

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror

Public Affairs, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

Michael Weiss, Joanne J. Myers

Transcript

Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: I'm Joanne Myers, director of Public Affairs programs, and I thank you all for joining us this evening.

Our speaker is Michael Weiss, who, along with his co-author [Hassan Hassan](#) has written what is without a doubt the definitive book on **ISIS**. As anyone will tell you, Michael is the go-to person for those seeking to understand the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. His book *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* will be available for you to purchase at the end of the program today.

If you have been following the news—and I know that you have—you have seen how ISIS has progressed from a nearly defeated Iraqi insurgent group into a jihadi army of international volunteers, who behead Western hostages in slick videos and have shocked the world by conquering massive territories in both [Iraq](#) and [Syria](#), while destroying any impediments in their path.

The combination of the group's brutality, its territorial ambitions, its military effectiveness, and its apocalyptic ideology set it apart from anything that has come before. But what is ISIS seeking? Why are they such a threat to the world? How do they maintain control? How do they acquire funding? And why does our guest believe that this army of terror will be with us indefinitely?

These are just some of the topics Michael and I will be covering in the next 30 minutes or so, before we give you the opportunity to ask any questions that haven't been addressed during our conversation.

Discussion

JOANNE MYERS: Let's begin. In the introduction to your book, you write that "this book is personal." So before we delve into questions about the origins of ISIS, would you tell us what you meant by that?

MICHAEL WEISS: Sure. For my co-author [Hassan Hassan](#)—he is a Syrian national and comes from a town called Abu Kamal in the eastern province of Dayr az Zawr. This is a town that is now controlled by **ISIS**. He has lived in Abu Dhabi for a long time. He is now in London. He was watching in slow motion as his country was basically [burned to the ground and destroyed](#), first by the [Assad regime](#), which had brutally and bloodily repressed what had started as a [peaceful protest movement](#) and then became an armed insurgency, led mostly by civilians looking to protect their families, but also then by defectors from his own military; and then, increasingly over time, and for reasons I will get into in a minute, an uprising that became radicalized and turned, first, into an Islamist insurgency, or one that is dominated by Islamist insurgents, and then into a jihadist insurgency.

For me, it is personal because I was working at a British think tank in 2011 and we were covering all the nations that were then undergoing the cataclysm or convulsion, I think rather wrongly, described as "the [Arab Spring](#)." The Syria file literally just fell into my lap one day. I was told, "Here, this is the one

we haven't done. You need to cover it." And truth be told, I didn't know much about Syria. I am a journalist by training, so I started to investigate.

I got to know some of the early activists and opposition figures on the ground. I don't think it is any secret or I am covering myself in any indignity to say that I befriended a lot of them. What I found was that there was, by and large, a kind of cohesion to what they wanted.

Economic reform, first, to start. The [Assad clan](#) for 40 years has run mostly like a mafia, not all that dissimilar to the [Putin system](#) that is now [backing it](#) both diplomatically and militarily. The original protest was not a revolution, was not a call of "we seek the toppling of the regime;" it was a call for greater enfranchisement and liberalization.

They wanted democracy. They wanted to have a pro-Western orientation. The countries they modeled themselves on: France, the United States; and then, in the secondary or tertiary categories, other Middle Eastern nations such as Tunisia and Turkey. In every city in Syria—and we did a sample survey of the opposition, from Damascus to Daraa to Hama to Homs—it was similar. I found that rather remarkable.

I went to Syria in 2012—this was during Ramadan, so the summer of 2012—embedded with the [Free Syrian Army](#) [FSA], which had just then liberated not all of Aleppo City, but a quarter of Aleppo known as Bab al-Hadid. I spent about 36 hours in country. I stayed in a town known as al-Bab, which is about an hour's drive north of Aleppo City, spent the night there, then drove into Aleppo and surveyed what was then—the thing that struck me the most was that the garbage had piled up so high, they were almost like barricades. The entire infrastructure just blasted out by aerial bombardment and artillery shelling.

The people I stayed with in al-Bab, the family, in fact, in whose home I was domiciled for 24 hours or so, were since driven out seven months later by ISIS. Al-Bab is now one of two towns in the suburbs of Aleppo that is exclusively controlled by ISIS and has suffered some of the worst atrocities, both by the army of terror and by the Assad regime.

When I got there, they had just liberated al-Bab from Assad. What the regime would do was it would shell things like the hospital and any kind of local civil services, such that people couldn't be treated for wounds, they couldn't receive food, oil supplies. Food, petrol were running very, very low.

What I was struck by was the indomitable optimism. A lot of the people there spoke English. They had had training as engineers or studied because they wanted to eventually come to the West.

At night, even though there were still armed rebels—what was then the Free Syrian Army—a lot of these guys put down their Kalashnikovs and did something remarkable, at least to my untrained Western eyes. They donned white gloves, they picked up garbage bags and brooms, and started to clean up all the rubble that was left by the regime's bombardment.

I talked to people as young as 14 years old to well into their 30s. Remember, this protest movement, this rebellion, was led by the young. The average age, I think, was probably in the early 20s to maybe mid-20s, the local coordination committees.

I said to them, "What are you doing? You have become the 'Free Syrian Street Cleaners' all of a sudden."

They said, "That's right. That's because for 40 years, to do anything in this country, you had to ask permission or you had to pay a bribe. You were living under the yoke of this totalitarian state. This is the first time that we have felt like a free people."

I know plenty of people in the West, you tell this to them, and now they have seen this slow-motion collapse of Syria through the lens of jihad and they think, "Well, of course they would say that to a Western journalist." But no. This was sincere.

They were all telling me about some of the other rebel groups and the brigandry and corruption that was taking place. They were giving evidence against interests. You couldn't help but be stirred by this. It was a very powerful image, even divorced from some of the retrospective romanticism.

As I said, seven months later, al-Bab is now completely lorded over by ISIS. The family I stayed with—the rebel whose house I was in, Abu Ali, was driven out with his family, so that safe house now belongs to some ISIS thug, who is using it for god knows what purposes.

So for me it is personal because, as a journalist, I saw the degeneration and the decline of what had started as, I think, a very noble cause and now has become this awful calamity. It doesn't even do to describe it as a civil war any longer; there are so many sideshow conflicts, there are so many civil wars taking place. I am happy to get into some of that, either in the introductory remarks or in the Q&A.

JOANNE MYERS: I think also that many readers might be surprised to discover that you begin by talking about a militant Jordanian, [Abu Musab al-Zarqawi](#), who [fought](#) in Afghanistan, joined [al-Qaeda](#) there, and later moved into Iraq. Why did you begin with him?

MICHAEL WEISS: He is the founder of the feast. One of the reasons we wrote this book—I was doing a lot of media in June of 2014, when ISIS [stormed into Mosul](#) and sacked the provincial capital in Iraq. The question that was always presented to me was, where did they come from? I thought this was the most bizarre question I had ever heard. It was as if the [Viet Cong](#) had taken over a third of Southeast Asian in 1985 and CNN and the [Reagan administration](#) were scratching their heads and saying, "Where did they come from?" They just have a different name. This was [al-Qaeda in Iraq \[AQI\]](#). We had been [at war with them](#) for well over a decade.

Zarqawi, as you mentioned, was a Jordanian jihadist of very humble origins. He was from a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan, although he himself is not a Palestinian refugee, and, sort of by an accident of history, ended up founding the most formidable terror group known to man. Everything about him was banal and anticlimactic. He was not a great thinker. He was not a great theoretician of jihad. He was kind of an idiot, semi-literate even in Arabic.

But through happenstance, he went over to Afghanistan twice. The first time it was to join the [Afghan-Soviet war](#) on the side of the [mujahideen](#). The problem was he arrived too late and the Soviets were already withdrawing. So he kind of bopped around Pakistan and Afghanistan, with pretenses of being a journalist, to try to chronicle the exploits of the great Afghan Arabs, or the mujahideen.

His mentor, a guy called [al-Maqdisi](#), who was the great scholar and the great theoretician of jihad, sort of nurtured and cultivated him when they returned to Jordan together. They founded a small, rather uneventful, bathetic terror group, which was completely infiltrated by the Jordanian intelligence services, and were thrown into prison together.

In jail, Zarqawi actually came into his own. He was charismatic. You know, prisons in the Middle East, whether they are run by Arab dictatorships, or indeed by the United States, are essentially academies for jihadism. What ends up happening is the natural leadership, the charismatic [Hitler](#) or [Stalin](#) types, rise to the top. They become wranglers of men. People flock to them. They look to them to break up disputes or to solve any kinds of crises or conflicts. It was here that Zarqawi began to hone some of his skills.

He was let out of prison in 1999 as part of a general amnesty that coincided with the ascension of the

current monarch of Jordan. He went back to Afghanistan, met Osama bin Laden. The interesting thing about this meeting—it was very fateful, 1999 in Kandahar—they didn't like each other at all. Bin Laden thought Zarqawi was an unlettered thug. Zarqawi thought bin Laden was effeminate.

The difference is, without getting too much into the arcana of jihad, by this point bin Laden was what was known as a far enemy ideologue. He had migrated from the viewpoint of "let us overthrow the kleptocratic and defunct Arab dictatorships, which do not embody the true Islam" and go after the really big fish, which is the United States.

Zarqawi was still of the belief—he was what they call a near enemy ideologue. He said, "No, no, no. The problem starts at home." Because he was from Jordan, his beef was with the Hashemite monarchy. He wanted to overthrow the Jordanian government.

The other problem with Zarqawi was that he was a genocidal maniac who wanted to go after the Shia. Why did this upset bin Laden? Again, this is not to present Osama bin Laden as a moderate or a *mensch* (honorable person) of any kind, but there are these differences and they need to be understood.

Bin Laden's mother was a Syrian Alawite. The Alawite clan, which is what the Assads belong to, is a schismatic sect of Shia Islam. With Zarqawi declaring all-out war against the Shia, he was upsetting Osama—going after his mama, essentially.

Nonetheless, they struck a pragmatic accord, because he saw in Zarqawi—rather, his lieutenant saw in Zarqawi—potential. He gave Zarqawi a start-up loan, about \$200,000, to build a military training base in Afghanistan. By all accounts, the base was actually very successful. He was grooming these militants.

When the United States invaded Afghanistan after 9/11 and everybody fled, including Zarqawi, who migrated first into—it is a little bit unclear; we know he spent some time in Iran; he probably spent time in Syria. Osama bin Laden did something very smart. He predicted that the United States was not going to stop in Afghanistan. These guys pay very close attention to the policy discussions in Western media. He knew that a war was coming, and it was going to happen in Iraq. So what he did was he issued an instruction that the socialist infidels, meaning the Saddam Hussein Ba'ath regime, should take up common cause with the mujahideen, with the Islamic fundamentalist fighters, or vice versa.

Zarqawi at this point was not really a paid-up member of al-Qaeda. Like I say, he had run a training camp on Osama's dime. But these relationships were not so hierarchical. It was what I call "Rolodex pragmatism." He knew the right guy, he got some money, but he had not declared buy-out to bin Laden. He had not pledged allegiance to him yet. Nonetheless, Zarqawi made his way into Iraq.

When we invaded, we did some very fateful and stupid things. You all remember de-Ba'athification. The first three tiers of the Ba'ath Party were prohibited from public service. So these people were rendered unemployed with the stroke of a pen.

The second big thing we did was we disbanded the Iraqi military. This meant that, even if you were a low-level private or a corporal in Saddam's army and you were drawing a salary, even if you had abandoned your tank or your armored personnel carrier and ran away in the face of 100,000 invading American soldiers, you were also rendered unemployed.

Why did this matter? Iraq was, under Saddam, a minority-rule state. The Sunnis are the minority; the Shia are the majority. The Sunnis, as a result of decades of Ba'ath rule, lived very high on the hog. It was a patronage economy—the same system, by the way, in reverse that Bashar al-Assad has put in place in Syria for 40 years, or his family has put in place for close to 40 years. So the Sunnis became

immediately disenfranchised. They felt like all the privileges—admittedly, privileges of essentially an apartheid state—just went up in smoke with the advancing U.S. columns.

Zarqawi was very clever. He exploited this sociological crisis in Iraq. He started blowing things up.

The two most spectacular attacks he launched with or debuted with were against the [United Nations installation in Baghdad](#) and also the [Jordanian embassy](#), because he hadn't forgotten what his true fight was against, again the kingdom of Jordan.

The [Bush administration](#) at this time was putting out a lot of disinformation: "This is a foreign fighter-led insurgency." Actually it wasn't. The insurgency was led by native Iraqis, a lot of them Sunnis, as I mentioned, who had come from Saddam's regime in some form or another, even at the very low level, but the tip of the spear, if you like, was led by the Zarqawists. Zarqawi had his own organization at this time, known as [Monotheism and Jihad](#).

Well, he did so well that eventually bin Laden finally decided, "You know what? You should link up with al-Qaeda." Zarqawi said, "Great, because that will mean an uninterrupted flow of finances coming from Waziristan," or wherever bin Laden had set up shop—Abottabad, Pakistan, I guess. The two of them forged this marriage of convenience. But this is important. It was a marriage of convenience, not a marriage of two minds or ideologies. As I mentioned, they never got on.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq became the face of the anti-American and anti-Iraqi insurgency, even though, as I mentioned, the rank-and-file were, in the main, native Iraqis.

There was a guy we interviewed in the book called Colonel [Derek Harvey](#). He worked at the Defense Intelligence Agency. When [Dick Cheney](#) was saying things like "last throes of the insurgency," [Rumsfeld](#) was saying "regime dead-enders" or "mujahideen from abroad," Harvey was saying, "No, actually what has happened is that the remnants from the Ba'ath Party have linked up with the Islamic fundamentalists, and the Islamic fundamentalists are exploiting all of the accoutrements of the former Ba'ath."

Saddam's henchmen ran car-smuggling rings. They had built all kinds of apparatus for guerilla warfare. Why? Because Saddam was always worried and always fearful of a revolution from within. He knew it was going to be led by Islamists or Salafis.

We tend to think of him as secular. To an extent, that is true. But it is also true that that after the [First Gulf War](#), he inaugurated something called the [Islamic faith campaign](#), which was an attempt to marry [Salafi](#) ideology with Ba'athism. So Saddam was actually creating members of his own apparatus, his own regime, who actually had flickerings—more than flickerings in some respects—of radical Islamic thinking. So they became the natural partners or allies with AQI. Eventually, the United States figures out how to kill these guys, or how to really push them back. It was as much a political phenomenon as it was a military one.

We think of [the surge](#) as just the injection of 35,000, 50,000 new boots on the ground. No. What the surge was—al-Qaeda in Iraq was clever. They would embed in the Sunni communities of Iraq, mainly the center and western portions of the country. These are areas that are governed by tribes, tribes that have been around for hundreds of years and cut pragmatic relationships with whomever was in charge. If it was Saddam, it was Saddam. If it was AQI, it was AQI.

The surge was about solidifying political gains that had erupted quite spontaneously, and without really U.S. pressure, because AQI, as much as it is a terrorist organization, is also a mafia and is also a very criminal—it is like the Mexican drug cartels. They come in and they are extortionate. They say to you, "You cut a deal with us. We'll protect you, either from the United States military or the Iraqi security

forces or the Shia militias that are attacking you. But you have to pay a price. All of the gray market economy or black market economy that you have been benefiting from for all these hundreds of years we now control, so you have to pay taxes to us." This is the way they behaved—in many respects, the way Saddam had behaved.

They were so brutal—raping women, assassinating sheikhs, again interrupting this revenue stream that had profited the tribes—that the tribes eventually turned against them. And when they turned against them, they looked to the United States military, not because they liked what we were doing—they saw us as foreign occupiers—but, again, it was a new pragmatic relationship. "Oh, when you come in and you boot out the terrorists, you don't conduct pogroms, you don't do ethnic cleansing, you don't rape our women, you don't assassinate our tribal leadership. So we will cut a deal with you and we will work with you to expunge these guys from our territory. But in exchange, you have to work with us and guarantee our political rights and make sure that we are properly represented in Iraq."

The difficulty was, when we knocked out Saddam and we declared "this is now a democracy," because the Shia had been and are the majority in Iraq, and because they had been so persecuted by Saddam, they took over the country. They took over all the institutions of government. They ran ministries.

In many respects, a lot of these groups on the ground—militias, death squads—had been sponsored by Iran. Remember, the [Iran-Iraq War](#) carried on for years. Even during Saddam's time, there were people in his own country who were essentially spies or proxies of the [Revolutionary Guard Corps of Iran](#).

Some of these ministries, including the Health Ministry, the Finance Ministry, the Transportation Ministry, which ran the international airport in Baghdad—the people who actually ran these things were terrorists from the other side, Shia militias, that the United States was also at war with.

We forget. We think we only fought al-Qaeda in Iraq. The Joint Special Operations Command [JSOC] had two task forces. One was to go after al-Qaeda; the other was to go after what they called Iranian influence. The United States was at war with Iran in Iraq for as much time as it was against al-Qaeda.

Zarqawi, who was, again, leading al-Qaeda in Iraq, was very [Machiavellian](#) and very clever. He knew that because he was running a minority franchise—the Sunnis could never take Baghdad by just sheer force of numbers, by themselves as native Iraqis—the way to foment a real crisis was to go after the Shia. He hated the Shia. He had a pathological bloodlust against them. But he thought, "If we go after the Shia, the Shia radicals will further radicalize, the Shia will then attack Sunnis, and Sunnis will be driven into our fold. This is how we will take over the country. Then Sunnis around the world will see this as a campaign not against the United States, but against Sunni Islam, and they will pour in from all corners of the globe, just as they did in Afghanistan, and that's how we will reclaim the throne, if you like. It is as much a project of Sunni restoration as it is holy war."

The U.S. military finally figured out that you can't defeat Sunni jihadism without Sunnis on your side. That was the [Anbar Awakening](#), which started initially at the local level in 2005-2006.

The problem was, when we [withdrew](#) from Iraq in 2011, it wasn't just a military withdrawal; it was a political disengagement. All of the tribesmen that had partnered with us, at great expense—a lot of them were killed—had bull's eyes on their backs and were now marked for retaliation by the [Maliki](#) government, which ran the country. We backed Maliki in 2010, even though he didn't actually win the [election](#) and violated the [Iraqi constitution](#), which we helped write, in order to retain power.

This guy was seen by Sunnis as Saddam as a Shia, essentially. He was doing pogroms. He was sending in the Iraqi military, including his own loyalist militias, to suppress Sunni peaceful protest movements and revolts. He decreed his own [vice president](#) and [finance minister](#) to be terrorists. The

vice president ended up fleeing to Turkey. This was all the mess that essentially created the sociological conditions under which ISIS was able to come back.

So the top line here is, the Sunnis who turned against AQI then welcomed them back in, because they no longer had that pragmatic relationship with the United States, they said, "Hey, we would rather work with you than partner with al-Maliki."

The Syria crisis erupts in 2011. Throughout the entire history of the Iraq War, who was the guy financing or underwriting or patronizing jihadists flowing into Iraq more than anybody else in the Middle East? Bashar al-Assad. This guy was underwriting al-Qaeda in Iraq up until 2009.

In fact, what would happen is, if you were a jihadist in Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, you would fly into Damascus international airport, and there was actually a bus terminal that would ferry you into Eastern Syria, where you would be domiciled by an al-Qaeda, an Iraq cleric who was working cheek by jowl with Assad's Mukhabarat, or intelligence services, and then would send you across the border into Iraq to target the Americans or the Iraqis or whomever.

Actually, the bus depot in Damascus was located guess where? Right across the street from the U.S. embassy.

This was happening all under the watch of the U.S. government. [David Petraeus](#), [Ryan Crocker](#), who was then U.S. ambassador to Iraq, were prevailing upon Assad, "Please, shut your borders. Stop this relationship with jihadism."

In 2009, according to a former Iraqi intelligence officer—one of the good guys—he had a guy in Zabadani, a town north of Damascus, wearing a wire, a spy. The spy sat in on a meeting that consisted of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Saddam's Ba'ath Party agents, and the Syrian security services, planning terrorist attacks, not even against the Americans, but against Iraqi state institutions. Again, the Health Ministry, the Finance Ministry, all of these weeks later, were blown up in these spectacular attacks, vehicle-borne IEDs [improvised electronic devices] that left huge craters in the ground.

This is important to remember because the Syrian revolution, or the protest movement, begins in 2011. From day one, Assad's line is this: "I am fighting not protesters or democrats; I am fighting al-Qaeda. It is al-Qaeda sponsored by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel"—truly a coalition of the willing if ever there were one, right?

The problem was, how do you win the media narrative when you are shooting children? I mean 12-year-old girls sniped through the eye by the security forces. How do you win the media narrative when members of your own military—remember, the Syrian military at the officer level is mostly Alawites, because they benefited from this patronage system, they were promoted above the Sunnis.

But the Sunni conscripts were the ones who were actually carrying the packs and the guns, and going out and doing the fighting. They would be sent into territories and told, "You're going to fight terrorists," except when they got there, there weren't terrorists. There were people marching in the streets with banners and saying, "We want the downfall of the regime."

So the military refused to open fire. The Mukhabarat came in and said, "If you don't open fire on them, we're going to open fire on you." The first clashes and defections occurred actually in Idlib province in 2011 because the military refused to shoot peaceful, unarmed protesters.

Assad starts losing the war of ideas. So what does he do? In 2011, he declares a general amnesty for what he pretends are political prisoners. In fact, a lot of the jihadis who he had once sent over into Iraq and then arrested when they came back to Syria were let out of prison.

The three top Islamist brigades, or rebel units, on the ground up until recently—the commanders of all three were former inmates of Sednaya prison in Damascus. They were let out in May of 2011 by Bashar al-Assad.

Why did he do this? Well, it doesn't take a rocket scientist or a Middle East expert to figure it out. He knew that as long as this campaign, this war of attrition, was going on—actually, a very brutal state suppression of a protest movement—people would radicalize; people would turn to the guys with the long black beards promising them, not even heaven on earth or virgins in the afterlife, but just saying to them, "This guy came and he raped your daughter, or he threw your son into a prison and electrocuted his genitals. We are going to go blow him up." And the people would say, "Have at it."

We think of ISIS as the most barbaric and brutal organization in the Middle East. Let me tell you, anything you have seen, anything you have read in newspapers about what they have done, Assad has done that and worse. Burning people alive—Assad's militias, Assad's *shabiha*—these are mercenary gangs responsible for some of the worst massacres—they lock whole Sunni families in their homes and set the house on fire and let the families cook alive. You are just not seeing it on CNN.

JOANNE MYERS: You have so much information that it is hard to stop you, but I just have to ask you a couple questions before we open it up to questions from our audience.

Do you find it strange then today that Assad talks about the need to get rid of ISIS when in fact he facilitated it?

MICHAEL WEISS: As of the end of 2014, a British intelligence firm called [Jane's Defence](#), which tracks military dynamics, did a whole study, and they found that about 10 percent of all the aerial sorties that the Assad air force had waged in Syria were against ISIS. Where was the other 90 percent? Against the Free Syrian Army and against civilians, bombing bakeries and schools and hospitals.

The top line of that study, by the way, was that Assad and ISIS had been ignoring each other on the battlefield. The very jihadists that this guy had suborned and patronized and facilitated basically cut a deal with the regime: "We are not going to attack you because we would rather conquer territory in your hinterland, areas that are mostly depopulated, not in your immediate control, not that you care about, because it is not where, for instance, you are running weapons to [Hezbollah](#) in Lebanon, it is not the coastal corridor from whence your family came and that you want to have access to the sea."

He cut a deal with them. He said, "Take it over," knowing that the West would look at this conflict the way that we look at it today: one of a brutal but secular dictator versus the terrorists. This is the biggest myth coming out of Syria, and it is a myth that has been cooked up in Damascus by a very clever propaganda apparatus—also cooked up, by the way, in Moscow and Tehran.

JOANNE MYERS: If [Obama](#) would come to you and ask for your advice about how to defeat ISIS, what would you say?

MICHAEL WEISS: This is something his own administration has said. When [John Kerry](#) gets up and says "Assad is a magnet for jihad," he is not talking out of his hat. First of all, he is well aware of this relationship that I have mentioned.

In 2008, by the way, we went into Syria to kill a border emir called [Abu Ghadiyah](#). A JSOC team went into Syria and killed this guy because he was sending jihadists into Iraq. Assad denied that the guy was there and then told [David Miliband](#), the former British foreign secretary, "Well, even if he was here, you had no right to come into my country."

Assad, from the very beginning, as I mentioned—because this was a sophisticated propaganda campaign, his agents, including Hezbollah from next-door Lebanon, would come in, and the way they would torture people was they would make them commit sacrilege. If you are a pious Sunni living in Idlib or in Daraa, these guys would come at you, they would beat you on camera, they would kick you, they would pull at your beard, they would hit you with shoes, which in the Arab world is very offensive, and then they would make you say, "There is no god but Bashar."

We saw recently in the United States a [brutal killing](#) where Christians were asked, "Do you believe in god?" And if they stood up and said, "Yes, we do," they were shot.

In the Muslim world—we fetishize Muslims, but it is the same thing, making them commit blasphemy on camera. They would film these atrocities, leak the footage to YouTube or wherever, knowing what? That radical clerics from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan to Qatar would watch this and it would madden them like wine. This would become a jihad; this would become a holy war.

[Yusuf al-Qaradawi](#), a cleric who has his own talk show on Al Jazeera, declared a jihad against Assad. We think that Assad is terrified of this, that he opposes this. No. No, he wanted jihadism in Syria. He wants it to this very day. The Russians are in there now [bombing on his behalf](#). Who are they bombing? Not ISIS; the FSA, including the guys the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] has given anti-tank missiles to, because the goal from the beginning was to destroy a credible moderate, or even not so moderate, opposition: "Anybody who poses a direct threat to my regime, eliminate them." Then it's *faute de mieux* (for want of a better alternative)—actually, it's *après moi, le déluge*. It's "me or ISIS, me or the terrorists. That is your choice. You pick."

Let me tell you, I do a lot of debates; I talk to a lot of people. I can tell the guys who have spent enough time in Damascus getting their talking points from the Mukhabarat, because this is exactly what they say. It is what the Russians are saying. They say, "Well, which would you prefer, the head-loppers, the human organ-munchers, or Assad? At least Assad is a gentleman. He drinks wine and he listens to [Right Said Fred](#) off iTunes." This is actually the way that they think.

JOANNE MYERS: Do you think the United States has a moral obligation to go in and to protect those who cannot protect themselves from these people?

MICHAEL WEISS: The geopolitics as they have been over the last 10 years—I mentioned to you that part of the AQI and Ba'ath campaign was one of Sunni restorationism. It was bad enough in Iraq, the way we conducted the war, going in in the first place, because it drove the Sunni *ummah* (community) to this point of crisis where they would allow these radicals in.

But when Syria kicked off and Assad basically poured fuel on that flame? We are at a more dangerous period in the Middle East now than we were right before 9/11.

I covered this conflict for five years. In the beginning I went to the Turkish refugee camps and I would talk to the refugees. They said, "Obama backs Assad because of Israel. Israel wants the Golan Heights, and Assad has kept it quiet for the last several decades."

Then it was, "Obama backs Assad because he wants a deal with Iran for the nuclear program."

Now it is, "Obama backs Assad because Obama prefers the Shia and is in league with Iran and Russia to murder, dispossess, and disenfranchise the Sunnis."

It is a conspiracy theory, to a point. Do you know how dangerous this is, to hear this from people in the region?

Right now bombs are being dropped on guys that we have partnered with. They already had a bull's

eye on their backs because they were seen as Western hirelings or collaborators with the United States. We gave them minimal weaponry to go fight the regime. The CIA program was about fighting the regime. The Pentagon train-and-equip program, which is now defunct, was about fighting ISIS.

So they went in marked men. Russia drops bombs on them. The president of the United States gets up and says, "Well, there's nothing we can do. This is Russia, Iran, and Assad at war with the majority of the Syrian people. We are only at war with ISIS."

If you are Sunni, sitting in the cafés of Cairo or the [shisha bars](#) of Antakya, what you are hearing there is, basically, Obama hates the Sunnis. What that means is that the radicalization process that began in 2003 in Iraq and that accelerated greatly in 2011 in Syria is now spinning—spinning like the centrifuges we apparently dismantled in Iran. This is very, very dangerous.

It means that even people who do not start out as Salafi jihadis or not ideologues—one of the things we tried to do in the book is show that when ISIS conquers territory—we talk about numbers. How many people are in ISIS? Thirty thousand, 100,000, whatever. What this discounts is that when ISIS comes into your town and lords it over you, you become a member of ISIS; you become part of the vast apparatus.

The way everyone sitting here is an American—you pay taxes; you are part of the military-industrial complex—the same thing. ISIS charges taxes. They make you pledge allegiance. They make you cut a deal with them. A lot of people are going over to ISIS now because they have no other means of survival. The infrastructure the coalition or Assad has bombed has robbed them of a living. They can't make money. ISIS pays them a salary for whatever services. If they are sick, if they have cancer, ISIS will send them to Turkey to go to a hospital and get chemotherapy, all *gratis* (free), as long as you keep the deal: you work for us, you don't look to do another awakening, you don't look to rise up against us.

We forgot everything we learned from Iraq. They forgot nothing. They learned from all their mistakes.

I am sure you want to ask about this, but I am preempting it a little bit. The most terrifying and powerful aspect of their propaganda is—what they fear the most is another awakening. They say, "As long as we can keep the Sunnis down and divided and against each other and looking to us for loyalty, we will never be booted out of Iraq again."

If you look at their videos, they go around dressed as Iraqi Security Force personnel to all of the homes of the Anbar Awakening councils, the guys who partnered with us and then also with the Iraqi government—Sunnis. They knock on the door. The sheikh thinks it is somebody from the Iraqi government. He opens the door—it's like a twisted episode of that series [Cops](#), where you follow the policemen in and they arrest the criminals or whatever—and then they make the sheikh recant, confess his sins on camera: "Yes, I'm a collaborator. Yes, I partnered with the great Nusayri-Safavid-Jewish conspiracy against the Sunnis." Then they make the sheikh and his sons dig a mass grave. Then they behead the sheikh and his sons on camera and they dump the bodies in the grave.

This image is counterposed with an image of what? Mass repentance rallies in mosques in ISIS-ruled Iraq. The rallies are all of the other sheikhs they haven't killed coming, handing over their Kalashnikovs, tearing up their Iraqi government ID cards, and pledging undying obedience and loyalty to [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#), the caliph of ISIS.

The message, the narration, behind this scene is: "If you come to us and beg forgiveness, all will be forgiven, no questions asked. We don't care if you fought us in 2006. If you don't come to us and beg forgiveness, we will come to you, and then it's too late." If you are a Sunni living in Iraq and there are not 150,000 American troops on the ground with which you can partner, guess what you choose?

You wonder why they [take Ramadi](#) and they hold Mosul? They had two provincial capitals as of June 2014, and in the last year we have been hearing, "Oh, we're beating them. We're winning. We're winning." How did they get another provincial capital? Now they have three. This is very simple arithmetic. My five-month-old daughter can do it. This does not mean that we are winning this war.

JOANNE MYERS: Michael, you have so much information, this should be part one and we need to invite you back for part two. But I know that the audience has so many questions. I just want to stop you right here.

This man is an encyclopedia. Anything you want to ask, please feel free to do so.

Questions

QUESTION: Don Simmons is my name.

ISIS has had a number of sources of income. I can think of taxing the economic activity of people they control; contributions from fellow travelers, like Saudis mostly, I guess; the sale of oil, sale of antiquities, kidnap; and other fruits of crimes. Which of those are the most important streams of income now? Secondly, are there any practical hopes for action by our government or others to stanch the flow of money? Finally, if the money flow is stanching, would the fighters go home? Would it do good?

MICHAEL WEISS: I would say that as of now, the biggest and most significant source of revenue is taxation. This is one of the reasons they want to reign, they want to govern. If you can't pay them in cash, you pay them in kind. If you are a farmer and you have 100 head of sheep, ISIS will say, "Give us 10."

Revenue in terms of oil is important. Guess who one of the biggest oil-buyers from ISIS is? Bashar al-Assad. They control all the oil refineries in Eastern Syria, and in order to keep the lights on in the presidential palace in Damascus, he is buying oil from them.

There is an electric station in Aleppo. I learned this, actually, from an ISIS defector I spoke to two weeks ago. They have a deal. The regime personnel actually work the electric station that is controlled by ISIS. So ISIS employs regime agents, electricians. The split is something like 58-42 percent: 58 goes to ISIS; 42 percent of electricity goes to the regime.

Again, things are not so black and white in the Middle East. The relationship between terror organization and state is a very profound one.

In terms of antiquities, everything that they do has some Islamic theological justification. You have all seen the [video footage](#) of them smashing up the priceless works of art from the Mosul Museum. What you don't see is that they actually sell a lot of this stuff on the black market. They justify it as follows: If the art is pre-Islamic idolatrous or worshipped art—so any kind of pre-Islamic god, polytheistic gods—that's it, it has to be smashed.

I actually think that if it is too damn big to carry out of the country and sell on the black market, it gets the hammer. If they can put it in their pocket and run it into Turkey or Iraqi Kurdistan or Jordan or wherever, they are going to sell it. There is a very pragmatic component to what they do.

In fact, we can talk about the apocalyptic vision, the eschatology, in their propaganda. There is a very good [study](#) that came out today by the [Quilliam Foundation](#). It looked at a month of all their propaganda. They found that the thing that they are emphasizing the most right now is governance. If you have been living under attritional warfare in both Iraq and Syria (for in Syria, five years, in Iraq

since 2003) just to have the lights on for six hours a day, to have the garbage collected, the bakeries baking bread—these things are important. People will succumb. They will submit themselves to you in exchange for that.

They do human trafficking. We went to war with them because they beheaded American citizens on camera—or we went back to war with them. What you didn't see is that the European Union countries have given hundreds of millions of dollars in ransom to ISIS because their journalists, their aid workers, have all been kidnapped.

I was in Paris last week. I did an event with a French journalist who was hostage to ISIS. The official story in Paris is, "Of course we did not pay them any ransom." But the unofficial story is, yes, you did.

Now we get into the more gruesome and barbarous state of affairs, which is [James Foley](#), the first American journalist that they beheaded on camera. They have attempted to auction his remains on the black market for \$1 million. By hook or by crook they will make money—smuggling, selling weapons, any kind of contraband, all of these things.

I want to talk about this more. I mentioned the marriage between al-Qaeda and the Ba'ath Party. The people in the upper echelons of ISIS today, with the exception of Baghdadi himself, every military philosopher or real agent who is running the show, guess where they all came from? Saddam's military, Saddam's intelligence services. The guy responsible for taking over Syria for ISIS, or one-third of Syria, [Haji Bakr](#)—he was Saddam's military intelligence agent—had a schematic for how to take over Syria.

A German colleague of mine, [Christoph Reuter](#), said this reminded him of the [Stasi](#). These guys have state training. This is not unconventional or guerilla warfare. This is conventional. They know how to do intelligence, counterintelligence, and, yes, make money, and make it through gray and black economics.

I hope that answers the question.

QUESTION: Sondra Stein.

I think the reason that the West and the United States sees ISIS as the greater danger isn't the measure of brutality, but that ISIS is expansionary, going into Afghanistan, Jordan, Libya, sending terrorists to Europe and probably the United States. I think that is the determinant.

I am asking the same question Joanne did. If you were president tomorrow, exactly what should we do going forward, now that you have this quagmire?

MICHAEL WEISS: It starts with winning back—I hate this cliché because it is a U.S. military cliché—it starts with winning back hearts and minds, and Sunni hearts and minds. [Samantha Power](#) can tweet to her heart's content about war crimes and the ICC [International Criminal Court] and barrel bombs. Nobody cares.

Unless you are willing to back it up with fire and steel—we are hearing talks now by presidential candidates about a no-fly zone. I was making this argument in 2012, before there was really ISIS on the ground, when Assad started using attack helicopters and fighter jets. The [red line](#) that sort of became a [deal](#) with Mr. Putin was seen as such a betrayal and it squandered so much goodwill and credibility. Now again, squandering our assets, CIA assets, to Russian Sukhoi fighter jets is also another way to screw up what is already a pretty screwed-up state of affairs.

The [International Crisis Group](#), which is an organization that never advocates any kind of military solution to a conflict—it is all about diplomacy and conflict resolution—came out with a [report](#) two

weeks ago saying, actually, you could do a no-fly zone in southern Syria, where, believe it or not—we say moderate rebels—rebels that we can actually work with and, to some extent, trust more than in the north have been fighting the regime pretty well. They are controlled by the CIA and the Jordanian General Intelligence Directorate, and controlled very tightly.

At least you would then convince a segment of the population that the United States is on their side. Right now, as I mentioned earlier, the conspiracy theory is, this isn't a war on Islam; this is a war on Sunni Islam, and America has chosen the side of the Shia, headed by Iran and backed now by Russia, and of course Assad.

Again, this is facts on the ground. We are very bad at doing facts on the ground. Russia does facts on the ground really well. They are doing it now.

So there has to be some kind of military engagement with forces other than just ISIS. Until and unless that happens, while Assad sits pretty in the presidential palace, these guys are not going anywhere. Again, the coalition that has been built that claims to be at war with ISIS and to do the job better than we, they are not actually fighting ISIS at all.

QUESTION: Nina Rosenwald, Gatestone Institute.

You mentioned the Free Syrian Army. [Trump](#) said we don't know who is in it. [McCain](#) wanted us to help them. Maybe they were all killed last week. Do we know? What is the story there? Is there anything salvageable?

MICHAEL WEISS: Yes. After five years, the CIA cultivating these guys, the Pentagon trying to figure out who is who, if we don't know who they are, then, frankly, you should stop paying your taxes, because this government is completely defunct.

Of course we know who they are. We were giving U.S.-manufactured anti-tank missiles to rebel groups that have been bombed around the clock by Russia. You don't give that stuff to groups that you think are going to go off and join al-Qaeda. In fact, these groups were fighting ISIS.

Today, as I speak, there is a group called Suqor al-Jabal, which has been bombed by the Russian Air Force. On the ground, who is attacking them? ISIS. Russia has actually served now, giving close air support to ISIS against an FSA group that has been battling ISIS.

In 2014—one of the reasons we know Russia hasn't actually been going after ISIS—all of Idlib province is ISIS-free. Now, let's be fair. The groups that expelled ISIS from Idlib included [Jabhat al-Nusra](#), the al-Qaeda franchise in Syria, which actually broke away from ISIS in 2014, earlier that year, but also other rebel groups. A lot of them are Islamists, a lot of them are fanatics that I don't want anything to do with, but plenty of them weren't. They still exist.

I have been to Southern Turkey. There is an entire refugee camp devoted to defectors from the Syrian Arab army, at least 10,000 to 20,000 guys sitting on their asses, playing cards, talking on Skype all day long, and waiting for someone to pick up the phone and say, "Hey, you are our actual Free Army."

[De Gaulle](#) had less to go on—he was busy shopping for tailored suits in the streets of London. That was a completely fabricated resistance.

These guys were serving Assad's military. They are secular. They drink wine. They have mistresses. They do all the things that we say that we would prefer to see running the country. Where are they? What has happened to them? I am sure a lot of them have gone off. They are living in Berlin or in London or whatever.

But I refuse to buy this argument that there was not human capital there. There was, and I am sure there is to this day. If we could de-radicalize or get tribes that yesterday were bombarding U.S. military checkpoints in Ramadi or someplace in Al Anbar, if we could get them to partner with the [101st Airborne](#), we could get anybody in Syria to partner.

Petraeus made a lot of controversy. He came out in, actually, my publication, *The Daily Beast*, and he said, "You know, you can even peel away people from Jabhat al-Nusra," the al-Qaeda franchise, "to work with the Americans." He actually knows what he is talking about, because we kinda-sorta did the same thing in Iraq.

That's what I said. We have forgotten everything we learned. One thing that came out of that conflict was actual epistemology of the way the region or that particular country worked, especially the Sunni areas. Now it's all, "We don't know who's who. They are all pharmacists and doctors and dentists," as Obama said. It is just excuse-making.

QUESTION: My name is Francesca Turchiano.

Based on what you said, I am thinking something different from what I thought until this moment. This is what I am asking you. It is not, as I thought, religious fervor that is driving a lot of this; it is absolute greed, fanaticism, and other unimaginable forces of evil, as opposed to genuine religious fervor.

MICHAEL WEISS: Well, no. I would say it is both.

My hypothesis is as follows. Are the guys in the military intelligence Shura councils—the guys behind Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, running the show, essentially—are they true-blue fanatics who believe that the end of time is coming and will happen in a town called Dabiq in the Aleppo suburbs? Are they doing all this, are they all in, to usher in the Armageddon? Or maybe, because as of 2003 they were smoking Cohiba cigars and drinking whiskey and keeping their wife and seven mistresses and 25 children in clover, maybe they are kind of pining for the good old days, and this is the best way to facilitate that. If they can take Damascus and Baghdad—or hell, not even Damascus; Aleppo and Baghdad—and tap into the reservoirs of ancient Islamic glory going back to the Abbasid Caliphate, why not?

The rank-and-file who join ISIS—if you turn on the U.S. media, you see a 14-year-old boy from Tunisia, he can't tell you one *hadith*—he hasn't read the *Koran*, much less memorized it. He is going off to do holy war. "Why do you want to do holy war?" "To fight the infidels and the apostate."

These guys—when they come over, ISIS uses them as cannon fodder. All of the foreign fighters, most of them, unless they have real military training, such as one of the field commanders in Aleppo, [al-Shishani](#), who is actually an ethnic Chechnyan who served in the Georgian military, trained by the United States, [fought Russia in 2008](#), became a jihadi—he went over and is considered to be a good tactician.

If you are some 18-year-old from Saudi Arabia, guess what? You are a suicide bomber. Those guys have the absolute religious fervor.

Now, the question is—and this is something [Will McCants](#), who has written a very good [book](#) on the ISIS apocalypse asks—does Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi really believe in the end of days? Based on what I know and people I have talked to, he absolutely does. But the interesting about him is he got into an Islamic university in Samarra—actually, the Saddam Hussein Islamic University in Samarra, but that is my point—he got into it because his family had Ba'ath Party connections. So he, too, is a beneficiary, a profiteer of the *ancien régime*.

Again, you cannot take this in isolation. Anyone who tries to approach ISIS from a strictly

counterterrorism point of view—frankly, I have no time for you. You are better off, frankly, if you really want to understand this group, read some of the anti-Stalinist literature of the 20th century. Why did intellectuals, why did people who knew nothing about [Marxism](#) or [Leninism](#), give themselves over to the Soviet Union? Because maybe they had lived through brutal war and occupation, they had been ruled by the Nazis beforehand, or they didn't trust their own defunct and kleptocratic local government. The Soviets came in and promised them bread and roses, and made the trains run on time. Yes, if you acted up, you got sent to the gulag. But so what?

Don't discount the power of just stability, law and order, even if it is at the point of a gun and it is sanguinary. And that is what ISIS is.

Again, the mafia rules. A lot of people I talked to who know more about ISIS, unintentionally—they studied the cartels in Mexico or they studied Italian crime families. It is; it's run like that. You have *capos de regime*. They farm out their turf and their sort of territorial battles to other, lower rank-and-file members.

But I am not discounting the religious fervor. That is a huge portion of it, especially in their recruitment efforts. But again, is it a vehicle for something more? And yes, there is a political project here.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. My name is John O'Connor. I run the investment firm J. H. Whitney. Michael, *salaam alaikum*.

MICHAEL WEISS: *Alaikum assalaam*.

QUESTIONER: I haven't read your book, which I look forward to, but in hearing your comments tonight, I think it is a really important dialogue that you have surfaced. I have actually spent a fair amount of time in each and every one of these lovely places. I worked with [al-Haqqani Network](#)—for/against/with/around—and I use them as a useful model for ISIS. It is. As we came to say over there, if you are the only guy with a Hilux pickup and an AK-47 in the village, you are kind of in charge, and your god should be everyone's god.

I am struggling to find any existential threat to the United States from ISIS or Assad. What I worry about is not recognizing the Russian legitimate interests in Syria and Tartus, which we have been completely ignorant of since inception. They have an 80 percent baked arc through Russia, Iran, to Syria, which is kind of an endgame. So I find the notion of any U.S. involvement in Syria laughable, in the face of having spent \$2 trillion, \$26 billion training people. I have been on the ground. I have worked the training. It doesn't work. It is very expensive.

Are these existential threats?

MICHAEL WEISS: ISIS, in their propaganda—the black flag of ISIS, which is actually not even the black flag of ISIS; it is just a black flag with a *shahada* on it—encompasses the globe. If they had their druthers, would they be in Washington? Well, if you listen to the first Baghdadi *sermon*, "Eventually, if Allah wills it, we will be in Rome."

Do they think they are capable of achieving that? No. Are they an existential threat to the United States? No. Unless they get a million-man army equipped with nuclear weapons and we just kind of capitulate to them, no.

But that is not what they want to do and that is not what they need to do. Are they looking to commit terrorist attacks in the United States? Absolutely. Are they going to do it by sending sleepers? Maybe, but more likely it is just the lone wolf, radicalized people sitting in their mom's basement who want to do jihad, but now can't make it over to Raqqa or to Mosul.

QUESTIONER: It's activation v. inspiration.

MICHAEL WEISS: Yes, exactly.

QUESTIONER: So you agree they are not an existential threat.

MICHAEL WEISS: No, they are not an existential threat.

QUESTIONER: And Assad? What's the problem with Assad?

MICHAEL WEISS: Look, let me phrase it to you this way. I am married to a died-in-the-wool anti-interventionist, who says to me, "Why should we get involved? Look at Iraq. Look at Afghanistan." I say it is the old [Trotsky](#) line about the dialectic: You may not be interested in it, but it is interested in you. So you think the Middle East, just leave it alone, let it fester, let Russia—

QUESTIONER: No, no. I am talking about Assad specifically.

MICHAEL WEISS: As I mentioned, he is a magnet for jihadism.

QUESTIONER: Can't buy it.

MICHAEL WEISS: Absolutely.

JOANNE MYERS: We will continue that conversation later. We have time for two questions.

QUESTION: Midshipman Gabriel Marsan, United States Merchant Marine Academy.

I have been following the [U.S. presidential campaign](#). It came up earlier. I remember in the last [Republican debate](#), the CNN debate, in the first half, Governor [Bobby Jindal](#) and [Rick Santorum](#) were both arguing for mass invasions, similar to Iraq. I see you shaking your head. I am guessing it is not a good idea. I would like your opinion of it.

MICHAEL WEISS: I interviewed probably a dozen former and current U.S. military officials. They all gave me their assessment, which is that we will eventually be back in Iraq in a combat capacity, and also in Syria.

I said, "Does this mean—if it took 150,000 to pacify Iraq, how many is it going to take to do both Iraq and Syria?"

They said, "No, no, no. You've got it all wrong." In terms of vanquishing ISIS, or at least disrupting them enough in places like Raqqa and Dayr az Zawr—remember, these are mostly depopulated areas—it is not enough to do an air campaign. Look at [Fallujah](#) in 2004. How much ordnance did we drop on that town? It was a pocked moonscape. Within the first week of major combat operations, AQI had already set up shop in Mosul. So it's like playing whack-a-mole.

The problem is you need assets on the ground to actually cultivate and partner with, as I mentioned, the local Sunni resistance, even a resistance of the left. There are people who would love nothing better than to kick ISIS's ass. They just don't have the support, and they are not going to put their necks on the line unless they know that support is forthcoming.

Again, coming back to my earlier point, the way the United States is comporting itself now—look, if Obama got up in 2011 and said, "You know what? I don't care. I'm the anti-war president. I'm pulling us out of Iraq, Afghanistan. I don't want anything to do with Syria. Bashar al-Assad, you are on your own," I would at least respect that.

But by giving the false hope and the false encouragement—"he must step aside," "let's have this *pas de deux* at the UN Security Council with the Russians while we are doing a *deal* with the Iranians"—again we have squandered so much goodwill and credibility.

I didn't serve in the armed forces. I am not a military strategist or expert. All I will say is that we will eventually be in both these countries again, in some capacity. It is going to be much, much harder to do something to turn the tide now than it would have been in 2012 or 2013. I think that is just a fact. They are not going anywhere.

QUESTION: What are the U.S.'s vital interests in this region? What is a strategy for achieving them? I would define as primary among the U.S.'s vital interests something about which we have heard nothing, which is the developing *humanitarian crisis*.

MICHAEL WEISS: Let me take the last part first, as they used to say on quiz shows, the humanitarian crisis. Everyone is watching this exodus of refugees pouring into Europe and saying, "Oh, this is terrible. What can we do? What can we do?" They are fleeing, by and large, not from ISIS, but from Assad.

This gets to the point of U.S. national interests. Does it matter to you that Hungary is tilting in a very dangerous direction, with a *Poujadist* far-right *leader*, who basically speaks of a holy war—"We don't want Muslims in our Christian nation"—and will profit at the polls because of this?

I was in France. I can tell you, there are people, part of *Sarkozy's UNP* (Union for a Popular Movement)—what used to be known as the UNP Party—who are getting expelled because they say that "this means the end of the white race. We are taking too many brown people into the continent."

This is going to change European politics. Again, you might not be interested in the Middle East; it is always interested in you. If it changes European politics in the way I think, then you bet your butt the United States has a national interest in it, because it means the vitiation of NATO, it means the probable dismantlement of the European Union, and a host of other unforeseens or "unknown unknowns."

This is a hemorrhaging that is not being stanching—so 300,000 dead, half the country displaced, either internally or externally, and god knows how many more still trapped in dungeons and being tortured on a daily basis.

The question is—yes, I agree—what is the strategic objective? What is it we are trying to achieve? Do we want to defeat or degrade—I don't know what the going euphemism is—ISIS? Fine.

You have to start with first principles. How is ISIS able to hang on to so much territory? It is because you have a complete collapse of state institutions in Syria and they are not doing the job that they claim they are doing, which is fighting the terrorists. They are fighting everybody but the terrorists. They are fighting people who have actually fought the terrorists and beaten them before. Maybe it is worthwhile building up that constituency and helping them go after ISIS.

Now, we have done this train-and-equip program. But I have done some deep reporting on this, and let me tell you, the problem wasn't in the implementation; it was in the conceptualization. Or, as they say in computer programming, the bug is actually a feature.

We were sending guys into Syria that we had trained up, but the commanders of their brigades had not been trained by the United States. I actually talked to CENTCOM [United States Central Command]. I said, "You're sending guys in that you kinda-sorta know as the commander of these units?" They said, "Yes." I said, "And guess what happened? They took 20 percent of your weapons

and they sold them to al-Qaeda. What did you expect?" These are not proxies or assets in any classical understanding of the term.

So we are doing things half-assed. And let me be very frank with you. As you can tell, I am not looking for the next job in the State Department or whatever. I just don't care. There is no U.S. policy for Syria. There is no U.S. policy to defeat ISIS.

Why? Because Barack Obama is very tired. He doesn't care. He doesn't want this on his plate. He got his foreign policy legacy, the Iran deal, which he has described as his version of [Obamacare](#) in the international sphere. And he has a year and change left. So this is from Barack to [Hillary](#) with love. Now it is on your doorstep.

I am serious. You think I am being glib? I talk to people in government all the time. The focus is on, if I may say, meaningless bullshit: "How can we counter the narrative on Twitter?" What the hell do you mean, counter the narrative on Twitter? These guys are chopping off people's heads, burning them alive in cages, and you are talking about hashtagging it. I mean this is ridiculous.

So there is a real problem in the way the United States is going about this. Like I say, this is not to say that we have reached peak America or that we are in the Roman Empire. There are lots of people who know exactly what they are doing and know exactly how this organization works, and not a single one of them, so far as I can tell, has been invited to be part of any special task force on countering ISIS.

The guy who is now going to head the coalition, the special envoy, [Brett McGurk](#)—his nickname in the Green Zone is "Brett McJerk," because he was backing Maliki at a time when everyone was saying this guy is a sectarian thug; he is Saddam-lite.

David Petraeus is out of government; Ryan Crocker out of government. [Emma Sky](#), an anti-war British Arabist, the [Gertrude Bell](#) of her generation, who has understood very clearly that really the problem in Iraq wasn't even al-Qaeda, it was Iran taking over the country and doing things to push people into the arms of al-Qaeda—these people have—

One story I will end with. It was about 2010. We were pulling out militarily from Iraq, but also politically disengaging, which was the real issue. One of the guys in my book was in the White House, because at that point he was advising CENTCOM on Iraq and Afghanistan.

A National Security Council member in the Obama administration, who I don't think has ever been to the Middle East, this military official says to him, "Look, this is a catastrophe. This country will collapse if we do what we're about to do." The response he was met with was, "If our policy succeeds, we'll take credit. If it collapses and descends into civil war, we'll just blame [George W. Bush](#)."

Now, I have no love for the Bush Administration. But this is not foreign policy; this is public relations policy. That is why we are now talking about—*The Daily Beast* broke a big [story](#) a couple weeks ago. What is it? Fifty Defense Intelligence Agency analysts have blown the whistle and accused their government of cooking intelligence on this war, everything from trying to interdict the financial flows— whoever asked me that question—saying "we have disrupted the oil pipelines"—yes, we bombed the refineries we can see from satellite footage, but we have ignored the refineries that ISIS has built, the makeshift ones, in order to manufacture and pump oil. Fifty people—this is as big a scandal as "oh, there's WMD (weapons of mass destruction) in Iraq." They are feeding this stuff to the commander-in-chief, and he is crafting policy as a result of it.

This is a big, big deal. This is not fun and games. This isn't about winning elections. Actual people's lives are at stake here. I don't mean Americans. I mean Arabs, I mean Muslims, who look at America now as, at best, incompetent, but at worst, sinister. I know you are going to say, "Well, they

always"—no, no, no. Believe me, this is new. This is 2.0 anti-Americanism.

JOANNE MYERS: Michael, you have a captive audience. We adore you. I know you could go on—

MICHAEL WEISS: I could go on for hours about this.

JOANNE MYERS: I know. It was terrific.

Audio

ISIS is often portrayed as a mysterious force that came out of nowhere. It's nothing of the kind. This grim, unforgettable talk gives us the full, terrifying story, from the initial mistakes made in Iraq to the carnage going on now in Syria.

Video Clips

ISIS is often portrayed as a mysterious force that came out of nowhere. It's nothing of the kind. This grim, unforgettable talk gives us the full, terrifying story, from the initial mistakes made in Iraq to the carnage going on now in Syria.

TV Show

ISIS is often portrayed as a mysterious force that came out of nowhere. It's nothing of the kind. This grim, unforgettable talk gives us the full, terrifying story, from the initial mistakes made in Iraq to the carnage going on now in Syria.

Read More: [Intervention](#), [Islam](#), [Religion](#), [Security](#), [Terrorism](#), [Torture](#), [Warfare](#), [Afghanistan War](#), [Armed Conflict](#), [Collective Security](#), [International Relations](#), [Iraq War](#), [Islam and the West](#), [U.S. Foreign Policy](#), [Middle East](#), [Afghanistan](#), [Iran](#), [Iraq](#), [Jordan](#), [Russia](#), [Saudi Arabia](#), [Syria](#), [Turkey](#), [United States](#)

Copyright © 2016 Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs