic State. If there were more broadly based, healthy economic development in countries such as Saudi Arabia, would you expect that would significantly weaken the pull of Islamic State?

**RICHARD BARRETT:** I don't think it's an economic development issue so much as a social development issue. I think economically a lot of these people aren't hurting too badly. They're just like everybody else.

If poverty were connected with terrorism, we would see a huge amount more terrorism than we do at the moment. I think people who are really struggling are spending all their time struggling. They're not necessarily going off. I think it's really much more an issue of social development, of understanding a little bit better how the world works and what your contribution could be.

If you have a relatively unsophisticated understanding of that, I think that something like the Islamic State can be awfully attractive. It can say, "All your problems, whether they're individual, personal to you, relationships and things like that; whether they're to your community, whether they're to your country; all these things are connected, and there's one simple answer: You come over to us and it's sorted. And any problems you might have in the afterlife too, for that matter."

**QUESTION:** Rita Hauser.

There's a serious attempt in Europe, Britain in particular, but France and Germany and they're following up here to bar people from leaving here to go, assuming you can identify them. Do you think that makes any sense? Would it be successful? Here, of course, it will raise major issues of civil liberties and all of that.

**RICHARD BARRETT:** I think that's a very good question, and of course there's a Security Council [resolution](#) coming up on Wednesday that's going to be adopted over [Chapter VII](#), so it's mandatory on all states. The resolution essentially demands states introduce laws to criminalize the travel of anybody, not just their citizens, but anybody from their territories. So transit countries would also have to stop people who are going to fight with a terrorist group abroad.

Well, what is a terrorist group? We don't have a definition of that. What does it mean to go and fight abroad? Here, in the United States, you have this concept of material support. But that's not one that exists in the European countries.

If you go and you help in distribution of bread or something in Raqqa, in the United States you'd be providing material support, probably. But not necessarily, it wouldn't be illegal I think in other countries, even though the Islamic State is a banned organization.

What are we doing by trying to prevent people from traveling? We're not really stopping their desire—if they have that desire to join the Islamic State—and they will try and find a workaround. You're certainly not dissuading them by ripping up their passport or slapping them in irons because they want to travel.

It's not a de-radicalizing action. It's rather a radicalizing action. "I thought the state was not particularly my friend. Now, I see it's my enemy trying to prevent me from doing something I want to do, and why? What is wrong with this? You are against Assad. You support the Free Syrian Army. I'm essentially going to achieve the same objective." There's all that confusion.

But beyond that I think it comes very, very close to allowing states to really infringe on the fundamental liberty of the freedom to travel. It's saying to states, "Based on your presumption of his intention, you can take action to limit his rights."

I don't get that. Where's the process? Where's the due process there? Where's the appeal? How could you appeal against that? A resolution tells a state to introduce a law like that, it has to introduce a law like that. I'm sure this will come up to the European Court, for example, for individual nationals, and it will be a right mess because there aren't guidelines with the resolution. There aren't enforcement measures. So it's open to interpretation.

The problem with any Chapter VII resolution that is open to interpretation is that it can be abused just as easily as it can be ignored.

**JOANNE MYERS:** What if it's somebody who wants to re-enter, who has been there and comes back, and the country prevents them from entering?

**RICHARD BARRETT:** Let's talk about that. That's a good question. If someone's gone, you should prevent them coming back. Well, I don't think that any country has a right to prevent its citizens from entering its territory. I think that's enshrined in international law. It's fundamental to international law, so there's a problem right there. You say, "Okay, well, if he's dual citizen, we'll take away his citizenship from us." Who's first? "I want to take away his citizenship." "No, I'm going to take away his citizenship!" He has to be left with some citizenship, so that seems to me to be a slightly strange problem.

But also I do object to this refusal to allow people back. Because if you want to address this very strong narrative about the attractions of the Islamic State, you need to get people who can say, "I was there, and it's not like that. I can tell you how bad it is."

Those are the people with the credibility. Those are the people who can project a message and they know the audience, they know their buttons to press, if you like. So, you're denying yourself a fundamental tool of value in combating the narrative by preventing people coming back just on the basis of their being there rather than on the basis of why they want to come back, which is the key question.

**QUESTION:** Susan Gitelson.

Thank you for being so incredibly insightful for us. But the question is what can be done, let's say, in the Levant? We have lived through, and they have lived through the [Arab Spring](#), through all this disillusionment of the young, and then the re-imposition of authoritarian states in many cases. Is there anything that we can do to encourage the governments in these areas to change, improve their policies for young so they'll be less disaffected?

**RICHARD BARRETT:** I think there were two very good points there. First, if I take the second one about encouraging the governments. This is a regional problem, in my view. It's international to a certain extent because stability there is so important to us.

But it's a problem that demands a regional solution. For so long as you get Saudi Arabia and Iran slugging it out, whether it's in Syria, whether it's in Iraq, whether it's in [Yemen](#), you're going to have these problems continue.

There has to be some understanding in the region that the threats that they're dealing with in front of their noses which they think are so very, very real are actually going to be overtaken by the threats that they're creating at the same time slightly further away.

I think that all our efforts should be devoted to trying to get the region to work together to try and sort it out rather than coming in and saving them for a couple of years, and then actually not necessarily getting rid of the problem.

As to the Arab Spring, well, I think the Arab Spring was enormously successful. I think it was a fantastic thing. Because although it didn't lead to very many immediate results and changes of government and so on, it awoke understanding and interest in the public which now you can't get rid of. It's there. Before, Middle East public opinion—what's that? Who the hell cares? Nobody gave any time at all to public opinion in these states.

You can't ignore it now, it's out there, and because of the opportunity for people to communicate so much more easily, it's real. Sure, it dies down, and sure, al-Qaeda will come and say, "We told you so. If you're not violent you don't achieve anything." But it'll come up, and each time it'll go like that in my opinion.

So, I think that this, even Iraq-Syria, I think, is a great thing to have people thinking more pertinently, more directly about the future of their countries. "What is our identity now as a Syrian? How do we identify ourselves as an Arab? How do we identify ourselves as a Muslim? Are we just saying that we're in this sect? Are we just saying that we follow this faith? Are we saying we are in this geographical area? What does it mean to be Syrian now after three years of civil war? Our heritage is being destroyed, our children are not being educated. What are they learning? They're learning that people shoot other people."

Those issues, "Yada, yada, yada, that's nothing. We need to get rid of the Islamic State." But these are the fundamental issues that are going to come back in another 15 years or so.

**QUESTION:** Arlette Laurent.

The [secretary-general](#) of the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) last week in New York was saying that the Islamic State was neither Islamic nor a state. But what can you tell us about the structure of this Islamic State?

**RICHARD BARRETT:** It's quite interesting that, fundamentally, the Islamic State is an Iraqi movement and its origins are in [Iraq](#) with [Abu Musab al-Zarqawi](#) and all that in 2003, 2004, and it built up and then really got beaten really, really badly by the United States and Iraqi forces so that by 2010, it was barely surviving.

But there were two groups of opposition, of course, in Iraq at that time. There was the Salafist, *takfiri*-type opposition to [Maliki](#), to the Shiite government. But there was also the Baathists who were of course pretty pissed that they had lost all that they had had under [Saddam](#). It was a Baathist initiative essentially to come and join with the Islamic State, or the [Islamic State in Iraq](#) as it then was.

So that those networks, that discipline, that party structure that the Baathists were so good at, which all came and fed up to the glorification of the leader—forget about Pan-Arabism and secularism and all that stuff; that's what Baathism became—to bring that in and mix it with that very strong ideological, motivational factor of the Salafist *takfiris* and then make an organization that could grow. . . Even so, it might not have grown particularly without the Syrian Civil War. But the Syrian Civil War just was such a boost. Now, suddenly hundreds of new recruits are coming in, people are beginning to believe in it, that this could be really something new.

So, the structure is, you have the caliph. You have fundamentally two deputies, one more senior than the other. The more senior one is in charge of all the Iraqi operations. The next one is in charge of all the Syrian operations. Under that you have various councils—advisory council, religious council, security council—meaning security, finding informers, and so on, and assassinating rivals—media, finance, and so on. That's quite structured. Then you have provincial governors, and they have their own structures. So, it's very hierarchical. It all feeds up to the caliph who has the final say.

I think when the Baathists got Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to take over, they were probably thinking, "We need a figure who's not Baathist, who's got some religious credentials and can talk the talk, but, you know, not necessarily someone who's going to lead himself, someone we can influence."

Now, it seems to me, particularly with the death of this guy [Haji Bakr](#) who engineered all this, that Abu Bakr has really achieved this sort of leadership. He's turned out to be a rather ruthless and effective leader, which of course helps the State in many ways as well.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. William Verdone.

I see an irony here and I'd like your insight. In removing ISIS from Syria, can that strengthen Assad's regime?

**RICHARD BARRETT:** I think the great problem with the international strategy at the moment is that we're very focused on what we want to get rid of but we haven't really got anything to come in and take its place. There are maybe 6 million people living under the Islamic State. There's a huge amount of territory from north of Aleppo to south of Baghdad—that's a long way—who have some interaction with the Islamic State, all the people in that area.

If you just destroy them or make them into a defensive and even more aggressive group, without anyone coming in to backfill, what have you achieved? In a way, it doesn't strengthen the Free Syrian Army or the rebel cause in Syria particularly, because they're weak. Their weaknesses are not as a result of the Islamic State. Their weaknesses are a result of many other factors.

If you just focus on the Islamic State maybe Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda group, which in the next most efficient group, manages to build up a bit. Beyond that, the [Islamic Front](#) may recover a little bit from what it is, so they may do better. But the rebels, the what we call the moderate rebels—"moderate rebel" has no meaning, in my opinion—they are not necessarily going to be empowered.

So, Assad is fine. Assad's policy is "Great. You sort out those guys, because they're threatening me. I'll hang onto the main part, Aleppo, Damascus, and to the west of that, the Alawite heartland and the heartland of Syria as well. Then when you've weakened them completely I'll go and mop up and recover that territory."

That's how I would see it too, particularly if I was sitting in Damascus. I'll make noises about sovereignty and stuff like that but I'm not going to cry over air strikes on Raqqa, quite frankly.

**QUESTION:** Richard Valcourt, *International Journal of Intelligence*.

The [director of national intelligence](#) has indicated that there's still another group that they're even more worried about now. Can you explain a little bit more about that one?

**RICHARD BARRETT:** This [Khorasan Group](#), as they call it—and it is true that from 2011 even, al-Qaeda leadership was sending people into Syria to support [Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani](#), the founder of Jabhat al-Nusra. That, of course, is important to remember, that Jabhat al-Nusra came out of the Islamic State in Iraq as it then was. They were a group of nine people who were allowed to go and establish themselves in Syria.

But [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#) was very, very keen to try and boost that and to make it into a really good and effective al-Qaeda body, because he understood before Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi did, how important Syria would be for the global movement.

So several people went over from Afghanistan, Pakistan, from Yemen as well. One of the fears was that the al-Qaeda, because it has this global objective, really a terrorist objective, would be using Syria to recruit people who could go off and be terrorists elsewhere, and they would give them training and all this sort of thing, particularly in bomb-making because [al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula](#) has the bomb-making expertise, which they were going to pass on to these new recruits.

This idea came about that there's this Khorasan Group, that the group essentially of outsiders coming in to support Jabhat al-Nusra.

It's hard to say. I mean clearly [Jim Clapper](#) has some reason for believing that this is a real and fundamental threat. But al-Qaeda is very much on the back foot at the moment and I can see that it really needs to do something, show its strength, show its capability still.

But whether it's been able to recruit people—I see Jabhat al-Nusra really has gone back to attacking Assad now, so wait to see. But you can understand the concept and you can understand his concern. But what the substance is, I'm afraid I don't know. He will know very much better than me.

**QUESTION:** Allen Young.

Why isn't Russia more involved in the fight against the Islamic State? First of all they are allies of Assad. More importantly, they have the [Chechnya and Dagestan](#) and all of that where they had to be concerned about Islamic radicalism. Why aren't they as much involved in the fight against the Islamic State as we are?

**RICHARD BARRETT:** I think that the Russian alliance with Assad is very important for Russia. Apart from Assad they don't really have any foothold in the Middle East, and so that's something that they would want to preserve, I think. And I think they want to preserve it while they try and rearrange the pieces on the board. Now, they're trying to do deals with Iran and so on and get in there.

Beyond that, I think that Russia has very strong principles about interference, sovereignty, and all that sort of thing. They think of [Ukraine](#), no doubt, and they wouldn't like, necessarily, to see international action in Ukraine, and also other parts of the world, perhaps.

They have that very, very strong legalistic approach to sovereignty, that, "Sure, you can attack the Islamic State in Syria, but you have to do it with the Syrians."

I think that the other thing is that for the Chechens, yes, there's probably between 1,500 and 2,000 Chechens there, most of them, probably, with the Islamic State, some of them with Jabhat al-Nusra. For the Russians, that's where they need to be. They certainly didn't want them in Chechnya. If they're being killed there, that's great. If more of them are going there, that's great, too.

In a way, they're quite in favor of taking action against the Islamic State. They're not particularly in favor, either, of American leadership, because of course now they want to come out and say, "We're still a superpower. We're still on your level and you need to take us into account." So American leadership they object to, and also the idea that all this is still somehow directed against Assad.

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much. My name is Barbara Jones. I'm the Irish Consul General in New York.

I wanted to ask you to reflect on your observation that this is a regional threat, and to ask you, from your expert vantage point, is there actually any infrastructure in the region to allow for a security and political dialogue around the threat within these states? I would think that is a crucial framework to have to begin the conversation about how to tackle the threat, and to be clear and realistic, as you have suggested.

**RICHARD BARRETT:** There are contacts now at an increasingly higher level between Saudi Arabia and Iran. That's a vital first step, I think. The overtures were made by Iran. By the Saudi calculation, Iran has got much more to lose than anybody else right now, because they did so well from the American invasion that they can only go down, if you like.

The Saudis were saying, "No. Let them suffer. Why should we help them?" Now, I think the Saudis have come much closer. We heard that there was a [meeting](#) between the [Saudi](#) and [Iranian](#) foreign ministers, here in New York, earlier this week. That's encouraging

There are different currents in Saudi Arabia. You had the Prince [Bandar](#) current, which was very much in favor of arming anybody who would attack Assad, because Assad was essentially an Iranian ally, a Shiite, this whole business of sectarianism.

There aren't very many Shiites, so far as the Saudis are concerned, although about 70 percent of Iraq is Shiite, of course. Still, they're saying, "Overall, yes, let's do whatever we can to promote Sunni against Shia."

Then you have the Prince [Mohammed bin Nayef](#), the interior minister in Saudi Arabia, saying, "Hang on a minute. This is all going to blow back and affect us. We really don't want to see our own community more radicalized as a result of this."

I think that that argument was solved very much in favor of Mohammed bin Nayef, with the [king](#) issuing a decree in February of this year saying it was illegal, completely against the interests of the state, to go and fight in Syria.

If you were a member of the army, it was even more illegal, so that showed that he was very concerned that a lot of army people were going over there. They managed to get about 300 Saudis back, put them through their rehabilitation program, but they have a big, big problem still.

Just, I think, a week ago or 10 days ago, there were another 80 people or so arrested for planning terrorist attacks. We don't know what that means, of course, but nonetheless, it's a way of keeping Saudi population aware that there's a big threat there.

The Saudis are seeing more threat, existential threat even, to their regime because, of course, King Abdullah . . . this whole succession thing is racing towards them, and they really haven't sorted out how to move that down to the next generation. Big, big issue for internal stability, in my view.

That's coming towards them. At the same time, the Iranians are saying, "We're a bit uncomfortable with what's happening." It's coming together, but you still have this Muslim Brotherhood/anti-Muslim Brotherhood thing.

Qatar, I see, has got a bit closer back with the Saudis, but I don't know. We still need countries to stand up and take a lead.

Egypt would be great, but [Sisi](#), in my opinion, is just not up to that task. He's not going to offer the leadership, and there's nobody else in the Middle East right now who can offer that leadership. That's why I was hoping that Erdoğan might be able to take on the role, but it is unlikely because he's not an Arab anyway and so on. Frameworks, I'm not sure, but I mean, there are signs that they could be growing perhaps.

**QUESTION:** John Richardson.

My question is about Islam, the religious and political interfaces in Islam. By analogy, in Europe, there was [Reformation](#), [Counter-Reformation](#), lots of burning at stakes, beheadings and everything, but eventually people got tired of it and you had this notion of tolerance and freedom of speech.

When I look at the Middle East, my eyes glaze. I know on top you have Shia Iran, and Sunni Saudi, but then you've got the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia, you've got the Salafist, you've got the Sufist, you've got all these things, you've the whole concept of Jihad.

Where do we act, in terms of their religion and their politics, getting together to be a bit more tolerant to each other?

**RICHARD BARRETT:** It's a difficult issue because it's not really about religion. This is about power. Religion is obviously hijacked, it's brought in to it to justify, legitimize, explain, if you like, why

particular people should have power rather than other people should have power.

Religion is a football, kicked around between the groups, with everybody claiming to have the true understanding of it, but who knows what the true understanding of it is, quite frankly.

Religion seems to fulfill a fundamental need in an awful lot of people, but because it's so personal, that even in Islam where it's all written down—and it should be quite clear what the Quran says—there's a huge amount of interpretation.

I agree with you, the whole process of political change leads to these horrific things being done in the name of religion, but essentially, they lead to social and political development, which then manages to allow religion to take its proper place as a personal issue rather than a public issue.

It's enormously complicating when religion gets involved, I agree.

**QUESTION:** I'm David Hunt.

Mr. Barrett, you've studied the Middle East for many, many years. The United States has now started a coalition of interested countries in the area, but how effective is this going to be? Where will ISIS be in three to five years? What's your long-term view of how effective these actions are going to be, and where we'll be in, say, five years?

**RICHARD BARRETT:** Let's say ISIS is two things. It's the political movement, and then it's the idea behind it. One of the very few things that Ayman al-Zawahiri has ever said that was worth listening to, was, "For so long as our enemies attack al-Qaeda as an organization rather than as an idea, they will fail. The strength of al-Qaeda is as an idea."

On that ideological underpinning of the Islamic State, you are not going to defeat it by an international coalition, by Security Council resolutions, and stuff like that. You are only going to defeat it from within the community itself. This is unacceptable. We go back to that point in the social development.

As for the presence of the Islamic State, yes, you could probably beat it up pretty well, but you are not going to destroy it. It comes back to the earlier question, there's nothing in there to take its place. It could be worse what happens next, or it could be better what happens next.

Until there's something else to take its place, there's actually not, in my view, very much point in building a coalition, which is just fixed on destroying something rather than building something.

If we can't build this regional framework and regional understanding of how the world would be reorganized in that area, then the Islamic State or something that's similar to it, is going to be around for a very long time.

**JOANNE MYERS:** Thank you for this very balanced and thoughtful discussion. It was really terrific.

## Audio

How is ISIS structured? Why are young Muslims from many countries going to Syria to join it? What is the nature and extent of the threat and how can it be overcome? Counterintelligence expert Richard Barrett (formerly with MI5, MI6, and the UN) gives an informative, balanced, and perceptive report. Don't miss it.

## Video Clips

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