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“The Lost Spring between ISIS and Iran: Any Hope for the Middle East?”

SPEAKER:
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Introduction and Moderator:
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Suzanne Scholte: Good afternoon! If I could have everyone’s attention please. I want to begin our program and introduce myself. I’m Suzanne Scholte, the president of the Defense Forum Foundation, and it’s my great pleasure to welcome you all today to our Congressional Defense and Foreign Policy Forum. For those of you who are attending for the first time, this is a program that was started several decades ago: a non-partisan forum to bring congressional staff together to talk about critical issues facing our nation. We’re very proud of our long history of bipartisanship in these forums, and we hope that you will become regular participant. We always promise an expert speaker on a critical issue, but also the opportunity to have a collegial atmosphere and opportunity to visit with other staff. I want to recognize a couple of folks in the audience that are with us today. From our board of directors Jeb Carney, the Vice Chairman of the Defense Forum Foundation sitting right over here. I also want to recognize Stacy Whitehouse who helped us get this room, and has been a wonderful help to help us getting rooms for these programs. She works for Congressman Rob Whitman.

The person I have to introduce today, is very difficult to introduce because he has such an accomplished background in so many different fields. And it’s hard to know which one to focus on. He’s been a successful lawyer, a long time professor, a lecturer, a media analyst, somebody who’s spoken out on human rights issues, and advised minority groups… He’s a very accomplished author. It’s hard to know which one to focus on. But for today, we’re going to talk about his background on terrorism as somebody who predicted the Arab Spring the year before it occurred and has been somebody who’s foreseen a lot of the developments that have happened in the Middle East. It’s a great honor to have Dr. Walid Phares with us. He just got back from Europe last night. He has served for many years as the advisor to the U.S. House of Representatives’ Caucus on Counterterrorism, and the Co-Secretary General of the Transatlantic Legislative Group on Counterterrorism. He’s taught and lectured at many universities, and he’s been a terror analyst for major media organizations ranging from MSNBC to Fox News. So it’s a wide range of people who acknowledge him and respect his expertise on these issues. He’s also a prolific writer, as I mentioned, an author who published his first book while he was a law school student. His most recent book, I want to call to your attention, is entitled, “The Lost Spring: U.S. Policy in the Middle East and Catastrophes to Avoid.” It’s a very great honor for the Defense Forum Foundation to have him with us today to discuss the Lost Spring between ISIS and Iran. Is there any hope for the Middle East? Dr. Phares.
Dr. Phares: Thank you ladies and gentleman. Thank you very much for this introduction. I’d like to thank you all for organizing this event. Last time I was here was in 2011 immediately after the Arab Spring for the upheavals in the region taking place and we made more projections which began by the way in my last book *The Lost Spring: U.S. Policy in the Middle East and Catastrophes to Avoid*. I must say that when I am in the media about to be interviewed, anchors have had problems with the subtitle because the subtitle is “catastrophes to avoid” and they invited me to talk about catastrophes that were not avoided. (*laughter*) I published it last March and then you know the story since…

In June, ISIS and Iran and in Syria and the Houthis in Yemen… Of course Libya is going in a whole direction. The deal with Iran: the deal or no deal or yes a deal, we don’t know yet. So all of that happened within one year. This is one of the richest years with these dramatic events for U.S. policy but also for the region. And even probably more important for them. If you are in Syria, you could have been bombed by the regime and by ISIS and by Nusra that’s pretty much very dramatic for your lives, for your civil societies.

So what I would like to do today -as I was invited and accepted very happily to be with you because of what you do -- especially that most of you are working within (Congressional) offices, and that’s crucial, this engagement is very important to me, as I have been advising many Members of Congress and now many members of the European parliament as well. It’s because the circulation of ideas and the discussion of ideas is critical. Your role is crucial, as well as the role of NGOs represented here. So, thank you for organizing this.

What I would like to do today is to do an overflight of the major crisis now exploding in the Middle East. Today is a dramatic day as you can imagine. Since 5 am when I came back at midnight, at 5 am I was awoken by many networks to address the issue of the killing in France, the terrorist action in France. A few hours later, as I was sitting and being interviewed in front of the camera, we hear about Tunisia. And then we hear about Kuwait. So, I don’t know what will happen by the time we finish this lunch, hopefully nothing, God forbid, but we are encountering these very dramatic events around the region. In addition to our politically dramatic events, which I will not comment about because I am not an expert on domestic politics. So, let me go over this past year very quickly, because the most interesting point is going to be you asking the questions and raising the issues, and that’s where I would love to engage with you.

There has been since last June -- it is a year now -- a series of major changes, geopolitical changes, cataclysmically different from anything we’ve seen before even including the Arab Spring. But as a result of the Arab Spring as well. And I would even add as a result of things that we could have done or things we’ve done that we should’ve done otherwise for the previous either five-or six years for those who are interested in this administration, but also the last 20 years or 25 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union if you want to put it in historical perspective.

So, here we have Daesh Islamic State in Syria (ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī 'l- 'Irāq wa-sh-Shām), Iraq, ISIS or ISIL as the administration likes to call it, take over in a blitzkrieg one-third of Iraq. Actually, about 75% of the Sunni areas of Iraq. That was between June and August. That alone was an earthquake by itself. This is an area which armed forces have been, for many years, working on making sure that Al-Qaeda, the Jihadi group at the time, would be defeated and that we would offer Iraq as a whole to have its own government which allowed us to withdraw as promised by the U.S., by Washington. Now the drama of it is that all the efforts that we put in as a coalition, mostly the United States, were reversed completely within 20 to 25 days. That’s the blitzkrieg. So that alone, deserves the evaluation, the assessment by historians, military historians. But it’s too early for the historians now to cite. We need about 10-20 years to do that.

So from Iraq there was a comeback into Syria. Daesh or ISIS, which was in Syria, back to Iraq. So they sort of help each other to elbow a little bit and create this whole, what they call their caliphate. The ISIS caliphate stretching effectively from Mosul all the way to Raqqa, and down. Now over the past what 60 days to Palmyra which is in the midst of Syria. So actually technically 40% of Syria is in the hands, or under the control of Daesh. Now most of these areas should they be Al-Anbar in Iraq or most of the Syrian deserts are deserts. But
still geopolitically speaking when you look at Saudi Arabia you have Riyadh, and Hejaz, and everything else is desert. But the space is significant.

Now what is also significant is the fact that the counter ISIS Daesh coalition led by the United States, with many partners of course, wasn’t able, over one full year, to reverse the military achievements of, at the end of the day, its’ militia. It’s not even North Korea. It’s not a Saddam Hussein regime with missiles and an air force. So the drama is that our coalition formed by US, Europeans, Arabs, with a full partnership with the Iraqi government, whose army we have trained and spent billions of dollars to help -- you know more than I do because you are the ones spending here -- and then all the strategic supports, it did not work yet.

So the first question to debate and discuss in Washington today, [in] terms of counter terrorism is: What is it that we need to do to be able to defeat ISIS and to bring, well, to reverse, what ISIS has been able to achieve over the past full year. Now, this is only about Syria and Iraq, but there is another area in the Middle East, two other areas in the Middle East that are also problematic, where ISIS-like organizations have been able to seize more territories. And both areas, both countries, which you have guessed already, Yemen and Libya, are situated in dramatically important geopolitical areas. Now let me begin with Libya first.

Libya has been bleeding since the upheaval. Well, since the collapse of the Gaddafi regime. It has actually never known stability since then. I mean while in Iraq and other places there were changes and there was some stability, and then the stability collapsed. In Libya, no. There was not one day of stability. Because those forces that brought down Muammar Gaddafi, backed by us, by NATO at the time, themselves became engaged in a civil war against each other. So you have the more jihadist, Salafist, a plethora of forces, some of which were linked to Al-Qaeda, others now are claiming allegiance to Daesh, ISIS, others more independent, on the one hand, That’s the Libya today controlling parts of the capital, parts of the second largest city of Benghazi, and significantly a part of the eastern part of Libya. I wish I had a map to visualize that. On the one hand, on the other hand, former bureaucrats, army officers, of the ancient Libya, the old ex-Libya regime who rose against Gaddafi but are rising now against the jihadist led by the general who was most effective during the time of Gaddafi, lived in Virginia for 20 years, and then back to Libya after the revolution, and General Haftar is now leading that counter offensive.

But that, is only the major problem in Libya. Then, you have in the south, by the way, a brewing revolt since you are interested in predictions, so in the south of Libya you have a more African ethnicity minority, the Toubous, who do not want to come back to this unified Libya which is not unified now. That’s one of the problems of the future. And to the west of Libya, you have a minority by the name of Berber Amazigh who actually are omnipresent across North Africa, which also has a militia. So that’s Libya alone. Now what are the strategic consequences of the chaos in Libya –there are two kinds. Number one, this is an oil producer that is critical for the Europeans, for European economies. So whomever controls the access, whomever controls the oil reserves and the trade, will have pressure on Europe. But second, more importantly and dramatically, over the past few months, was the wave of migrants, thousands of migrants, coming from all parts of Africa through Libya, and then sailing through the Mediterranean to Italy and other parts of Europe creating this problem with migrants. As Suzanne just mentioned. I just came back from Europe and the chief point of discussion was what to do with these migrants. Of course by this morning I’m assuming the discussion is about the terror act that took place in France. So, Libya is very important for our allies in the Mediterranean and of course in Europe.

Third point of pressure is in Yemen. Now I would move to say that Yemen most likely outside ISIS in the north is the most strategic, threatening, and dangerous place depending on who will finalize control of that country. And I wish we had all the time we can, but I will try to summarize the best I can.

In Yemen you have two moves, and each one of these two moves will have effects and consequences on the region. One was by a pro-Iranian militia which was an initially located in the North of Yemen. You know, just a tiny little enclave in the city of Samtah. That militia over the years was backed by, financed, and then trained, and then most likely, sort of, I don’t want to say manipulated, but put in a sort of alliance with the Iranian
regime. They were past Iran, Iranian Revolutionary Guards going to Yemen, members of the Hezbollah and Lebanon as well. And over the past six months another blitzkrieg, this time waged by this Houthi Militia that descended from Samtah in the North, which is on the Saudi borders, seized the capital of Sana’a, and when that happened, to me this was another of these earthquakes happening… A capital, an Arab capital, falling into the hands of the militia. ISIS did control large cities, and of course would love fantasizing about Damascus and Baghdad, but did not seize capitals. This militia actually seizing a capital, the capital, Sana’a, to a point whereby a higher ranking official, Soleimani, the head of the Quds force, the central security agency, if you want, of the Iranian regime, declared very candidly a few months ago that we and the Iranian regime have control over four Arab capitals. Which are these four Arab capitals: Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and now Sana’a. Now this is a sentence of huge importance. If you compare the achievements of ISIS which are very bloody, very ugly if you want to put it that way, and then the very slow tectonic advances that the other side of the Middle East is achieving, while we are even negotiating with them. But more dramatic was the fact that this militia, after seizing the capital, over the past four months did the incredible thing which was to travel south all the way, and they are now in the suburbs of the second largest city of Yemen, and that is, Aden.

Now why is this important? Because from Aden, what this militia can achieve, is to reach the Red Sea. To reach the coast of the Red Sea. For you who are geographers, you know that there are two very important points in the Middle East that could put pressure on the world economy. One is the Hormuz Strait. That one we know very well because we’re there. We’re in UAE and Qatar and Kuwait. And then the other one, which is not that far, it’s on the other side of the peninsula, Bab-el-Mandeb. Bab-el-Mandeb is that little strait between Yemen and Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti. Now, whoever has any strategic control over the area can affect world trade, especially world energy trade. And this pro-Iranian militia is actually there on the coast. I am not claiming that at this point in time they have the upper hand militarily. They are not equipped yet. But if they are not reversed, as is the case in Syria and Iraq with ISIS, then if they are stabilized there, what is going to happen is that Iran will be the master of the area. And that is going to create a lot of changes in the region.

So, the second move that came after the invasion by this militia, or, advanced by this militia, was a campaign, an air campaign, waged by Saudi Arabia as a result. Because the Saudis understood that a victory by the Houthis around Yemen would put a lot of pressure on the Saudis, and actually, I don’t want to expand too much on that, but in a very summarized way, an Iranian presence in Yemen would actually sandwich Saudi Arabia because Iran is across the gulf. Iran now is trying to have influence in Eastern Saudi Arabia, and a pro-Iranian element in the south of Saudi Arabia. Let me dramatize it a little bit more, for the Muslim world, a pro-Iranian militia in Yemen would be at the straight shot from the two most important shrines of Islam which are Mecca and Medina. I mean you cross the border between Yemen and Hejaz, straight shot you are at Mecca and Medina. So it is very big for the Muslim Sunni war, for the Saudis, for the gulf… They wage that campaign, the air campaign, which continues, and goes in parallel with the air campaign that we and our partners are waging in Syria and Iraq. So the whole region is under air campaigns. One is against ISIS, the other is against that specific militia.

Now, you add to this the Iranian role in Iraq and Syria, and in Lebanon, and you would realize that at the end of the day there is a race in the region. You have on the one hand Salafi, Jihadi, ISIS – whatever you want to call them, expansion, and when you look at each country, you will see that ISIS is the only force that is expanding more than other. We’ve pushed back against them. We’ve killed their leaders. We destroyed everything that is on any road in Iraq and Syria. We’re good at that. But what we have not been able to do is to actually reverse, to obliterate the forces. The Iraqi army takes a village somewhere, ISIS takes back another village somewhere else. It reminds me more of WWI than WWII. Remember in France, or on the Russian German border, you know they would move 100 miles in one direction and the other army moves 100 miles in the other direction. So there was no real end of the war or end of the conflict.

Within this whole context of conflicts, let me just mention another human rights, or humanitarian disaster that is happening. We all know about ISIS massacres, killings, slaughter, and beheading of hostages. That is not
something that I want to be talking about – you know as much as I do. But there is one place in Northern Iraq and in Eastern Syria where the stakes are much higher for small communities.

Meaning, as I stated before in front of many audiences, at the end of the day, there will be Shia. At the end of the day when this whole thing is going to be resolved. There is going to be Shia. You watch. They’re not going to fly elsewhere. There will be Sunni in Iraq. There will be Sunni in Syria. You know, maybe the Alawites will continue to be somewhere in Syria. But there are small communities, very precious small communities that are or have inhabited parts of northern Iraq and parts of northeastern Syria. At the end of this conflict, even if the international community would win, they would be gone. And that’s a drama for these communities. It’s as if we say, well there were a lot of Jews in Europe after the Holocaust. Large parts of Europe have no Jews or very few. In Northern Iraq you have the area of minorities stretching from the north of Al-Anbar and then Nineveh valleys the so-called Nineveh valley. Among them obviously you’ve heard of the Yazidi, the Yazidi communities, about 600-700 thousand. Thousands of them have been killed. Thousands of their women are now, have been taken by ISIS as sex slaves, sexual slaves. This is happening in the twenty first century, this is not fifteenth century or seventh century. And in addition, to that that they have been moved out of their communities. Most of them, most of the refugees are in Kyrgyzstan. Fortunately, there is an area of Iraq, which is Iraqi Kurdistan, that has been able to withstand the advances of ISIS and also absorb hundreds of thousands of Yazidis and absorb hundreds of thousands of Christian Iraqis such as Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Syrians. And also Sunni, there are Sunni Arabs who are moderates who fled ISIS. Everyone is sitting in Kurdistan so heavy, haha, putting it in a cartoon-esque way, that it may collapse economically, if we don’t really support that. In Syria, there is a comparable situation Northeastern part of Syria, there is an area where you have Kurds and you have Christian minorities, the Syriacs, and then some Sunni Arabs as well attacked by ISIS. Fortunately for that part of Syria, they were able to themselves withstand those attacks. You must have heard certainly about the fight in Kobani, this is one city isolated north of Syria, not yet linked to that part or soon to be linked. So, you have all these conflicts stretching from Libya, to Yemen, to Iraq, to Syria.

I may add quickly, use 30 seconds to say. Lebanon is not far from falling into that confrontation as well. Al-Nusra in Syria and ISIS as well coming from Syria are trying to penetrate Lebanon from Lipika and from the north. I don’t want to make another projection here, but since we may meet at another date in the future, there is a possibility that these Jihadi militias may seize a large city inside Lebanon, inside Northern Lebanon, which is Tripoli, so I’m making this statement now. Because all indicates that they are concentrating and ISIS has already made a statement about that. That would bring Lebanon, a third country in the Fertile Crescent, in that part of “the Levant” if you want into the problem, the major problem.

Now, I will not end my remarks before talking about the overarching U.S. policy in the region. At the heart of this policy now, there is a… see Washington, it’s not a secret, is divided on this issue. I’m not going to be telling secrets here. It’s Iran. We have the administration, which is going very firmly in the direction of trying to sign that final agreement with the Iranian regime on the nuclear, on the nuclear deal. They, the U.S. and other countries signed already one pre-agreement, the Framework Arrangement, and the Iranian regime is promising that they will sign. On the other hand, all indicates, including State Department reports that the behavior of the Iranian regime outside the agreement including inside the agreement, meaning they are not really helping the parliament of… Iran is behaving in a way that is not helpful for the agreement. But other agencies if you want are in full-fledged confrontation including with our allies, the Arab moderates, the gulf, and of course the role in Syria and beyond. But beyond that, the real question is, is the Iranian regime interested in signing an agreement and is interested in implementing the agreement? Now we have a divided Washington. There is a majority in congress, from both parties, that does not trust the Iranian regime. There is a debate within this majority should we give the administration that one shot: let them try and if they fail, then we go back to sanctions. In my own view, that’s my own view we are going to get to a point when the Iranians may not deliver, but by the time when that would happen, conditions of the ground would be much more difficult to reverse.
Let me give you an example I was sharing with some of my friends here at the table. Yes, for those in Washington who argue that trying to negotiate, which is rational, and if they don’t, we still have the sanctions to impose. My view is that while negotiating, there are things we need not to do so if there is a failure we can still have the cards to put pressure. And one of the things I was focusing on was: let’s not release a wad of cash to the Iranian regime before the Iranian regime actually comes to the agreement. Why? Over the past year, last year 2014, we sent a billion dollars. From what? From 20 billion dollars of Iranian frozen assets in the United States since the time of the Shah. This year, by the end of this year, we should have released another seven billion dollars. But this is part of the deal with the Iranian regime. The problem is what the Iranian regime will do with this money. If it takes it and spends it on the people of Iran, then great. But apparently the first thing after we promised we are going to be releasing, some of that money, the next day, Russia says, now because of the agreement I can send my S300 sophisticated anti-aircraft long-range missiles, which if deployed in Iran, will be used by the Iranian regime to deter us or anybody in the region in the case of them not committing to the agreement. See that game? It’s a very complicated one. So, in my view, while it’s okay to negotiate, and we could negotiate and anybody who’s charge will know probably better but one thing to be very attentive to is not to empower the Iranian regime to actually have the tools for not implementing the agreement if that agreement is signed. So these are in general terms, the major development and drama in the region.

In conclusion, some of the recommendations with regard to Iraq and Syria and the fight against ISIS. Well there is the kinetic fight against ISIS. The U.S. has decided to do it from the air by bombardment and also from other means, I mean, intelligence, swift commando activities, training the Iraqis, and so on and so forth. But here’s the problem, here’s the center of the problem. ISIS is feeding like insects. They are feeding from within an area of Sunni majority. This is where they are recruiting people. The majority of that community is against ISIS but like any totalitarian regime, it doesn’t matter what the feelings of the majority is. It matters that they can recruit and draft and control. We saw that with the national socialist and the Bolsheviks in past decades. So ISIS is in control of those areas from Mosul down to Al-Anbar and of course inside Syria. The Iraqi army as is right now, which is our partner, when it moves inside those Sunni areas, against ISIS, you feel and you realize over the past weeks and months that something very strange has happened is that the majority of the population may not help ISIS but is not really helping the Iraqi army. The Iraqi army finds itself almost in an alien place.

Remember in the beginning of this drama last year exactly, how could two fully-armed divisions of the Iraqi army completely melt, melt down? In Mosul, after being attacked by hundreds, hundreds, there are thousands, hundreds of, you know, four by four trucks, running and screaming. And why did they run? They felt that the city was not with them. They felt that they are an expeditious force of Shia sitting inside a Sunni area. And in the Battle of Ramadi there was a repeat of that issue. What that means. It means that in ethnic environment, you can’t have an army made of one ethnic group go to another area made of another ethnic group without having representation from all ethnicities. So that’s, that is basically what is making the campaign against ISIS not successful and of course we could spend more time on Syria which is even worse.

So why is it that the Iraqi army and the Iraqi government which is supposed to be our partner not opening up to the Sunni moderates? Or at the same time, telling us you have a limited role in this affair. Because there is an influence coming from the east which is the Iranian regime, Iran doesn’t want that the Sunni areas of Iran could be freed by a Sunni force because they will have to deal with it later. They don’t want that most of Iran will be freed on the ground under any circumstances by an international force because when we free, as an international community, an area and a community, we are not going to allow the return of a dictatorship or of the Iranian. So it reminds me a little bit of the second war, World War II. When between Stalin and the Allies there was this consideration, it’s not just to bring down Hitler and the Nazis it’s what we will do with the whole of Europe afterwards the collapse of that regime and so that’s why in Iraq and Syria we see those difficulties. And it’s true. It could be applied also to Turkey. Could be applied to Qatar with regards to Syria.

My final suggestion is that these strategies have to be revised. I mean this is what we were able to achieve within one year, slow down the expansion of ISIS. Actually, ISIS, if you have realized, does not fight much in non-Sunni areas except in the minority areas where it was able to ethnic-cleanse the Christians and the Yazidis,
but when it met resistance by the Kurds, it stopped. When it met resistance by the Shia in the south, it stopped. It is expanding only in the Sunni areas. So we need to begin, first of all, by finding a Sunni partner, a Sunni moderate partner. Use all the resources in the Arab world that are willing, including a coalition of Arab forces that are willing to train and support these Sunni moderates. And with them execute the liberation of Sunni areas. And then, try to recreate again one more time, because we tried it one time in multi-ethnic Iraq. Otherwise, the only projection and final one I can see is that Iraq is going to go into three countries, into three areas, into three warring areas. Kurds in the North, Sunni ISIS in the center, and then pro-Iranian government ruling the Shia parts of Iraq. And similar scenarios can be applied to Syria and hopefully not also to Lebanon.

With this, I would like to land now after this overview and I would be happy to engage in any debate and questions. Thank you so much. *Applause*

**Question 1:** You mention and make the point that ISIS is moving in and they’re essentially a militia. Are the existing people there just so timid that they have no willingness to fight at all and just don’t care?

A: The people under ISIS and then the people around ISIS: the people around ISIS have all been able to fight and try to stop them, beginning with the Kurds in the North at a high price, the Iraqi sort of Shia belt in the South, the minorities are gone, the Christians have been ethnic cleansed, the Yazidis have been ethnic cleansed, so they are sitting and living in the North. Underneath ISIS, you have Sunni. Yes, they have tried. If you recall in the first months of the ISIS blitzkrieg, ISIS executed hundreds if not thousands of Sunni moderates. See, when I’m asked in the media sometime, why is ISIS so brutal? That is precisely the answer to your question. They are showing what will happen to you. It’s like the Nazis in World War II. These mass executions are a signal to the occupied societies that you will have the same treatment.

Most recently there are some tribes in Al-Anbar area armed partially by us and by the Iraqi government that are trying to push. But even the terminology that we are using “arming the tribes,” in my view is a weak one. Why? It’s not just… okay imagine distributing AK-47 to people, to tribesmen, and then telling them “go fight.” No, you have to actually create an Arab-Sunni force with its own command, with its own hierarchy and backed by us. This has not happened. Why didn’t it happen? And thank you for the question because it then allowed me to answer another question. Because the government in Baghdad is against it. So Baghdad wants us to hit from the air, give them the weapons, and they don’t want to send the weapons to the Sunni tribes except those who are supportive of them. So that would need a change of attitude in Baghdad. If Baghdad changes attitude, then we cannot just arm the Sunnis but create a force among the Sunni and that force can rise against ISIS.

**Question 2:** What do you think the United States and its alliance in the Middle East can do to strengthen the governments already impacted by ISIS? Because I think one of the reasons that ISIS has been able to really succeed is people see it as a source of stability in a lot of countries where there isn’t stability. And in the United States, a lot of people see it as part of that problem. So what do you think can be done to combat or find an alternative to this stability that I just described?

A: We tried one year, but whatever we have done, I’m not sure what it was, but it was one year. I think we should try something else. And that something else we need to try is to work with actual partners who see eye to eye with us, not with half an eye or quarter of an eye and then using our resources and then they have a different project. Because, let’s be honest here, should it be Iran or Turkey maybe, halfway. They have their own interests and so they would want us to do part of these interests and then they would… for example, the Erdogan government would like us to bring down Assad, but then when we say, “who is going to take replace Assad?” The answer is “don’t worry, we’ll take care.” No, we worry. We want to know exactly who is going to replace Assad. In Iraq, just help us keep the shooting, send your heaviest bombers destroy ISIS and the question is: so what happens after ISIS is destroyed? “Oh, don’t worry, we will go in and…” No. We can’t do that. Because every time we’ve done it before we did it precisely with regard to the Sunni triangle with Al-Qaeda. We destroyed Al-Qaeda, and then the Morisi government told us, “don’t worry. We will handle that.” What did they do? They persecuted the Sunnis and then brought this situation.
So, my suggestion is to find a partner that is first reliable, second regional, third, made of government that we can rely on. So, I am with the idea that is now circulating in the Middle East of an Arab military alliance made of those who have demonstrated that they could gather on the ground and that would be Saudi, UAE, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, and on. These countries, if they form such an alliance, first of all they can deliver on the ground. They can do this way better than us. I mean they’re distinct, but their intelligence services know better how to deal with, you know, extremists and counter extremism.

But on the other hand there is another dividend, which is the Sunnis of Iraq and the Sunnis of Syria will let go of ISIS if they see another Sunni force coming to free them from ISIS. So we may not have to put boots on the ground, we don’t need to put boots on the ground, but to select the right boots on the ground to fight in the right battlefields of the Middle East. That would be my one recommendation. The other recommendation is to slow down on the Iran thing until Iran delivers. So, we give Iranians if Iranians stop their support Hezbollah in Lebanon. If the Iranians stop their support of Assad, then we start delivering. But now we are delivering everything and Iran has not changed behavior. These would be my major two recommendations in policy change.

Question 3: First off all, I just wanted to say thank you. That was an awesome talk. This last term, I actually had a roommate from Kurdistan and you know, I’m kind of joking with the subject here, but he was saying how him and all his family really were really looking forward to the defeat of ISIS because he believed that- well he’s an optimistic guy- he’s believing that Kurdistan will be able to achieve its own state assuming ISIS is defeated. Does Kurdistan have a chance of reaching some sort of agreement around greater autonomy?

A: Well I have the answer of a historian and I have the answer of an analyst dealing with realities of Washington, Brussels, and the region. As a historian, I would say because I have dealt with the issue of Kurdistan since, since you know, I was born and raised in Lebanon. I had one life there, and a second longer life here. Since the beginning of my involvement in Middle Eastern issues, I believe firmly that the Kurds eventually are going to have their own country. And, well, like it or not, this is the drive of most national ethnic groups everywhere. Now in Iraq, they have been able to achieve a greater level of autonomy thanks to, unfortunately, conflicts. Not thanks to the generosity of Saddam Hussein or now the generosity of ISIS. They will. Why? Because they are determined they are going to do it. So what they have now is an autonomous area in Northern Iraq. What ISIS has done was to give this Northern Iraq Kurdish autonomy even more access to becoming de facto independent. I mean they have an international airport. They have their own oil. They have a military force. They have even offices here on 16th street who represent them. So it’s almost there. The one thing they don’t want to do is, is to actually declare “we are an independent republic” because that opens a Pandora box in the region. Baghdad is not ready for that, but to be honest, we are not ready for that: I mean, the U.S. and the Europeans. But down the line, I think that eventually they are going to go from what is today a federation in Iraq to a confederation and a confederation is a loose gathering of republics. So, eventually, I think they are going in that direction. How will the historical circumstances play for that to happen is something beyond our projection at this point in time.

Question 4: I would like to thank you first of all for your presentation. If someone is both a skeptic about the effectiveness of sanctions against Iran given that they have expanded so successfully under sanctions and a skeptic of almost any agreement that we can come to that will be more than a piece of paper. It seems that if you’re a skeptic of both sanctions and an agreement it seems it is up to Iran whether it wants nuclear weapons or not. It has the resources under sanctions to develop a nuclear weapon as you have been perceiving, without sanctions and a piece of paper that is called an agreement, they will have more resources to pursue a nuclear weapon. So it is beyond us as long as the Iranian regime is in place. It’s up to them whether they want it or not. What would be your response and is there anything we can do as a matter of policy to change that?

Answer: Well I’ll begin with the conclusion. I think I’m among those who think that we need to have an alternative policy, a review of policy in regards to Iran. So I’ll begin from here. All the policies including the
previous policy, I’m not just talking about today’s administration but even past administrations, have not led to a change in Iran so something has to change. First, with regards to sanctions, the sanctions were put... if you take every single sanction, it is like the air campaign against ISIS. Today, this morning, I was asked on TV, what is your assessment? Well, every single tactical strike is successful, right? Every time we have a, whatever, flying, you know a platform flying, and we target a vehicle, we destroy the vehicle. But a collection of tactical victories does not mean a strategic victory. That’s one.

With regard to Iran, every single sanction we put, was successful. We stopped this company from doing business with Iran and then we flexed muscle and we are successful. No, we are not successful because the sanctions were applied essentially on the civil society of Iran. They were the ones who couldn’t get a lot of stuff. But in Iran you have two economies: the wider economy of the people and the economy of the regime. The economy of the regime is completely insulated from the economy of the people. They have the cash. They own the bank. And besides the back of Iran was completely open to Russians and Chinese and Brazil and I mean the sanctions were successful, but the strategy was not. So I agree with regard… Even now, let’s suppose now we have a super unity in Washington, which would be a miracle, and we all say let’s put again more sanctions. Even that is not going to work. It’s going to be very difficult for the Iranian regime to maneuver but it’s not going to bring down the Iranian regime or change their behavior.

Now, what is more interesting in my view? If the Iranian long-term strategy of producing or not producing the nuclear weapons and why and how, it is why I agree with you, I would agree with you, even more. The Iranian regime is the one deciding if and when and how they are going to show that weapon system. We are not doing much to actually do anything with it because we are concentrating in the wrong direction. Again, this is my own view. I wrote a piece in 2007 and I titled it, “It’s the Missiles not the Fissiles.” not the fissile material. Because the Iranians have, the Iranian regime that is, have funneled a strategy and I called it, “building the dome first.” They want to protect the forthcoming weapons with a dome they would build, and once they would have the dome, then we cannot get that weapon from them. Because you and I would understand if they show us that they have a nuclear weapon, what will happen immediately to that nuclear weapon? There are many people in the region before us who would be interested in going and taking out that first weapon. The only way not to eliminate their first weapon is to have many of it and to have a dome that will protect it. All to have the capacity of deterring us from doing it. So what they have been doing over the past few years was to build slowly and surely the capacity to deter us and protect the baby that was not yet born. They’re not going to build the baby first.

So what is it that they have done? Number one they expanded in the region. So we’re not dealing with Iran, our public thinks that we are only dealing with Iran. No, we are dealing with Iran, and Iraq, and Syria and Lebanon and Gaza and now Yemen and possibly Bahrain. So when we will come back from our dreams and say oh now we are going to put pressure. On what? On, five, six countries in the region. It’s not any more Iran. Second, when we are going to deal with Iran we are going to find a different Iran because we are now indirectly funding the purchase by Iran with our cash, or the cash that was here, of S300 long-range missiles and another canopy of weapons. So, what the Iranian regime has been trying to do was to create that dome of defense and at the very end when they feel that they don’t need anything from us, they got the cash, they got the land, and they got the will then they are going to display that weapon and say we have it as Pakistan and India said and did in 1999. What did they do? They set off a couple of those and said, we are a nuclear power. What are you going to do about it?

**Question 5:** Going back to your analysis of defeating ISIS and forming a ground troop with the Arab allies. Saudis and UAE and the other Sunni states would not do that right now because, again, their focus is Iran more than other places because they see that as a long-term threat to them. And it will be difficult for them to take that and do it because then the other strategy that comes in that if you go and defeat ISIS with the influence of Iran and Iraq, what would happen to the Sunnis? So how do we deal with that to form a coalition?
Dr. Phares: Thank you for this brilliant question actually because strategic agreement question. Meaning This Arab coalition has priorities. I would even go one inch further.

Interjection: As a matter of fact, Saudis and UAE are actually looking now not towards the U.S. towards Israel…

Dr. Phares: That’s also another aspect.

Interjection: That’s the first time, so it’s like Iran is uniting…

Dr. Phares: Yes, yes. Absolutely. In my own knowledge, and that’s not just of you because I was in Egypt and the Middle East and I spoke to many high-ranking officials. This Arab Coalition has priorities. Believe it or not the first priority of a Saudi-led coalition in the peninsula is where now?

Audience Member: Yemen.

Dr. Phares: Yemen. So what they are saying, we’d love to have that coalition, will help you everywhere when we will be free. But first, we need to deal with Yemen. And they are right, I mean Yemen is here on their flank. So they want the Arab Coalition first to visit Yemen. Then Egypt is telling them, I’ll be very helpful and I have a million soldier army but I have a problem next door. What is it? Where is it? Libya. An effort … has gone and tried to do, is to try and get this international approval by the Europeans and others and probably with, you know, regard the migrant, everything you want to deal with Libya. Third and only final will be Syria and Iraq. But again as the gentleman has mentioned, Syria and Iraq are we going to see Arab-Sunni armies engaged in an invasion to fight Sunni extremists while Iran is the one threatening them. Well here could be interpretation. Because if they first secure Yemen and Libya, that is a first. They cannot move without securing these two places. The answer would be yes for the reason that if they take out ISIS they will replace ISIS will Sunni moderate Iraqi army that would actually cut Iran from the Asset regime from Hezbollah, so it could turn to the advantage if they are able to do it. But there are two problems with that, the big two problems.

Number one, the one I mentioned when are they ready? Not now. Not in a year. And second, will we support this? This administration, the next administration. I know that this administration may not support that, but I’m not sure about who is going to be in the White House in a few years from now, so these will be the two problems that this coalition will have to face that is…

This will allow me probably to give one answer to a potential question but I would like to make that statement now. Not every force in the Middle East is eternal. Not even Iran. Not even the Iranian regime. Now, most of you remember if not all of you what happened in June of 2009 inside Iran. There was a revolution. There were 1.8 to 2 million Iranians, not Arabs, not Kurds, not Swedes, Iranian youth. 60% of the demonstrators were under the age of 20 then. One quarter of the demonstrators the first few days were girls. That’s Iran. Including the Neda (Neda Agha-Soltan), the symbol, the one who was killed by the Iranian regime. Iranian regime leaders know very well that underneath the younger generations are not going to perpetuate that regime. It’s only there by force. So there was a spasm in 1999 when there was a revolt on Iranian campuses across Iran, but there was no real, at the time, Facebook, or internet, so we didn't know much about it. I mean, only the experts knew about it. A second wave came ten years later in 2009, this time we knew about it because of Twitter. It was called the Twitter Revolution. Most of the things we see today happened actually in the past, the bad things and the good things. The only difference we did not know about it because there was no social media. It’s like the massacres in Southern Sudan. One million black people were killed. We did not know much about that, because only the experts knew because it was not on CNN. It was not on Facebook. So my projections for Iran, it that the Iranian regime is in a hurry to obtain that nuke and to consolidate its power on the outside because it is afraid from the inside. The inside, not may, will explode again. The question is, when that will happen, will we be ready to assist that inside so it will change the regime not by our own actions but by the actions of the Iranian people. That’s another question. Thank you so much ladies and gentlemen for giving me the opportunity to talk.
*Applause*