

# The Middle East Crisis: Updates on Strategic Challenges and Opportunities (Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Gaza)



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## **The Middle East Crisis: Updates on Strategic Challenges and Opportunities (Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Gaza)**

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## **Dr. Judith Yaphe**

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This is so exciting; I just learned yesterday I was being drafted. And I am always delighted to be here, but this is something that is very close to my heart, and as Yonah well knows, because I have covered Iraq since I was a graduate student. It was my research interest and my professional focus at the CIA as an intelligence analyst, and at the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, where I focused on medium to long-term research for the Joint Chiefs, Joint Staff and the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD).

I am now at the George Washington University, but Iraq remains my passion and my interest. And let me also say this, I am not an economic determinist and from what I know, from what I have seen, and from what I have experienced about Iraq, it has nothing to do about money. If it did, and if only it did, everything would be so much simpler. But Iraq, as Yonah points out, is much more complicated. The Sunni Arab tribes of Iraq are some of the largest confederations in Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and in the Arabian Peninsula. So, to say it is just about money is beside the point. If you do not understand that, then you are not going to quite follow where we are now. If this sounds like *War and Peace* and you do not have a list, then I will try to keep it as simple as possible. But I want to anticipate some of your questions and issues as well.

Now, I do think, and it is my personal and professional opinion, that this is certainly the worst crisis Iraq could face. And this has been said by many analysts but I never said it before. I did not see Civil War in 2004 or any other time. This is a real civil war and it is not being fought about money, and it is not all about oil. It is about power, control and marginalization and a lot of those issues and arguments and battles that precede certainly our time period, some of which go back 1500 years or more.

The impact is devastating. I worked three years in counterterrorism at CIA at a time when we had a major enemy – Iran – and we worried about export of the revolution – I do see this as an existential threat to Iraq, the region and ultimately it will come here. And if we do not think so, we are hiding our heads in the sand. So the problem: I will start with ISIS since that is a nice place to start.

The problems with ISIS did not just start in June, or six months ago, this problem been there for a long time. Because the forerunner of ISIS was Al-Qa'ida from the 2006 insurgency and surge, which we helped to defeat by working with the shaykhs. They came to us because they wanted help after tacitly and actively supporting Al-Qa'ida, thinking they won't hurt us, they won't bother us. They did.

And when it hurt their interest – and not just economic interest – they took power and began intruding in tribal, family and personal matters, as in we want your daughters to marry our soldiers, we are taking over. The shaykhs responded that enough is enough; our power, our control, our status, our families and our wealth are at risk. They came to us with a proposition, which General Petraeus took up and expanded. He had good advice from his Iraqi military

advisers and those who had been in the old regime, came over to us and were very helpful in being able to pinpoint the problems and individuals and made that a success, but I say it was a joint effort.

The Iraqis were part of that problem but also a part of that solution. The problem today is that we have is so-called Islamic State. What is dangerous here is that it is the first time an extremist group has controlled territory and established a state – which not even Osama Bin Laden could do –and now is recruiting fighters and terrorists to come and obey the Caliph, which is a call to the very religious to obey. Whether he is a real Caliph or not, is irrelevant; we have to deal with this as a real problem.

The question is how did they do it so easily and so quickly? The answer is simple: they did not do it by themselves and it did not happen overnight. The organization goes back to the Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, an al-Qa`ida affiliate. He was responsible for several spectacular operations in Jordan and Iraq, including the attack on the UN office in Baghdad which killed the UN representative Sergio de Mello, and especially for targeting and killing Iraqi Shia, in order to trigger a sectarian civil war.

Zarqawi was killed in 2006 and his group was eventually taken over by his acolyte, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Both men had reputations as virulently anti-Shia vicious killers who could not be constrained. Baghdadi had trained in Afghanistan with Bin Ladin and joined Zarqawi in Iraq, was arrested and spent several years in U.S. jail in Iraq. On his release in 2010, he began to rebuild the Zarqawi network, recruiting and training terrorists and planning operations. His opportunity came with the war on Syria and its spillover into Iraq. Using the support, manpower, and information available from Sunni Arab political, tribal, and military officers and renegade Ba`thists, his organization – now called the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – begins its march on Iraq in December 2013, and takes Mosul and roughly one-third of the country in June. Iraq becomes a huge and frightening success for ISIS and Iraq. Al-Qa`ida in 2014 broke all ties with ISIS and its leaders for being too violent, too extreme, too out of control. On the first day of Ramadhan, 30 June 2014, Baghdadi, using his real name Ibrahim, declared himself head of the Islamic State and called on all devout Muslims to join him in the Islamic State in Iraq.

Ibrahim is very clever. He draws on deep seated Islamic themes and symbols. He says he is a Hashimite, a descendant of the family of the Prophet Muhammad, thereby establishing his legitimacy. If you are a very religious minded Sunni or Shia Muslim, this will resonate with you. He has got all of the credentials, he trained as a cleric in Baghdad in the 1990s, he fought in Afghanistan with al-Qa`ida and Osama, and has returned to liberate the homeland.

Did I say he was clever? He put together an organization that is good at their tradecraft, good in recruiting foreign and Iraqi fighters, good at fund raising (mostly criminal activities such as extortion, theft, and smuggling) and planning. No one really knows how big they are. Estimates at the time Mosul fell ranged from 800 to several thousand to thirty thousand. I do not think anyone really knew then or knows now. But the point I want to make is they had help. They could not do what they did as quickly, as easily, as simply as it looks without the help on the ground of — check the following boxes: Iraqi Sunnis in exile who are marginalized, unhappy, and frustrated by their lack of power and whom Maliki has pushed them over the edge.

I think he shares a large portion of blame for things getting so out of hand and for making so many disastrous choices when he was warned what was coming. Baghdadi had help from local powerful tribes, prominent Sunni leaders, who Maliki was trying to arrest for treason. Maybe they were and maybe they were not, but there has never been an amnesty policy in Iraq and national reconciliation has never an option. Many supporters of Baghdadi share his enthusiasm for the insurgency and defeat of Maliki but not for the establishment of the Caliphate. This includes the prominent Baathists allegedly helping Baghdadi, those ex-Baathists in exile. My favorite is card number 6, from the Deck of 52 prime suspects advertised in the deck of cards produced by the CPA. I refer to Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, the very last of Saddam's inner circle uncaptured. I will concede that he is probably alive somewhere. He is a Sunni, a religious man – Baathists were religious, excuse me, the press got that one wrong too. Some in the military wore beards, the point being that Saddam allowed religious expression in the 1990s, he did not have any choice. He himself was on a religious kick to build support to retain political power. But the point is the army, including Duri's Army of the Naqshbandi, is a military, or qadiri order, and not the same as the religious order. KRG President Barzani is also a member of the Naqshbandi Sufi order.

Many of the different Sunni Arab militias that were involved in the 1990s fighting and in the 2005-2007 insurgency are back. They have helped Baghdadi and ISIS succeed and they are probably key to Baghdadi and ISIS defeat. They knew the weak points, what to attack, how to infiltrate, who to go for. Iraq is not a big country; you know who is who and what is what, pretty much where you are. It is essential to have the support of the people with roots backed by traditional tribal leaders. To be a shaykh in northern Iraq is important, to be a shaykh in the South it is probably not such a big deal. Where there is little money or oil, there is little power involved. The north, however, has wealthy clans and power brokers, and that is why I say – if it was only about money I would be relieved. But it is not. It is about power, it is about control. I also do not think it is about separatism. I do not think the Sunni Arabs in the north want an independent state. I believe their goal is to be able to control the situation, to return to power or with sufficient leverage to get power, and to then get rid of the Islamists and ISIS, when they want to do so.

I hate to use this analogy but I will simply remind myself that many people in 1930s Germany agreed with the rich, industrial barons who supported Hitler that he was controllable and removable when they voted him into power and they were eaten by that regime. You have to keep history in mind, sad to say.

The tribes provided ISIS with legitimacy and support, little knowing what would happen next. What happened is the establishment of the Caliph's version of Islamic law – no smoking, no drinking, and all women must be covered and stay home. Many rumors are circulating out there about the targets of ISIS' Islamic attentions, but one thing is clear – the Islamic State is not seemingly worried about ethnicity. Wow, you might say, this is Iraq and it is not about ethnicity? It is about sectarianism. The IS does not care what kind of a Sunni you are; you are a Kurdish Sunni, fine; Turkman Sunni, fine. But if you are a Turkman Shia or a Yazidi, not fine, you are dead. If you are a Kurdish Shia, also not fine. The Shia and the other minorities captured by ISIS are paying a terrible price for the Islamic State's successes. The Christians have been told if you pay the special tax—this goes back to the early days of Islam when non-Muslims (Christians and

Jews) were considered inferior and paid a special tax to avoid conscription. However, the IS first ordered payment of the special tax, then the Christians were told to convert, and then they were told leave now or else. The IS has arrested these “apostate” Shia and Christians, they have executed them, and they have forced them into exile. We are talking about the destruction of communities of Shia, Yazidi, Chaldean Christian and other religious communities that are pre-Islamic or date back to the early years of Christianity.

And there are reports of crucifixions; there are reports of killings, refugees and internally displaced people, 500,000 refugees from Mosul alone. Like the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, the believers in the Islamic State do not believe in visiting shrines, holy places, or cemeteries, or worshipping saints and tombs. In Wahhabi Islam and in the Islamic State, these practices mean you are worshipping a shrine, or you are worshipping the prophet Jonah or you are worshipping some Islamic imam or saint, and not Allah. So, all must be destroyed, including the Tomb of Jonah, the holy places of the Yazidis, the mosques and prayer houses of the Shia. What is next, you might ask? Some Iraqis answer that Baghdad may be the next city to fall, but the ultimate destination is Mecca and the shrines there. Is this what the Iraqis, Muslim or Christian or Yazidi, or Muslims want? I do not think so. That is not what anyone would want. We are seeing some reports of unease between the IS and its Sunni Arabs supporters, and some people speculate that this is U.S. strategy, as it was in 2006 in supporting the Sunni Arab *sahwa*, or rising against al-Qa`ida.

Now, I would like to come to a few issues discussed by previous speakers. First of all, the issue about Iran: Do I worry about Iran taking advantage of the situation in Iraq now? No. The Iranians are already there and have been there since 2003. I do not subscribe the theory often heard in the Gulf that we gave Iraq to Iran in 2003 or 2011 but we could not keep the Iranians out if we wanted to: a 900-mile open border with security control has allowed the Iranians to come in, exercise control over politicians and institutions, and use their influence to secure Iranian interests. The question in my mind, speaking as someone who has had to deal with this region from an intelligence and strategic perspective is this: how do you turn this development to our advantage?

Who is this Maliki? I said that I hold him responsible for much, but not all, that has happened in Iraq. I want to say he is stupid, he is not. He is clever and he is cunning, he is shrewd and he is conspiratorial. He has lived in exile for most of his adult life in the mukhabarrat (police) state of Syria and in Iran. He learned while still in Iraq under Saddam how to act and think like a conspirator, how to avoid risk, and how to co-opt his opposition. He thinks like Saddam, but is or was he Saddam? I will leave that for the historians to decide. Maliki sees the projection of power much in the same way that Saddam saw it. That means, Iraq must be a strong state with a highly centralized government. Does he go so far as to say, “I am the State.” Well, no. It may look like that, but it almost does not matter at this point. But I think he learned in exile how to conspire and how to survive, and he learned the need of a strong leader from Saddam and the Assads. He is not going to be an easy person to deal with; he is dangerous in that sense because all of his thinking is in that direction.<sup>1</sup> He made it very clear his intention was to finally exercise majoritarian rule, none of this let us share the power with everybody else. Majoritarian

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<sup>1</sup> This event was held in mid-June, one month before Maliki was forced to resign under pressure from his Dawa Party, his State of Law coalition, other Shia parties and leaders, the Kurds, and from Tehran and Washington.

rule means I am going to win that election, and they do have fairly fair, I have to say, elections in Iraq. Iraqis know what it means to vote, and that is not the point.

Behind the scenes manipulation? Yes. Manipulation of the courts. Absolutely. And I think the comparison to the 2000 election in the US is not quite so far fetched if you think about, or watched it from the outside, and I was in England at the time, and watched it from there.

So, he does not like the Iranians, I am convinced of that. Nor does he like the Syrians, but he is in a position where he has to examine his options and weigh his choices carefully. Frankly no government in Iraq can ignore the Iranians or could look at what is happening in Syria and not see a threat should Assad collapse because, if it happens there, for sure the next move is Iraq and he has seen that already. I am not defending him, I am simply saying, I believe he has made wrong choices, but you have to understand where he is coming from and we do not.

We talk about democracy, and I hate that word now. We are accused of not following through on promises and commitments, and we are asked how can you be trusted if you do not do this or that – if you do not protect the Iraq you broke, if you did not defend the Shah or Egyptian President Mubarak, both of whom kept their promises to you? What, you want to ask yourself, when you talk about U.S. policy and regional security is it that we should do to support the government in Baghdad? And we do support the government. Okay, if it is going to be Maliki and he is going to be elected to a third term, we do not have much of a choice there. You might want to ask yourself, if we do act, because we have to defeat these extremists, can we do that without having a policy towards Syria as well? I will leave that question for Yonah.

Now, let me conclude because I know I have run out of time and I do not want to abuse your good nature. Will this issue go away? I do not think so. The ISIS or whatever you want to call them is not just a local phenomenon; it sees itself as a universal phenomenon. It is talking about the global caliphate. Al-Baghdadi, or Caliph Ibrahim, has told all Muslims that it their obligation to come to the Islamic State to support the Caliphate. This is the call of obligation to all believing Muslims to do so.

Now, there have been similar calls to serve Islam in history and probably will be again. How many of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims will come? Perhaps less than one percent may be even interested, but that is a sizeable number and, anyway, what are the other 99 percent doing? What about the call to serve in Central Asia, Pakistan, and India? And I think that is part of the problem. Will the Iraqis be able to solve it? I do not think they can. I certainly do not think they can do it by themselves. I raise the question: who do you arm and how do you go about it without getting totally involved? I think there are ways, but we are going to have to decide pretty quickly to have a clear policy and move on this. I think we cannot pick the "right" ruler for Iraq. I do believe there are many Iraqis who would be just rulers, support a unified and unitary government and I think not be ruled by sectarian or ethnic interests. I also believe in Iraqi nationalism as a common thread among Iraq's Sunni and Shia populations and minorities as well. Power is all about leverage and control, and the only way most so-called politicians in Iraq and elsewhere know how to acquire it and keep it is through extremes. For them, nothing else can work, because nothing else has worked.

Now, I think there is opportunity here for the United States and for Iraq, but there is risk as well. And that is why I will close with this: we, the United States, cannot do it by ourselves, and you cannot have leverage without a willingness to back it up with. I am not just talking about boots on the ground. We have to back our policy words in Iraq with policy actions and we also have to engage those others who have the leverage we lack. Leverage on the Shia, leverage on the Sunni, leverage on the Kurds; and you know who has leverage with these parties? Iran. Sunni politicians flock to Iran for support, approval, and protection, just like the Shia do. You do not know about the Sunnis doing it, do you? Well, they do. Even the famous Ayad Allawi does. The Kurds, all the time.

Now, the point again is that there are others like Iraq's Arab neighbors who have just sat on their hands and have not done anything, especially the Gulf Arabs and especially the Saudis who have chosen since 2003 to ignore Iraq totally – and I and others have told the Gulf Arab governments that if you want to change the trajectory that you see for Iraq, if you do not want it to be a province of Iran or under Iranian control, if you want it to remain an Arab country – you have to open up, you have to become more inclusive, you have to talk to them and not say, “Well, we don't care,” and ignore the problem as if it will go away, because it is not going away. It will come to you. Let us hope that the window of opportunity opens again.

I do not think anyone really knows for the Kurds. If there is a Kurdish representative hear, he should speak. The point I would like to make is that the Kurds are talking about independence, but then they did something unforgivable. They had an opportunity to strengthen their case with Baghdad and defend the confederation that they wanted. But, when ISIS came, and they warned Ankara and Baghdad of the danger Mosul, and Mosul fell, what did they do? They did not live up to their obligations to fight for the confederation or the state. They deployed their peshmerga fighters and occupied the disputed territories and oilfields that are also claimed by the Sunni Arabs and Turkmen. And they intend to keep them. Some Kurds say, “We are going to have a referendum on independence. Now is the time” At the same time, there is hedging among the Kurds. The Kurds may have believed that ISIS would not attack them. Maybe there was even a tacit understanding to that effect? If there was a deal not to attack each other, that deal was quickly broken. ISIS wants the oil fields the Kurds control and the Mosul Dam, and it is selling oil from the Iraqi and Syrian fields to Assad's Syria and the Kurds to be refined and exported.

What the Kurds want, I think, is the best deal. There might be a bit of a fray. The final power with influence, of course, is Turkey and the Turks themselves have said two different things – we do and we do not support an independent Kurdish state. The Kurds hear what they want to hear, the Turks support our independence. I do not think the Turks themselves are really sure, the statements in support of an independent Kurdistan are part of an AK Party election ploy to win the Turkish Kurdish vote but the point is the risk here. Prime Minister Erdogan has helped ISIS get into Iraq and that was not too clever, and been reluctant to call ISIS terrorist. Iraq is, however, a regional problem and a regional solution is required, a point that the State Coordinator for Iraq Brett McGurk and the Undersecretary for Policy made very clear in their testimony to House and Senate committees in their testimony in mid-June. I think that means structuring a solution for Iraq that involves the neighbors because without their help, we cannot do it by ourselves.

## **Oren Marmorstein**

Counselor for Public and Academic Affairs, Embassy of Israel

Hello everyone. As you can expect, naturally I would like to focus mainly on the events happening nowadays in Gaza. But with your permission, I would like to expand the conversation a little bit more than what we are witnessing in the daily news and to go back a few years in time, actually not too many years in time, and to give us background. And what I am referring to is an event that happened less than a decade ago; I am talking about the 2005 disengagement from Gaza. Because in the ongoing discussion that is happening in the daily press, a lot of discussion is focusing on the current events but the bigger picture, the bigger context is sometimes being left out.

So to begin with, in the year of 2005, when it comes to the relations between Israel and Gaza, Israel has decided unilaterally to disengage completely from the Gaza Strip. And I want to remind us all that this was not an easy and smooth decision, in the sense of political decision in Israel. There was a lot of controversy that was involved, a lot of political objection among the Israeli political spectrum; but nevertheless the decision that was being made by the government was to withdraw from Gaza, and when I am saying to withdraw from Gaza, it is in the most complete way that you can imagine. Settlements were uprooted, civilians were being taken out. By the way, some pictures that were coming out from there, you can see civilians trying to cling to their communities and police force and soldiers taking them out forcibly because this was the decision being made by the Israeli government. And the bottom line is no settlement, no civilian, no Israeli soldier was left in the Gaza Strip whatsoever; full stop, nothing. We need to remind us of this because, you know, in the ongoing discussion sometimes you come across those arguments that it is all because of the settlements, it is all because of the occupation. Those are very catchy phrases, but there is only one problem with it, it has nothing to do with reality. The fact of the matter is, there is not occupation, there are no settlements, there was not even one Israeli in the Gaza Strip beginning from the year 2005. And my fellow speakers mentioned the economical aspect when it came to the discussion of Iraq and I want to remind us all, back in the year of 2005, that things looked quite optimistic and there were people saying, "Here, this place, this coastal place called Gaza Strip, maybe it could become the next Singapore." And there were some philanthropists who were willing to allocate money to invest some serious funds in order to make Gaza a prosperous place.

But as we all know, the events took a different course. In the year of 2006, there were elections in Gaza and then in 2007 a very violent takeover of Hamas, killing Fatah representatives, some brutal clashes between Hamas and Fatah and at the end of the day, Hamas is taking control of the Gaza Strip and just getting back to this hope, this economical hope or dream that Gaza will become the next Singapore, what we were witnessing is Gaza becoming a little Iran; a mini Iran just on our coast. So this is, again, this is not ancient history, but people tend to forget this is less than 10 years ago.

Now, if we fast forward in time and we are getting into the recent events, we would find that Hamas in recent months is in a very problematic point. Different factors are the reason for this. First, it is Hamas's relationship with its old patron, with one of its big supporters, Bashar al-Assad who used to support Hamas with weapons and money. The relationship between Hamas

and Assad got into a very problematic situation and Hamas lost much of its backing at a certain point in time coming from Assad.

Second, there is the relationship between Hamas and Egypt. After the current events, and I do not know, maybe we will have some time to discuss what is happening in Egypt, I have a soft spot like you mentioned for Egypt, I fell in love with the country. I was posted there during the time of the Egyptian revolution, so I had a chance to watch the events during the Mubarak era, during the revolution and a little bit after so on a personal note it was really an amazing experience. But when it comes to the relationship between Hamas and Egypt, Hamas, again, is in a very problematic spot. Because the good and tight relationship that it had with the Muslim Brotherhood is now being held against it and the Egyptian administration is now fully addressing the issue of smuggling coming from the Sinai Peninsula to the Gaza Strip, so this is another element. And of course, much of it adds up to the issue of money; Hamas is being left out with very little money on its behalf.

And just to add to this, this recent event of the kidnapping of the three teens; three Israeli Jewish teens that were abducted by Hamas. As you all know, Hamas terrorist kidnapped those three teenagers and they killed them right away. And by the way, this is a quite shocking piece of information when you listen to it live. What happened is that during the abduction one of those teenagers managed to call the 911 line. There was a problem that the person on the other line did not hear what he was saying, but the bottom line is that you hear the entire episode that is happening in the car and you get a glimpse at what is happening there. And the terrorists are shouting at them “put your heads down” and you hear the shot. So the fact of the matter is that Hamas killed those three teens immediately and their idea was to negotiate with Israel for the release of Hamas prisoners; that is their idea of the operation. But what happen is that Israel managed to get to the bodies of those three teens before Hamas even started the negotiation. So the entire episode was useless and because of this terrorist attack Israel launched a campaign to arrest terrorists of Hamas who were released in the Gilad Shalit deal and came back to terrorist activity because if you look at the agreement that followed the Gilad Shalit deal it was said quite clear that if those terrorist are to return to terrorist activity Israel holds the right to arrest them and that is what happened. So the Palestinian society, the Palestinian street, was quite enraged by Hamas because what they were saying, “You guys are just putting us into more trouble, you are not getting prisoners released and you are just complicating everything.” So with this background Hamas decides to start firing at Israel, and by saying start firing, it is not one hundred percent accurate because Hamas was firing the whole time. But after this episode of kidnapping the three teens, Hamas decides to escalate the flames and I am talking about events happening prior to Operation Protective Edge.

By the way, if we were referring to the media discussion, this was not part of the media discussion. But I can tell you on a personal note, I just came back from Israel last Sunday. My parents-in-law were sitting in their living room, watching the World Cup, this is what most Israeli men do during the months of World Cup, and they heard this alarm going off so my mother-in-law asked my father-in-law, “What is this noise that we are hearing?” My father-in-law answered, “No, this is nothing. This is the crazy fans. They are doing this noise in the television.” And my mother-in-law answers, “No, you are talking nonsense.” And of course my father-in-law does not take it seriously because this is what she usually tells him, that he is

talking nonsense, you know those conversations. But to make a long story short, only after a few seconds both of them realized that it was the siren going off and they were running to a shelter. And this happening, you never heard about this episode, not because it was in my parents-in-law's living room, because it was not part of the conversation, but this was happening in hundreds of houses of Israeli families in the southern part that are living in Beer Sheva. So this is the background when we are coming to discuss Operation Protective Edge.

The main idea was to restore peace and quiet to the people of Israel and restore the same sense of normal living that every person here in the states enjoys. And the idea was to restore it and we tried to restore it; first through diplomatic channels. I do not know if you remember this, but again it is important to mention these facts, that before launching Operation Protective Edge the Israeli government said in the very clearest way possible, "Quiet will be answered with quiet. We will not retaliate, if Hamas will hold its fire, we will not react." We said it once, we said it again; it did not work. Hamas continued firing. And then, we were forced to go into this operation first to stop this rocket firing; more than 2,000 rockets that are being fired at Israel. Think of it, it is two-thirds of the country; two-thirds of the country is in bomb shelters. I mentioned my visit to Israel and I can tell you this is a very unpleasant situation in which you put your baby to sleep and after two hours you wake her up, my seventeen-month-old baby Danielle, and you rush her to the shelter. And this is not happening one night, it is happening almost every night. And we are trying to stop it and like I said we tried to stop quiet with quiet.

And then came the Egyptian cease-fire proposal; Israel almost immediately said yes, trying to opt out of this operation. But Hamas rejected it and continued firing at our cities. But it is not only the Egyptian cease-fire; by the way, it was being adopted by many Arab countries. And Mr. Ambassador, please correct me if I am wrong, I think that the Arab League also adopted the Egyptian cease-fire. Many Arab countries, the European community, the United States, they all adopted the Egyptian cease-fire as did Israel, and Hamas continued to reject this offer. But then came along a UN call for a cease-fire. Just holding the fire for a few hours, that is what the UN was trying to do; Israel said yes, but Hamas continued to fire at us. And there was a third proposal offered by the Red Cross. Again, Israel said yes, and again, Hamas continued to fire.

So I think it is important to be aware that in every junction, Israel was trying to opt out of escalating the situation and when Hamas keeps drawing us to this battle, we were presented by a different and a new challenge, a new threat. We talked about those rockets, this time we are being challenged by a threat called terrorist tunnels. Now those tunnels are not, if I may, it is not a Shawshank Redemption movie tunnels, you know? It is not something you dig with a spoon. These are industrial tunnels. And they go all the way from Gaza Strip, all the way to Israeli soil. Again, this has nothing to do with Gaza, it goes to *kibbutz*, those communities that we have in Israel, all the way to the gates of the *kibbutz*. And the idea of Hamas is to use those tunnels and we know it because we had squads of terrorist coming out of those tunnels, 13 terrorist in one episode, coming out of them and they were intercepted by Israeli troops and we found in their equipment tranquilizers and handcuffs. So those people were not coming to sightsee, they were coming to abduct and to take hostages. And it turns out that, basically, there is Gaza and there is underground Gaza. There is a world of tunnel that Hamas has dug in order to allow them more options of attacks towards Israel.

And just to give you a sense, some argue that it costs roughly one million dollars to build this tunnel. We were talking again about economy; now think what could have been done with one million dollars. Already, there were 30 tunnels exposed and who knows how many more. Think what could have been done with all those funds; what could have been done with this concrete that is used to build tunnels instead of building schools and building hospitals and infrastructure. Hamas is using this money and this material to build its terrorist infrastructure.

Now, before wrapping it up, I want to touch on a very important issue that I think it is part of the discussion, but I think it is not being fully discussed and I am talking about the pictures coming out of Gaza. Those are hard pictures; there is no other way to describe it, hard pictures coming out of Gaza. But again, having this conversation with an educated group, one must realize that this is part of a deliberate strategy of Hamas. It is not by accident or by coincidence that we come across these pictures and this strategy has a name; it is called human shields. I am not talking about the war crime that Hamas is doing towards Israelis, targeting Israeli civilians. I am talking about the fact that Hamas is committing war crimes to its own people, to the people of Gaza, putting missiles and rockets in schools, in a UN school. Just this week two episodes in which in one UN school, UNWRA was the agency, it is an agency operating in the Gaza Strip, in one UN school they found more than 20 rockets.

You know, the Prime Minister said it I think in the clearest way; we have this system, an amazing system called Iron Dome. I would say it is almost rockets science, but it is rocket science. It is a system that, by the support of America and we are grateful for this support, allow Israel to address this challenge of being fired at from Gaza. So we are using this system, this missile system, to protect our civilians. And what Hamas is doing, they are using their civilians to protect their missiles; it is the exact opposite. So they are using schools to hide missiles, they are using hospitals as headquarters, they are firing at us from hospitals, they are using mosques. We know of cases where those terrorist tunnels are coming out of a mosque. And there is even more to it because we know that before Israel is operating in a specific area, Israel is trying to alarm and to inform the civilian population so they will be out of harm's way. And we know for a fact that Hamas is telling the Gaza people not to leave those areas. There is this video of Hamas Minister of Interior and he is saying on camera, telling the citizens not to go out of their home.

And you need to understand, and Generals you are much aware of army operations, I am not aware and maybe there were cases like this in the past, but I am not aware of so many efforts, so many attempts made by modern army to try to prevent, to refrain from harming civilians. And I am talking about leaflets that are being spread to civilians, I am talking about text messages, sending text messages to private cellphones; and by the way, not just general text messages, but texts telling them exactly which neighborhoods they should go to because those neighborhoods are safe and are not part of the fire zone. Calling people; I want to share with you something that I just saw yesterday, it is an amazing video. You see this scene coming out of a battle happening in Gaza. And in this scene you see Israeli troops come across a fire that is being fired at them. And in the ready communication they are being asked, "Do you identify where they are firing from?" And they said "Yes. And this is from this building." And you see the building and it is a hospital, it is Wafa Hospital. So they are being identified as firing from the Wafa Hospital and you see it on camera and the other part of this movie is even more amazing. You hear this audio conversation between an Israeli soldier calling this hospital. And he is saying, "Hello, I am

calling from the Israeli soldiers. You are firing at us. Can you do something about it?" And he is telling the other person, "You must be aware that according to international law, if you are firing at us from a civilian infrastructure, hospital, school, we are entitled to fire back. That is self-defense." So the guy is asking him, "Can you verify that there are no civilians in this building? Can you make sure that there are no patients in the hospital?" And he is calling and the Palestinian is telling him, "No, there are no patients here." And he is calling in again and he is saying, "Just we want to make sure because we want to fire back." And again this to me was mind-boggling because you do not see it in the movies that the guy in the army is calling the other guy saying, "Is it convenient for you so I fire back?" It is something mind-boggling but this is what is happening in Israel right now.

The bottom line is this, and with this I would like to conclude. Like I said, Hamas started this round of fire because of their own political problems, trying to achieve political gains. They are doing so in the most cynical way, not only regarding the Israeli population, but also regarding the Palestinian population. What we are trying to do right now is to restore quiet. We tried to do it through diplomatic channels; there are still talks about diplomatic channels, if it is not working through diplomatic channels, we will do it through military channels. But the bottom-line is that we will restore peace and quiet to the people of Israel but also to the people of Gaza.

**Ambassador Mohammed Alhussaini Alsharif**  
Ambassador of the League of Arab States

Thank you Professor Alexander for giving me the opportunity to speak to your distinguished guests. I believe this is the second or third time that I find myself in the fortunate position of being able to correct some of the erroneous statements expressed by several of the previous speakers. Inviting me to participate in this seminar is a true testimony to the credibility and honesty of your prestigious institute.

You stated that the Palestinian situation is unfortunate. I believe this situation is far more than unfortunate - it is deeply tragic. Professor Yonah mentioned that a Palestinian speaker was invited to participate in this seminar but that he declined the invitation for undisclosed reasons. However, when it comes to discussing the plight of Palestinians in the occupied territories I don't think it is a prerequisite for the speaker to be a Palestinian, Jew, Muslim or Christian - what is most important is that the person is a fair and unbiased human being regardless of his or her nationality or ethnicity.

I would like to start by correcting the erroneous statements made by the last speaker representing the Embassy of Israel in Washington D.C. He repeated many times that Hamas (the Palestinian Resistance Movement in Gaza Strip) killed the three Israeli teenagers. The truth of the matter is that it has never been proven that Hamas killed the young men. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) has never confirmed or proven that they were killed by Hamas or any other Palestinian group. Hamas had nothing to do with either the kidnapping or the murder of the three Israeli teenagers, otherwise they would have admitted it. Had Hamas been involved in the kidnappings, the teenagers would have been kept alive to use as a bargaining chip, as Hamas has done in a previous incident, to convince Israel to release Palestinian prisoners.

Despite the fact that Israel could offer no conclusive evidence of Hamas involvement in the kidnappings, it used this as a pretext to launch a massive and internationally condemned bombardment of Gaza. Hamas and the civilian population were targeted relentlessly by jet fighters, tanks, missiles and other sophisticated weapons either supplied by or paid for by America. It was Israel's disproportionate assault on Gaza that triggered Hamas's responding with rocket attack. To date, more than 2000 Palestinians have been killed - most of them civilians, women and children. Only 20 percent of the casualties were Palestinian combatants. More than 12,000 Palestinian homes were destroyed or partially damaged. More than 10,000 Palestinians wounded (70 percent civilians). More than 50 percent of Gazans are now unemployed. Almost 60 percent of the population of Gaza became under the line of poverty. In comparison, 67 Israelis were killed (64 soldiers and 3 civilians) about 600-750 Israeli soldiers and 80 civilians were wounded.

My comments are echoed in a letter-to-the-editor to The New York Times written by Nathan Thrall, a senior analyst at the International Crisis Group covering Gaza, Israel, Jordan and the West Bank, "The Israeli assault on Gaza was not triggered by Hamas rockets directed at Israel but by Israel's determination to bring down the Palestinian unity government that was formed in early June between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, even though that government was committed to honoring all of the conditions imposed by the international

community for the recognition of Israeli legitimacy," wrote this gentleman. When I was Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to the Republic of Turkey (2005-2011) I recall one State visit when British Prime Minister David Cameron described the living conditions in Gaza as "the biggest open-air prison on earth."

I can't help but commend the heroic resistance shown by a group of Palestinians who were able to withstand Israel's far superior military force for more than 26 days using greatly inferior weapons - no tanks, jet fighters or an Iron Dome. Israel is considered the world's fourth largest military power. It is the only country that the United States is committed to defending at any time and at any price. The United States is also committed to maintaining Israel's qualitative military superiority over all the Arab countries combined at any time. Palestinian resistance in Gaza shattered the myth of Israel's security and demonstrated more than ever before that no country is secure in the region, no matter how powerful it is.

Hamas, by confronting Israeli occupation was able to expose, through internet, live TV and social media, how "isolated, deprived and punished a community of 1.8 million Palestinians." Furthermore, Hamas, considered by Israel as a terrorist movement, gained international support and was able to negotiate with the Israelis in Cairo on equal ground. A recent poll in Israel revealed that 51 percent of the population considered the war on Gaza a draw at more than four weeks with no real winner.

If I recall correctly, the last time I spoke at this institute I referred to comments made by Israeli officials indicating that the chaos and turmoil in some Arab countries had strengthened Israel's security. During his visit to Washington, D.C. on June 23, 2013, former Prime Minister Olmert noted that it was the first time in 60 years that Israel feels more secure. On October 9, 2013, senior Israeli defense official Amos Gilad delivered a lecture at the Washington Institute. "Despite the threat of Iran and the continuing turmoil in the Middle East, "said Gilad, "Israel is more secure than ever. From a security point of view, now is the best time Israel has seen despite the many challenges it faces." This no longer seems to be the case.

The same speaker today said that President Assad of Syria is supplying Hamas with weapons. He seems to have forgotten that the United States is supporting Israel with all the sophisticated weaponry it needs. Also, the United States contributes more than three billion dollars of American taxpayers' money annually to Israel. I wonder how Assad's supply of money and weapons to Hamas compares to the American Government's support to Israel?

Several weeks ago, I was invited along with other leaders of the Muslim community, by President Obama to attend a breakfast at the White House to celebrate the Holy month of Ramadan. During the Iftar (breakfast) President Obama said that, "Israel has the right to defend and protect its civilian population from assaults from across their borders." But Israel has no definite borders. An American journalist asked "where exactly are Israeli borders? It is Netanyahu's refusal to identify these borders that put the Israeli population at risk."

On July 16, 2014, Seuma Milne of The Guardian wrote that, "the idea that Israel is defending itself against unprovoked attacks from outside its borders is an absurdity. Despite Israel's withdrawal of settlements and bases in 2005, Gaza remains occupied both in reality and

international law, its border, coastal waters, resources, airspace and power supply controlled by Israel." Milne added that, "Israel doesn't have a right of self-defense over territories it illegally occupies. It has an obligation to withdraw...occupied people have the right to resist." He concluded his article by writing, "The brutal reality is that there will be no end to Israel's occupation until Palestinians and their supporters are able to raise its price to the occupier in one way or another, and change the balance on the ground."

That same day, Professor Alon Ben-Meir, a distinguished Jewish-American writer and academician published on his website a piece entitled "The Curse of the Occupation." He wrote that, "Occupation by its very nature erodes the moral values of the occupier, which leads to violations of the occupied's human rights with near impunity". In this regard, added Ben-Meir, "the blockade of Gaza is as bad as , and perhaps even worse than the occupation of the West Bank. This in turn engenders hatred and resentment as the occupied harbor enmity and often resort to violent resistance, revenge and retribution. "Today, Israel is considered to be the only occupying nation on earth. The 1949 Geneva Convention – to which Israel is a party - forbids an occupying power from moving its citizens into military occupied territory or from altering the ways of life of its people.

Professor of International Law, John Dugard, and a former U.N. special rapporteur on human rights in the occupied Palestinian territory wrote an article ( July 31,2014 ) entitled, “ Debunking Israel’s self-defense argument ” on the illegal occupation of Gaza. “ Israel is not the victim. It is the occupying power that is using force to maintain its illegal occupation. The rockets fired by Palestinian factions from Gaza must be construed as acts of resistance of an occupied people and an assertion of its recognized right to self-determination,” wrote Dugard.

Several months ago I attended a lecture given by an Israeli soldier by the name of Avner Gvaryahu who defected from the IDF together with many others of his fellow soldiers. They joined an organization called "Breaking the Silence", considered one of Israel’s most internationally lauded NGOs. Trained as a sniper, Avner said that they were allowed to shoot any Palestinian in the occupied territories who could be seen from a window using a cellphone or binoculars. Once, he said they forced their way into a Palestinian residence with a satellite dish to watch a soccer match. After locking the residents in the basement, they watched the match and then left without releasing them from the basement. I asked him what made him and other Israeli soldiers kill Palestinians who were not a threat to them? Was it their training or education I wondered? He tried to avoid answering my question but the audience demanded an answer. Finally he looked at me and said that he did not have a good or convincing answer.

The same Israeli speaker later commented that Israel had to withdraw from the Gaza Strip in 2005 so that they could run their own affairs. In all reality, Israel withdrew from Gaza not as a favor or a gift to the Palestinians but because Gaza had begun to pose a financial and security burden to its occupiers. Home to 1.8 million Palestinians, many of whom were deported from their homes in historic Palestine over 66 years ago, the Gaza Strip has been under a continuous blockade since 2007. The flow of necessary goods, as well as the right of Palestinians to move freely in and out of Gaza for jobs or medical care is tightly restricted. Israel's latest attack on Gaza has exposed the inexcusable plight of Palestinians in Gaza to the world community and it is an inhuman situation that must be corrected.

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Established in 1994, the activities of IUCTS are guided by an International Research Council that offers recommendations for study on different aspects of terrorism, both conventional and unconventional. IUCTS is cooperating academically with universities and think tanks in over 40 countries, as well as with governmental, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental bodies.

## International Center for Terrorism Studies (ICTS)

Established in 1998 by the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, in Arlington, VA, ICTS administers IUCTS activities and sponsors an internship program in terrorism studies.

## Inter-University Center for Legal Studies (IUCLS)

Established in 1999 and located at the International Law Institute in Washington, D.C., IUCLS conducts seminars and research on legal aspects of terrorism and administers training for law students.

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