

**Managing the World Crisis of the Middle East:  
Imperatives and Alternatives**

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## **Introduction**

Thank you. It is indeed an honor to be here with you this afternoon at Case Western Reserve University—this great Ohio institution. For the privilege of this opportunity, I would like to thank especially the distinguished Provost of International Affairs, Dr. David Fleshler.

I would also like to thank the faculty, staff, and students of the Center for International Affairs—especially Ms. Cami Ross—for their gracious reception. And I have noted with pleasure the Center's motto: "We Bridge CWRU and the World."

In fact, my remarks will achieve the modest goal set out for them if their author's personal—and by no means scholarly or philosophical—reflections are deemed to have contributed a brick or two to constructing that bridge of mutual understanding which the world desperately needs today.

## **The Makings of a World Crisis**

Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to begin with an obvious conclusion, namely: the Middle East has become a destabilized and destabilizing region. I believe the major factors contributing to this condition include:

- Intensifying cold and hot wars between the region's leading Sunni and Shiite powers;

- Proliferation of failed states—including Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen;
- The rise of a so-called Islamic State, or ISIS, lording over its zone of mayhem in Syria and Iraq;
- The spread of Islamic State ideology throughout the region and globally;
- Conflict-driven refugee flows of biblical proportions within and out of the area;
- Lack of effective governance;
- Failure of educational systems *on* and *at* all levels;
- Collapse of the Arab Spring, which in retrospect was a moment of hope characterized by a fleeting consensus that, unharnessed, was rapidly supplanted almost everywhere by despair and conflict;
- Polarization of residual reform movements between cosmopolitan modernizers and religious traditionalists;
- Contraction of social spaces that once sustained pluralism, including religious diversity; and
- Heavy handed, often destabilizing politico-military interventions by non-Arab powers—especially Iran—in Arab domestic and international affairs.

In my view, the Middle East's crisis can and should be classified as a *world* crisis for three primary reasons. First, it has drawn in

all the major powers in one way or another, including direct, boots-on-the-ground military intervention by the United States and Russia, the former Big Two of the Cold War and both permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Second, the Middle East's crisis is a world crisis in the sense that its profoundly destabilizing effects are for export, most prominently in the form of massive refugee flows into Europe. In the words of a U.S. state department "dissent memo" leaked a few months ago,

This crisis has deeply affected Syria's neighbors for years and is now impacting our European partners in far-reaching ways that may ultimately jeopardize their very character as open, unified, and democratic societies.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after those words were written—as this distinguished audience knows well—Britain voted to leave the European Union, a politically cataclysmic act which throws the future of the EU into grave doubt.

Third, I believe that the Middle East's crisis is a world crisis because the shape and form of its settlement will help determine which concept of world order carries the day in the early twenty-first century, and perhaps beyond.

In the Middle East today, three competing concepts of world order contend with each other, namely: the liberal world order of freedom and human rights; the authoritarian world order of stability over all; and the ISIS world order—or better, *disorder*—of religious extremism, murder, and slavery (including sexual slavery of children).

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<sup>1</sup> Max Fisher, "The State Department's Dissent Memo on Syria: An Explanation," *New York Times*, 22 June 2016 (available from [<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/23/world/middleeast/syria-assad-obama-diplomats-memo.html>]; accessed 22 June 2016).

Sadly, amid the world crisis centered in, but by no means limited to, the Middle East, the liberal world displays a weakness that clouds the vision and thwarts the actions of too many of its political leaders and thinkers.

The liberal world's self-inflicted helplessness is displayed most obviously in its hesitant, halting, uncoordinated, and spasmodic reactions to the nature of the challenge posed by the Islamic State, or ISIS.

Speaking as a citizen of Lebanon—a front line state in the ideological struggle against the Islamic State—the liberal world's lacking awareness of, and weak countermeasures against, ISIS are puzzling and dangerous. Recent history offers ample warnings of the threat, and lessons about what must be done in response.

With respect to the modern phenomenon of terrorism—and in particular terrorism inspired and sustained by religious extremism—no country is more painfully attuned to its destabilizing effects than is Lebanon. Having suffered from its harmful sting, Lebanese officials as far back as the 1980s tried to warn the world what would happen if the problem were not dealt with immediately, and on a multilateral basis.

During a 1983 state visit to Britain, for example, I addressed the threat of terrorism in these terms:

The fire of the ordeal that has touched the people of Lebanon will very soon, if unchecked, spread throughout the Arab world and the Middle East....The livelihood and the existence of the European nations will in turn become threatened, resulting in a wider conflict, unless something is

done now to avert the danger. Taking small risks today obviates the need for greater risks to be taken tomorrow.<sup>2</sup>

Turning to the present, what is the nature of the ISIS threat? From my perspective, the scope of the intensifying crisis that the Islamic State has inflicted on the Middle East leads to the conclusion that they must be designated as a threat to civilization itself, not merely as a criminal enterprise writ large.

I am a native and lifelong resident of a small country—Lebanon—that for better or worse absorbs almost every Arab, Middle Eastern, and global trend; I have been a close student of and participant in Middle Eastern politics on the national and regional levels for well over half a century; I have served in government as a peacetime parliamentarian and wartime president; I have directed an international think tank and one of the Arab world's oldest political parties; in all of these capacities, I have traveled extensively and visited practically every country in the Middle East, some numerous times over decades.

Given the arc of my career, I am equally saddened and alarmed to conclude that I have never in my political life witnessed Arab civilization in such extreme danger. Should the Islamic State succeed in eradicating the physical presence and history of whole communities—which is clearly its aim—then this would usher in a new dark age.

Still ensconced in a strategic core area, although it has lost some important territories once under its sway, a range of approaches and strategies must be deployed to contain and ultimately defeat ISIS.

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<sup>2</sup> This excerpt, as well the full text of the statement, can be found in Amine Gemayel, *Peace and Unity: Major Speeches, 1982-1984* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1985), 149-163 (quotation on p. 154).

Of course, overt military force and associated secret intelligence operations and covert actions must be employed against the Islamic State and its affiliates. But I submit that, over the long-term, the opponents ISIS and its ideology must not rely exclusively, or even primarily, on the blunt instrument of organized violence.

Instead, political and thought leaders of the liberal world need to formulate and implement strategies and plans that engender educational systems and cultural norms that uphold pluralism, diversity, and modernism. I would like to direct the remainder of my remarks to surveying some such strategies and plans.

### **Imperatives of and Alternatives to the World Crisis**

Despite the prevailing turmoil, I am convinced that the Arab and Islamic worlds can achieve the modernization they require, particularly in the social, educational, and political-governance spheres. In this regard Tunisia and Lebanon, each in its own way, provide solid grounds for hope.

Tunisian society, particularly in the era of President Habib Bourguiba and even when it suffered from a deficit of political democracy—especially with respect to the rotation of leaders at the top—nevertheless embraced educational reforms that allowed schools and universities to flourish.

Gender equality, another prerequisite of modern development, was at the center of the Tunisian national agenda. And finally, Tunisia's maintained a vibrant civil society, including a leading role for labor unions.

Turning to Lebanon, the country—like post-Arab Spring Tunisia—can be designated as a partial success story, although one that

has long been subject to repeated attacks on its sovereignty perpetrated by external forces like the PLO and internal factions blatantly in the service of Syria and Iran.

A decade ago, Lebanon was recovering materially, psychologically, and spiritually from a cycle of internal conflicts largely fueled by external forces. Then came another devastating war with Israel.

Subsequently, and continuing to this day, Lebanon absorbed successive shock waves from the Syrian conflict, including a huge influx of refugees. Yet Lebanon soldiers on as a concept of tolerance and an idea of democracy.

But Lebanon and Tunisia will not succeed as isolated islands of stability in a sea of chaos. Like the shattered states and societies of Europe after World War II, they and other Arab countries need international partnerships that can help sustain urgently needed political, governmental, and social reforms.

For Lebanon, the first order of business is maintaining its tenuous stability while coping with an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees. Given that Lebanon's population is about 4.5 million, the equivalent for the U.S. would be taking in approximately 107 million refugees and providing them with access to food, housing, employment, education, and all manner of basic services.

Therefore, in tandem with short- and medium-term aid, a long-term program must be launched to develop the economic infrastructure and government capacity of host countries like Lebanon.

Beyond multilateral and bilateral aid to Lebanon and other "refuge states," perhaps the greatest service the international community



could perform in managing the world crisis of the Middle East would be forcing the pace of a Syrian settlement.

The complexity of the war in Syria and, therefore, the complexity of its termination are understood by this audience and require no elaboration. Therefore, with respect to Syrian peacemaking I will devote only a few brief comments to the decisive factor as I see it, namely U.S.-Russian coordination and cooperation.

Despite its all too obvious flaws and failures, allow me to say something positive about the Obama administration's approach to Syria by praising Secretary Kerry's efforts to work with his Russian counterpart to implement the kind of ceasefire agreements that, eventually, can serve as a prelude to a comprehensive political solution.

Despite real and perhaps fundamental disagreements about Syria, it does appear that Washington and Moscow agree that the country must be reunified, whole and complete, under a government sitting in Damascus. This one thread of Russian-American concordance can perhaps—with diplomatic skill, determination, and stamina—be woven into a tapestry of peace.

In a word, diplomacy *can* succeed, and through its instruments countries and whole regions can be saved from the abyss of war. *Every War Must End* is the title of a seminal academic study of war termination, and this fundamental fact of statecraft applies no less to the series of wars that together comprise the world crisis of the Middle East.

Therefore, when contemplating approaches to managing this crisis, we must look with equal vigor at postwar reconstruction and reform, even as we focus on more immediate conflict management goals. This is why for several years now I have

advocated a comprehensive reform program called the “Arab Marshall Plan.”

The Arab Marshall Plan is not a detailed blueprint with specified funding levels, metrics, and timetables. Rather, it is conceived as a liberal world program to create an opposing force of, and for, moderation against ISIS and other extremists.

The Plan counters extremism by activating a set of interlocking measures, including what can be called “inspirational moderation,” physical reconstruction and economic development, and new systems of governance, both domestically and on the level of regional cooperation.

Amid a destabilized and destabilizing Middle East, inspirational moderation is vital because it can help move Arab societies to embrace democratic thinking as a precursor to democratic governance.

Economic development is essential because it is difficult for people to embrace human rights if they lack jobs, opportunities, and essential services like electricity, education, and healthcare.

And new systems of governance are necessary because, in the words of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, “[m]issiles may kill terrorists, but good governance kills terrorism.”<sup>3</sup>

The bedrock themes of the Arab Marshall Plan—like that of the original Marshall Plan—are true partnership and deep cooperation; in the present case, between the international democratic community and the Arab democratic community, a battered but potentially potent force for change.

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<sup>3</sup> See Peter Baker, “Obama Calls for Expansion of Human Rights to Combat Extremism,” *New York Times*, 19 February 2015 (available from [<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/20/world/obama-extremism-summit.html>]; accessed 20 February 2015).

Based on my decades-long knowledge and experience of the Arab world, I am convinced that only a program like the Arab Marshall Plan can save the Arab world from the consequences of failed states and the Islamic State by helping to construct a viable alternative: “citizen-states.”

In a citizen-state, the following elements broadly apply:

- The wellbeing of the individual is paramount;
- Politics and religion are separated;
- Executive governance is transparent, respectful of dissent and media scrutiny, and accountable to parliamentary oversight;
- Elections at all levels are free and competitive;
- The judiciary is independent; and
- Pluralism flourishes in the form of gender equality, religious tolerance, autonomous civil society, and cultural expression

In my view, only citizen-states are capable of mastering the intricate challenges of what the American diplomat Harold Saunders called “The Citizens’ Century.” At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Saunders offered this lucid analysis:

An era has begun in which governments face more and more problems they cannot deal with. Citizens outside government increasingly have an opportunity to fill that void.<sup>4</sup>

The path toward creating citizen-states is marked, as I see it, by three major initiatives appealing, especially, to the youth: first, educational improvements and the introduction of the latest information technology; second, new media as partners in democratization; and third, socio-economic development.

## Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for giving me this opportunity to share thoughts about managing the world crisis of the Middle East. I would like to conclude my remarks with a few observations that I hope will be of interest to the young people that give form, purpose, and vigor to this campus, and to all university campuses.

In the nineteenth century, the technical indicators of both economic and political change were factory chimneys, railroad tracks, and telegraph wires. These innovations transformed societies and the lives of individuals, but the broad masses were impacted *by* them rather than exercising significant control *over* them.

In contrast, twenty-first century technology—represented by the hand-held communication device—is symbolically and literally within the grasp of a vast array of people, who use them on a daily basis for all kinds of purposes, including resistance to government control and repression.

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<sup>4</sup> Sam Roberts, "Harold H. Saunders, Mideast Peace Broker, Dies at 85," *New York Times*, 8 March 2016 (available from [<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/09/world/middleeast/harold-h-saunders-mideast-peace-broker-dies-at-85.html>]; accessed 8 March 2016).

As the Arab Spring demonstrated, Arab youth are excellent users of Information Technology, suggesting that personal initiative, and along with it personal freedoms, will ultimately triumph.

For this reason, despite the horrors we see in the news—and which for those of us living in the Middle East are our daily reality—I remain optimistic that we, meaning the liberal world, will regain our direction and prevail in the great task of keeping ISIS and similar movements at bay and, eventually, defeating them.

The key will be for the positive forces of civilization—represented in no small measure by great educational institutions like Case Western Reserve University—to keep faith with core humanistic values and principles that no terrorists can break, despite the horrors they inflict within the areas they control, and elsewhere by means of spectacular attacks perpetrated by terrorist cells and self-radicalized individuals.

Thank you.