

After the Islamic State: Consequences and Beneficiaries
Foundation for Defense of Democracies
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JONATHAN SCHANZER: How are you doing everyone? My name is Jonathan Schanzer. I'm the vice president for research here at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. Thank you all for being here. I want to especially welcome members of the diplomatic community. I know there are a number of ambassadors here in the crowd as well as. I want to thank members of the media for being here. Today's conversation is titled "After the Islamic State: Consequences and Beneficiaries." We are pleased to host this conversation in partnership with FDD's Long War Journal. For those of you who were not aware, this is really, I think the go-to site for military intelligence and media. It is edited by Bill Roggio as well as Tom Joscelyn, FDD's Tom Joscelyn, and so they've really been doing I think a terrific granular analysis on Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and jihadist movements worldwide. I encourage you to take a visit to that site if you have not been there.

Just as an FYI, today's event will be live-streamed on the FDD website as well as on Facebook, so I encourage guests here and online to join the conversation on Twitter. Our handle is @FollowFDD.

Right now I'd like to just ask you, if you haven't already, to please silence you cell phones just to make sure that we have a discussion that is not interrupted. I'm pleased to hand over the conversation to Nancy Youssef, who is a national security correspondent *Buzzfeed*. Thank you very much for being here, and I look forward to the conversation.

NANCY YOUSSEF: As do I. Thank you so much. Well I'm delighted to be here with such a fantastic panel to talk about the after-effects of ISIS, and so I'd like to start with, because we're limited on time, just do a brief introduction to our panelists to my right. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, who is a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies. My colleague, Mike Giglio, who is an investigative journalist, and war correspondent at *Buzzfeed*. To his right, Robin Simcox, who specializes in terrorism and national security analysis as the Margaret Thatcher Fellow at the Heritage Foundation, and finally Tom Joscelyn, who is senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies and senior editor at the Long War Journal.

What I'd like to do is sort of start on the ground tactically and look at where we are in terms of the war, and gradually expand to the broader campaign against Islamic extremism. I'd really like to Mike Giglio here because he's spent significant time on the ground both in eastern Mosul and western Mosul where the fight against ISIS continues.

Mike, I'd love to hear your on-the-ground observations about how the fighting has evolved from eastern Mosul to western Mosul. What that tells us broadly about the campaign.

MIKE GIGLIO: I think this is the level which is adapting to the battle and the tactics of the coalition is using on the fly. I'm comparing the east to the west which is actually a really significant difference. Most notable thing for example was drones. When the battle started on the

outskirts of Eastern Mosul we had some surveillance drones, and once in a while there'd be of course one of them dropping a bomb. There wasn't really any casualties of significance. They started using them gradually more and more at the end of the battle for the East, but by the time the Western front wasn't able to hold ... assault for drones, so they were just constantly buzzing overhead. I was in the packing convoys for the Iraqi Special Forces. They were dropping bombs on the Humvees, whenever they saw someone get out of the Humvee they were trying to hit them with a bomb from the drones.

Causing throughout each day casualties. Also, what was interesting was, I noticed that the mortar fire, for example was much more effective than it had been in the east. When I was in Eastern Mosul, especially at the beginning, you would notice a lot of ricketing. So ISIS is firing a lot of mortars or it finally hit it's mark. From my experience, early in the West with the drones overhead, they were scoring a lot of direct hits. They would surprise you, they'd just come, you wouldn't have any warning that they were ricketing you. They can cause again the same casualties out the Humvee window. I asked Iraqi commanders, "What's going on with that?" And they said that they do believe that actually ISIS is using that surveillance to help

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Wanted to talk the 50 caliber guns the Iraqi force they're using, they also can provide defense against anti-tank weapon systems. Although, it's not fool-proof, but in essence ... The new development, according to the Iraqi soldiers, they're calling in air strikes. They are putting very bright, they look like a sparkling space ship white, shell on these car bombs. That's so, when the surveillance of the U.S.-backed Coalition, and pilots, and drone [inaudible 00:00:33]. In the past, they've been able to put rust colored, tan colored, now you have a brand new looking car and they're painting them in white and gray. There's another level of adaptation. I think, looking ahead to other battles with ISIS they're clearly taking the lessons. They're learning, and they're adapting pretty quickly to whatever is the next battle.

YOUSSEF: You've just finished a very intense battle for eastern Mosul and now you're facing a more complex fight in western Mosul. What is this doing to the Iraqi Special Forces? Are they short on manpower? Are they short on morale?

GIGLIO: Yeah. Just a little small bit of background. Iraq's military is as you all know collapsed in Mosul due to this massive problem. Iraqi Special Forces are the only-

GIGLIO: And because of, I think, some shortcomings in the Obama Administration's advise assist training mission after the fall of Mosul, the Iraqi military really wasn't up to the task in Mosul. These new divisions that the U.S. built up weren't very effective where they need to be in the fight for Mosul. So they end up putting everything on the back of the Iraqi Special Forces. And they took again a really significant level of casualties. So the soldiers are tired. They're not—the commanders they say are being replaced, but as I hear from soldiers on the ground, they're just going longer without leave in a lot of situations. And when they are

replaced, they're using new soldiers to replace someone who's, again, spent 15 years out in the field in some cases. And they're not replaceable. They'll say that. So they're fighting and they're winning in Mosul, but they're really suffering.

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YOUSSEF: That's something you hear in Washington, that ultimately, ISIS will be defeated in Western Mosul and that there will be battles for other smaller cities, but eventually we will see the end of the Islamic State in Iraq. And Daveed I wanted you to maybe talk about as you see that at that point – our focus today is on after these battles for the Islamic State. Who are the winners and losers going to be? And specifically, if you could talk about Turkey, the Gulf states, Iran, and the United States.

DAVEED GARTENSTEIN-ROSS: Well I think you have two major winners and then three major losers. The losers are Turkey, which through all this—when we look at after ISIS, basically we're looking at two different sides of the equation. We're looking at the Iraq side of the equation and the Syria side of the equation. Turkey threw all-in on the anti-Assad side, and lately has made noise about backing off its position. Basically the forces that they've supported are ending up either somewhat mildly or very strongly in the pro-jihadi camp, which Erdogan may be okay with for now, but ultimately that poses a danger to Turkey.

The currents are a much stronger force, with Kurdish statehood looking if not inevitable, then at least you'll have a de-facto statehood. So essentially, Turkey fought. They lost. They're stuck with the refugee problem.

The second loser is the GCC states. They had the opportunity to topple an Iranian ally in Assad. They failed to do so. And ultimately the part of Syria which they're still going to have some influence over is in very hard-liner jihadist hands, which may help them somewhat, but they're not getting the result that they wanted.

The U.S. is the final loser because no one's been able to really figure out what we've been after the past 6 years there. We have a set of policies and who knows what they were?

On the winners side, you have two. One of them is al-Qaeda and the other one is Iran, and these two can be seen as feeding off of each other. On the Iranian side, they were able to preserve Assad, though he's very weak and only has part of the country in hand. But in Iraq they've been able to make their presence permanent. The Iraqi government owes them. And they have the PMC, the Popular Mobilization Committee, having not just Iraqi citizens, but from all over. From Bahrain and the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, which gives them, essentially, the Shia international they can use to project power in a really unusual way. It could be threatening to the GCC.

Al-Qaeda is able to play off of that. For a while they've played off ISIS in a rather brilliant way. Tom and I wrote about this back in 2014 right when the U.S. campaign began. They've played off of ISIS by rebranding themselves in a way they've been looking to do ever since al-Qaeda in Iraq lost, showing themselves as the more reasonable, maybe even controllable

jihadist force. Saying, 'look now everyone knows the true Khawarij are, and that's ISIS. We're actually the organization that's in line with the aspirations of the people,' making themselves much more of a popular movement. But with respect to the GCC states, they've been able to also play off of the Iraq competition and frame themselves, not just in Syria, but also in Yemen, as being this anti-Iran force that at the very least the GCC states can work with, even if they don't want to.

Then of course there's the ongoing Sunni grievances. Someone is going to be able to capitalize on that, whether it's ISIS 2.0 or al-Qaeda—which there's rumors that they're starting to capitalize on it now. Someone's going to capitalize on it. With all of the various atrocities committed, including by the PMCs you have the stage set for this whole scenario to play out again.

YOUSSEF: That's arguably already starting. We're hearing rumblings of Al Qaeda coming back in the places like Anbar. The forces that Mike talked about are not enough for that to sort of keep a hold of some of those cities while there's such an intense battle for a place like Mosul. From your perspective, how aggressively are we starting to see the return of Al Qaeda in Iraq, and what are the sort of big changes you've seen in Al Qaeda vis-a-vis Syria?

TOM JOSCELYN: Well, you know, to understand how Al Qaeda schemed us out back in 2013, Aiman Al-Zawahiri sent a letter to a guy known as Abu Ali Albari who is one of the top Islamic state officials. And he said "I hear you guys are talking about building the caliphate, you're going to announce a caliphate," and he said "What caliphate? You're in a street fight. You're not going to be able to build a state. You're not going to be able to provide for the people, you're not going to be able to withstand all the international pressure that will come your way once you make this declaration." So Al Qaeda has very consistently said all along that the Islamic State is going to lose its state, going to lose its caliphate. And we saw throughout last year a couple of very interesting messages from Zawahiri, who does still maintain quite a bit of influence in the jihadist world despite some of the prognostication we've seen by others.

Zawahiri, last year he actually started to issue statements basically calling on his brothers in Syria to help reshape the jihad in Iraq, to help restart it. Because obviously Islamic State had failed, they hadn't captured the public opinion and the popular opinion to basically support them in the long run. They hadn't ingrained themselves in society in a way that keep them from losing their grip on their Islamic emirate in Iraq, and so therefore he basically called on his brother in Syria to basically take the strategy they used in Syria and apply it to Iraq, of course making the modifications given they're different countries.

Well that's very telling right? I mean that basically says that Zawahiri and Al Qaeda see Syria as a success for their sort of new strategy in waging jihad. And that strategy has been, as Daveed and I have written about a number of times, has been to build popular support for their cause and play these games with their branding and not try and be overtly Al Qaeda, but actually adopt different names. I was at a recent dinner and I asked the people, 30-some odd national security professionals, I said "What does Al Qaeda call itself in Syria right now?" And two people said 'Nusra Front,' which I said, "well that was a good guess as of July 28th last year." But they've changed their name twice since then. So part of what they've been doing is trying to

brand themselves in a way to portray themselves as the representatives of the popular Sunni population throughout Syria, and there are rumblings that they're going to try and do the same thing in Iraq.

Now, how does this work in Syria - well in Syria their current name is Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, which is the assembly for the liberation of Syria and the Levant. And they merged, they announced the merger in January with several other organizations that they had long been cooperating with. And there's all sorts of infighting disagreements over this, and this isn't a clean win for them, but it's a win over all. They have now got control over Idlib in northwestern Syria, they're able to manage operations throughout Syria and they've been able to sow strategic confusion about what exactly the extent of Al Qaeda's network in their designs really is. I think that they will borrow from elements of that from both the branding side and also trying to build popular support, if and when they do decide to come back in Iraq.

YOUSSEF: Robin, you talked a lot about the Islamic State, and how it's been able to reach out to the west, but now they're losing their grip. We're starting to see a potentially resurgent Al Qaeda. From your perspective, how has that loss of territory changed its ability to influence in Europe and in the west, in particular when it comes to recruiting? Can you be as effective?

ROBIN SIMCOX: Al-Qaeda has not been as, obviously, has not been as prolific as ISIS on that front. But, you have to assume that a lot of that is predicated upon the fact that ISIS was seen to be this, certainly for a couple of years period, seem to be this dominant force that was preeminent in Jihadist movement. They were controlling territories in Syria and Iraq, and looking to make news in Nigeria, and other parts where conflict is taking place.

But I did notice they have a slightly different recruiting method to Al-Qaeda, probably always have. I mean ISIS is, kind of, like a troll. Am I right? Taking in all that it can. I think Al-Qaeda has been a little more discerning, historically, who it has assigned to carry out operations on its behalf. And a little more discerning about the targets they would go after. Particularly when we think about operations in the West.

So, as ISIS loses territory, you have to assume there will be some loss of appeal. Whether Al-Qaeda will be the group that necessarily gains from that, I'm less sure on. I do think that, and Tom and Daveed have written on this extensively, Al-Qaeda's strength has been pretty consistently well-played. And, I'll just give one example of how that plays out in the policy debate in Europe.

Because Al-Qaeda ... I don't think Europe has been a great priority for them in recent years. As a result, Al-Qaeda hasn't been a great priority for many European governments, who have been entirely focused on the threat posed by ISIS. And yet, as part of the conversation, for understandable reasons, when we talk about the refugee flows coming from ... into Europe, there's obviously lots of conversation around Syrian refugees and ISIS's ability to infiltrate Syrian refugee flow. As plots in Germany and France show the reason for that concern.

But the second-most populous countries sending refugees to Europe is not from Iraq, which is third. It's from Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda's ability to regenerate cells in Afghanistan has been very concerning. Long War Journal has written about this more consistently than anyone. So, bearing in mind Al-Qaeda's strategic patience, bearing mind there is very large refugee flow going to Europe from Afghanistan.

I saw a quote from General John Nicholson, who was saying, "In '98, of US and UN designated terrorist organizations, 20 of them were in the AfPak region." Yet, there's not really any discussion, serious discussion going on in Europe about whether Al-Qaeda will infiltrate refugee flows for a longer-term goal in the way that ISIS has in Syria. So, I think as ISIS begins to lose some momentum, that I would imagine, I would hope that these countries' attention would begin to focus on Al-Qaeda again.

YOUSSEF: You know, the connected thread I hear through all of four of you is that we're starting to see an Al-Qaeda plan. It goes on through with the ISIS plan, that sort of post-military operations. But there still seems to be lack in plan from Turkey, from the Iraqi government and from the West. I'd like to open up to all four of you to talk about how you see the approach from each of those partners and the implications of not having a plan.

How developed do you think their post-ISIS military campaign plan is? And what does it mean, those lack of plans? How would you dissect their view, maybe in Turkey? Sort of, their plans for the region as they potentially have the greatest ability to influence. And yet, don't seem to have a clear plan for a post-ISIS region.

GARTENSTEIN-ROSS: For Turkey, I fundamentally understand what Turkey is doing with an eye towards how Erdogan is transforming domestic policy. I mean, what we're seeing right now is the very end of the Ataturk legacy. Basically, the de-secularization of Turkey. I think that's Erdogan's priority.

There's other things that he was trying to do with respect to Syria. It's very clear, openly reported in the Washington Post, for example, that Al-Qaeda has a de facto statehood in Turkey. With a variety of figures, such as Muhammad Islambouli, able to transit back into Turkey, other AQ figures were also able to do so as well. And, that's not a coincidence. That's not just Turkey not understanding who's crossing its borders.

You know, both A, Erdogan's desire to change the culture of Turkey and to accentuate both power and to defend to get such things as the attempted coup that failed and make sure that he has enough that he's not to face that challenge again is his fundamental priority with everything else falling into that, as well as into solidifying Turkey's regional position with it giving up on becoming part of the European Union and now looking to be ... either looking East or else looking to be much more of the swing player within the region.

YOUSSEF: Mike, how do you see it? Are you hearing on the ground in Iraq from the Abadi government a plan?

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GIGLIO: They're not able to focus on the ISIS problem and on the ... on terrorist networks, because the internal turmoil in Turkey is just ... It's mind boggling right now. If you remember the coup attempt, even before that. The Government reaction to the perceived threat and actual threat from inside the Turkish power structure is just mass panic. And they have been shuffling security forces and investigators for two or three years now. So they are purging people that they think they can concretely say are enemies of the government. But in a lot of cases they just don't know and they'll shift people from province to province. And you lose with that, a huge amount of your intelligence security capability. So I think that it's consistently underestimated in the United States the extent to which Turkey just has no idea what's going on, and doesn't have its house in order.

So I think that's very alarming when you are thinking about maybe, more of a focus from ISIS on terrorism networks after it loses territory, and then also cases emerging from other terrorist networks. And the fact that Turkey remains, such an important transit point, for these networks. And that there is a disastrous situation within the Turkish security services because of the internal fighting. In Iraq, I think ... You know I've mentioned that I've been embedded with the Iraqi Special Forces and they're taking heavy casualties. Just to stress, these are the guys that the US built up, specifically to do counter terrorism.

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They will eventually succeed in creating Iraq from ISIS territorially, but in the process they are destroying themselves and I have not seen a clear second effort to rebuild them. That's a massive problem for Iraq. After ISIS loses territory, when it starts focusing more on terrorism for example, where other networks emerge and the very people that you need to stop this have been decimated in the process of eliminating ISIS on the ground.

As far as the post-Mosul plans for Iraq, and I'm speaking more from a US perspective actually, kind of biased of me, but I don't really detect...

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They do deserve credit. Just getting Iraqi and Kurdish forces to cooperate, the way they did for the Mosul offensive was a really big step, but I've never really detected a serious plan on the US side at least, for what comes next. And speaking with people in the Kurdistan Regional Government and elsewhere in Iraq, I think everybody is kind of like, "Well, let's see. Let's establish the facts."

YOUSSEF: Tom, Robin, we've seen just a week ago a plan for this presented by the Pentagon to the White House, a thirty day plan, for the defeat of ISIS. Are there things that you'd like to see in that plan that would give a more specific policy direction to the US approach?

JOSCELYN: Can I just say something about Turkey real quick? And then I'll get to that one. What's interesting, here's one of the many ways that the difference between ISIS and Al-Qaeda play out. So, Turkey has launched Operation Euphrates Shield in Northern Syria, and has had Islamic groups fighting on the ground with them against ISIS. And there was a debate within

the Al-Qaeda sphere about whether or not you could cooperate with Turkey on Operation Euphrates Shield. And basically the Al-Qaeda clerics came down and said, "Well, we can't officially or formally cooperate with any of this for various reasons of Sharia jurisprudence." And so they didn't, but other of their allies did, and have been involved there. ISIS, of course, for a long time didn't claim operations in Turkey, even operations speculating an attack. But they shifted on that, as soon as basically there became this open warfare between them in Syria.

And so now ISIS is very antagonistic with Turkey and is trying to launch operations there. Al-Qaeda replies to that to ISIS and says, in fact the senior-most Al-Qaeda cleric in all of Syria, Saudi, who at one point had 350,000 plus Twitter followers, a guy named Sheikh Abdullah al Muhaysini, he actually replied to ISIS and said, "Why are you threatening Turkey? Why are you attacking Turkey? Don't you understand that they're the best thing for mujahideen to provide all the safe passage for the mujahideen into Syria to fight?" And, "they're our rear guard", basically, and "our safe haven", along those lines.

So my big question on Turkey is going to be, how is this going to play out now on the Al-Qaeda side and what is that going to mean for their policy going forward with respect to Idlib and the border and all the other issues they have there? It's a very interesting game to watch out. Basically, Al-Qaeda's position is, we want to benefit from Turkey's, sort of permissive environment as best as we can, but we don't actually want to say that we're allied with them in any way. Whereas ISIS is very antagonistic with them. So it's sort of another conflict that you see burgeoning there. Back to your question. Do you want to?

SIMCOX: So the thing that springs to mind actually is when I was concerned for Europe speaking for various governments on these kind of issues and one of the things that kept coming up again and again, which I'm not sure there has been an awful lot of anything about the potential diplomatic ramifications of it in the US government. Many, many European governments are very concerned how, especially when we've had a lot of our own fighters go to Syria.

YOUSSEF: They're own nationals?

SIMCOX: Yeah, they're own nationals going. About this potential that the US is going to start putting people in Guantanamo again. So there is a lot of concern in Europe, where we've got lots of French jihadis, and German jihadis, and UK jihadis, who are going to be fleeing these territories and possibly ending up in the hands of the US. The US has talked about the possibility of using Guantanamo again, and this is massively controversial. One of the messages that kept coming to me again and again, about the ... And this isn't specific to the masterplan, but the US strategy more generally, is this is going to be a major problem for our alliance, if Europeans are ending up in Guantanamo? And I make that point not to, say, be pro- or anti-Guantanamo, just a possible point of friction.

JOSCELYN: Well that raises the issue that the US have never solved, and the US leadership has never solved since 9/11 which is having a legal framework for detention and figuring out how to handle detainees along your bases that actually makes sense. And that's been an ongoing issue throughout this whole process. I know the Bush administration never solved

Guantanamo. Certainly the Obama administration didn't want to solve Guantanamo, they just basically wanted to get rid of as many of the remaining guys there as possible.

But there's a real question here, internationally, of what you do with jihadis who are captured on the battlefield and have intelligence about jihadist networks, and maybe you don't want to treat as an ordinary criminal or as a law enforcement matter. But how you hold them, how you interrogate them in a sort of a non-coercive environment where, you know, something well, well short of torture of course, staying away from that whole embroil. But none of these questions have really been thought through, and I don't know ... you know right now the de facto policy is these guys are held in prisons in local countries that often times are worse actually than what you would probably get in Guantanamo these days.

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YOUSSEF: That's a fascinating point that we don't think about as on the top of the list of things we need to consider in policy. I wanted to ask all of you one last question and then I'm hoping to open it up to questions. Assuming again that there's a defeat of ISIS in Iraq in Syria, the presumption that they will move somewhere else. Now geographically, it seems that Jordan is the most susceptible. Is that how you see it happening, and if so, how vulnerable is Jordan? On one hand, they're the closest, but they also have the best intelligence service. Is that the country we should be watching in terms of most vulnerable to the move of ISIS into a new territory? And if not, I'd love to hear your thoughts on where you see it potentially rising up in a more threatening way?

GARTENSTEIN-ROSS: That's a great question. I think that Jordan is very vulnerable, but not really to ISIS moving back into Jordan en masse. It's vulnerable, as we can see now, to ISIS activity, as you're having attacks and tourist targets, attacks in Amman, that are unlike what we were seeing even five or six years ago. Then you have this burgeoning refugee population in a country that's already sky-high in terms of unemployment rate and sky-high in terms of how water deprived they are.

And there's ... if you look at it down the road say, you have seven, eight years there's just a whole set of problems that have been put into effect. But in terms of their policy of dealing with ISIS, parts of it can certainly be critiqued. I mean, they've let clerics like Abu Mohammed al-Maqdesi and al-Muqtada out of prison, in part because they see these pro Al-Qaeda guys as a bulwark against ISIS which they see as their biggest terrorist threat. But the Jordanians aren't stupid. They're kind of doing what they've always done which is pivoted off of a situation and made the most of their scarce resources in a very threatening environment.

In terms of where they're going to move to, I'd look at the Iraq War and the defeat of AQI as kind of my model. Some of them will simply try to blend back into the population. There'll be a lot of revenge killings, not all of them will succeed, many of them will die and already are dying in ways every bit as horrible as what they inflicted upon the population. But some of them will stay in the area. Some of them will try to move with refugee flows. We can see them doing this in Sirte when they lost Sirte in Libya, where these guys were shaving their beards off and

trying to move back to where they could move, many in Southern Libya there. Some will try to move over to Syria.

Others will no doubt rejoin Al-Qaeda. Others will try to move to where ISIS remains strong, so probably into ... if they can get there, into North Africa. Some will go back to their previous countries. We can already see a lot of returnees of people who have defected from ISIS ... There are defectors. There are some who remain ... who've left ISIS, but are still ... still subscribe to some of their jihadi ideology. But there are others that are still pro-ISIS that are just back in Europe. And so a lot of people go back to their country of origin.

You can see that the networks that were built up during the course of the Iraq War stayed in place. You have networks like the Sharia for Belgium network which was a big part moving ISIS fighters over to Syria. The Khaled Zerkani network which also moved a lot of foreign fighters. And so I think what you'll see is kind of a re-establishment in Europe by people who are leaving ISIS of other kinds of networks that are primed for another go-around.

YOUSSEF: Robin, I can't help but wonder, are you hearing discussions in Europe about the fear of local nationals returning, maybe setting up cells because presumably when they return if they indeed have a jihadist ideology or have the potential then to launch local attacks, I'm curious how prevalent that concern is.

SIMCOX: Yeah, it's a major fear. It's the number one worry that ISIS trains the returning fighters, the trained and battle-hardened returned fighters because I feel at the moment that there's a great feeling that Europe is overwhelmed and over-burdened in certain countries. France and Germany have had an extraordinary tempo of attacks in the past year, plus and that's just from people who are currently in the country. When you speak to them it feels like they have a very precise number, very precise number of people who have left, who they think have been killed, and a very precise number, suspiciously precise number, to be honest, and I would be very surprised if they have the confidence of which they've told me about the amount of people they knew that are coming back. I think there are many they're unaware of and I mean the analogy that MI-5 always uses is you can only get the crocodiles nearest the boat. I think there's a probably pretty large amount of crocodiles near the boat.

YOUSSEF: I'd love to open it up to questions, if I could, please. We have a microphone right here. Let's go right here. Sir, if you could wait for a microphone. If you could please introduce yourself, your name, and your organization, please.

KEN TIMMERMAN: Yes. Ken Timmerman, from the Foundation for Democracy in Iran. Tom, you've reported a lot on the Iranian relationship to Al Qaeda over the years, and there were reports, as you probably know, early on at the time of the fall of Mosul of collaboration between the Iranians and ISIS at that point as well, not just Al Qaeda but ISIS. I wonder if you could update us on that.

And Mike, on Turkey, there's also been a lot of reports a year ago, 18 months ago, of the involvement of Erdogan's son in smuggling oil on behalf of ISIS and getting oil to market. Is that still going on, and can you update us on that one?

YOUSSEF: Tom, can you start?

JOSCELYN: The Iran-Al Qaeda relationship is one of the oddest things you'll examine in the jihadi world. I've been looking at it for years, and it's very bizarre. So, just to put it in context, in Syria they're at each other's throats. Al Qaeda's arm is fighting Hezbollah on a day to day basis, and the Assad regime, and other Iranian proxies. In Yemen, they're on the opposite sides of the war and they're fighting each other.

Certainly Al Qaeda agitates against Iran constantly in its rhetoric, and yet if you go back and actually look at it operationally, Al Qaeda has allowed what the Obama administration called the core facilitation pipeline for Al Qaeda to run through Iranian soil. Beginning on July 28th, 2011, the Obama administration started to release a series of designations based in part on files captured in Osama bin Laden's compound, but also other evidence, documenting this core facilitation pipeline.

I counted probably over a dozen times now where either the Treasury or State Department underneath the Obama administration said over and over again they were identifying senior Al Qaeda leaders in Iran operating inside Iran with the Iranian government's backing, with their support. In 2012, the Treasury Department actually released a statement explaining the relationship. They actually said, "Okay, here's how it works. Basically Al Qaeda says that they're not going to operate inside Iran or launch operations inside Iran. They're going to keep Iranian authorities informed of what they're doing, and if they don't do this, then the Iranians will crack down on them and put them in jail and detain them, but they have to basically abide by these terms."

This facilitation pipeline is essential for Al Qaeda's operations, including moving fighters and personnel and communications to Syria, where they are fighting Iran's proxies and allies. It's a very strange thing, and it also goes through Turkey, by the way, if you go through the Treasury Department statements. It's a very bizarre relationship. It's one of those things that hasn't been fully sort of I think digested in the public sphere at all. I've got a huge, massive thing on this coming, hopefully, maybe.

YOUSSEF: I feel like it's a separate panel, really.

JOSCELYN: Yeah.

YOUSSEF: It's so fascinating.

JOSCELYN: It's a whole other ... It's just amazing to go through the whole thing. Just if you look earlier this month, for example, this is one example, the senior-most deputy, or one of the most senior deputies, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, was just killed in Idlib, Syria, in a drone strike. Abu Al-Khayr Al-Masri, this is a guy whose jihadi career goes back three decades. In 2015, he was released from Iran under very murky circumstances, where he had been since after 9/11. He was released as part of supposedly a hostage exchange between the Iranians and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. He was one of several guys who were released as part of this exchange.

It's very interesting, because he immediately assumes a senior leadership position in Al Qaeda and becomes this key player in leading Al Qaeda's army in Syria, which is very, very strange. There are all sorts of details about whether or not he really was in some form of detention up until 2015, or was allowed some sort of communication, or freedom of movement. I don't know the answer to all that, but the bottom line is, here you have Iran ... Think about it this way. The Iranians, how they treat their domestic opposition, who are opposed to the mullahs of the regime, how do they crack down on them? You know, Ken, how they treat their domestic opposition. That's not how they treat the senior Al Qaeda guys in their custody, which is a very stark difference. I think it says a lot to the complex relationship there.

YOUSSEF: Mike?

GIGLIO: As far as Erdogan's son, I don't have any love for that family, but I haven't seen anything that really credibly ties him to that. I also think the idea of a big businessman or whatever you want to call Bilal Erdogan, or someone of that ilk, being involved in the ISIS oil trade I think is not quite how I understand the ISIS oil trade to have worked. Actually there was a time when I knew a lot of the oil smugglers on the border that were dealing in ISIS oil, and there were always rumors about the Erdogan family, but there are with everything in Turkey.

What was more likely happening, and what I saw with my own eyes, was more small-scale smuggling operations that were being ... You could say they were more due to corruption on the border, and then the lack of a good infrastructure on Turkey's part, and a lack of focus on the government's part. Local businessmen would be funding this, but on village by village. There were mafias in the villages that control the border areas, so it was much more diffuse and small-scale than that.

There may have been a time earlier, before ISIS became this big, international threat, when it was still part of Al Qaeda, when it was still part of Nusra, that more significant transactions were being allowed to pass the Turkish border, but again, that would have been before ISIS, and again, that's just speculation knowing how the markets worked back then.

YOUSSEF: You have to wait for the microphone, please.

HILLEL FRADKIN: Thanks. Hillel Fradkin of the Hudson Institute. I wanted to ask Tom Joscelyn a question about the Al Qaeda Idlib situation and the interpretation that may be put on the defeat of the Islamic State. It looks like, or it looked like in the past anyway, Idlib was an attempt to partially imitate the Islamic State on the part of Al Qaeda, to take the measure of the success Islamic State had had in exciting people with the notion of territorial control. I was wondering whether that remains the case. That was underscored, as I recall, by an amazing interview that Al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada gave to the Guardian newspaper, where they were clearly envious of the impression among jihadi sympathizers that the Islamic State had earned, and going forward, what you think will happen in those terms.

On Iraq, I just wanted to ask, the account you gave of the special forces is very encouraging. The account you gave of the regular forces is very discouraging. Do you see any sign that there is post-2014 any renewal of the regular infantry forces of the Iraqis or not?

YOUSSEF: Mike, I'm going to ask you to take the first question, because I feel like it has a simpler answer, I have a feeling.

GIGLIO: I don't want to be overly pessimistic about Iraqi security forces. They have fought in Mosul, and especially right now they are achieving some gains in western Mosul. I just really don't think it's the level that it should have been. It wasn't to the level that people expected in planning Mosul, but it's still an advance from the level that they were at, and especially the corruption that was there, when they collapsed in 2014. My main critique is that I think the U.S. could have put a lot more resources into that if the previous administration had wanted to.

Yeah, that's right. I think more boots on the ground would have helped, just in terms of being back at the bases and the safe area training. I just think also it's just important to say, they are there fighting. They're not running away. It's just they were counted on to do a lot more than they did. Maybe there could be room still for further improvement with them, especially as they get some experience.

YOUSSEF: I'm sorry, Tom.

JOSCELYN: I'll try and make it quick. Idlib is basically Al Qaeda's protostate or proto-emirate. This is where Al Qaeda is trying to build an Islamic emirate that will be stable and can actually survive the onslaught that will come if you actually try and declare it as an Islamic state. There are pockets of dissent within Idlib. There are disagreements over this. It's not all easy for them. Of course not, but this has been their stated goal for some time, is to turn this into an Islamic state, and Idlib is the hub of it.

In fact, a little while ago, a couple years ago, an audio message from Abu Mohammad Al-Julani, then the head of Al Nusra Front, was leaked online by dissenting factions who didn't want to declare an Islamic state in Idlib. He was basically giving this rallying speech to his followers, saying, "Now is the time. We're now going to fully enforce sharia, and we're going to have a go of it. We're going to declare an Islamic emirate here in Idlib." Very quickly, Al Nusra Front had to come back out and say, which is Al Qaeda in Syria, had to say, "No, no, no, we're not going to really do that. We wouldn't do that without Shura consultation or getting basically buy-in from all the other groups and parties in Idlib that have to do that," but that's clearly their goal and what they want to do.

The main difference between Al Qaeda and ISIS is one of timing and whether or not when to actually declare you control an Islamic state. There's a lot of literature within Al Qaeda, including from Bin Laden's compound and elsewhere, that says that if you do that prematurely, and you don't survive, then you basically can set expectations and a big letdown for the population and discredit your cause. You won't be able to actually properly run all the sharia courts you need to, and you won't be able to provide for the services you need for all the people, but they've been working on all that. That's what's going on in Idlib, what's going on in places in Yemen, what's been going on in places in Libya and elsewhere, has all been proto-governments by Al Qaeda to push the ball forward that way.

One final thing. When last year Al Nusra Front rebranded and changed its name, the message that came out from Al Qaeda that directed that whole time-

They became Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham, right, and then they rebranded of course, because they like to keep us confused. When they did that, the message that came from Al Qaeda senior leadership, including that guy I just messaged, Abu Al-Khayr Al-Masri, who released an audio message right before the rebranding, was that this rebranding, this relaunch, and this speaking some ambiguous words about disassociating from Al Qaeda is all in service of unity between Al Qaeda and all these other rebel groups on the ground, in service of building an Islamic state or a government.

What they said was that if some day you get there, where you get to the point, we want you to hasten to build a real Islamic government there in Idlib and in northern Syria. When you do, Ayman Al-Zawahiri will be the first soldier in your ranks. In other words, he will basically bow the knee to your new Islamic government. That shows you the power of the idea that they're playing with.

YOUSSEF: Daveed, I'm hearing Tom speak. The Islamic State really struggled with maintaining a state. It is costly. It is expensive, and there's a level of brutality that was required to maintain order. How does Al Qaeda not fall into that trap, if you will? How is it a different approach?

GARTENSTEIN-ROSS: I think they have a longer-term approach, which I'll get to you in a second, but I want to speak first to the Guardian piece, because I think it actually speaks to the longer-term approach. If you haven't read the Guardian piece which is being referred to, I highly recommend it. It's a 2015 piece which is called basically How ISIS Destroyed Al Qaeda. It's Maqdisi and Abu Qatada when they're out of prison, talking about how ISIS came along and Al Qaeda was destroyed. It's an obvious influence operation. I'm sure Tom thinks the same thing, because if you look at where they were at the time, they were talking about ISIS's control of territory. At the time it was published, Al Qaeda controlled territory across three countries. They controlled territory in Syria at the time. They controlled territory in Yemen. At the time, they controlled the port city of Al Mukalla. They were getting millions of dollars a day from running this port. They controlled territory in Libya, and they still do. Nobody talks about it because they use an off brand.

In addition to Afghanistan and Somalia, where they're at the forefront of an insurgency, and Mali, and they're like, "But our organization is destroyed." When I look at their long-term plan-

It was certainly the impression that they were giving, though. They had talked about Zawahiri being a terrible leader, not in control of the organization, ISIS supplanting them. Their propaganda strategies have been the exact opposite. In the case of ISIS, they've fabricated wins that they never had. If you remember late 2014, November 2014, it was reported by CNN and Associated Press and others that ISIS had come to control the Libyan city of Derna. It was very interesting, because it was based on social media reports.

If you're familiar with the history of Derna, it was obvious they didn't control it. Derna was controlled by a patchwork of militias, and ISIS drove a convoy in. They became a player in Derna, but driving an armed convoy into Derna unopposed isn't like driving it into D.C. If ISIS drove a convoy down the street right now and nobody stopped them, we could all agree there'd be trouble. In Derna, that's how you enter Derna. You enter it in a convoy, or you get your head cut off.

Then they stuck an ISIS flag on a government building. That's like rolling into a McDonald's and putting a flag on the ... McDonald's used to have the Hamburglar, and there was a mayor of McDonalddsville and whatever. If you stick your flag there, you don't actually control anything. Maybe you control the McDonald's, but that's how meaningless it was. After Gadhafi left, there was nobody in the government buildings. It's not like putting a flag on the White House.

They convinced the media. I talked about this quite some time. In May of 2015, I testified before the Senate talking about how this was fabricated control of Derna. The following month, it became clear that it was fabricated. They assassinated the head of the Derna mujahideen Shura council, who was named ... and the head of the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade. When they assassinated Salim Derby, who I just referred to, the Derna mujahideen Shura council pushed ISIS out of the city in four days without calling in any reinforcements. Completely fabricated, whereas Al Qaeda, when they control territory, they don't want you to know it.

JOSCELYN: I think it was the Daily Beast report, they made the head of the Islamic State in Derna do the Cersei walk basically from Game of Thrones.

GARTENSTEIN-ROSS: Right. The Derna mujahideen Shura council is affiliated with Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda is not proclaiming the fact that they control Derna, even though they do. I think that their longer-term plan is they're gaining across multiple theaters, and other theaters are being destabilized. I'm guessing that what they'd want to do longer-term is declare multiple emirates at once, such that you can't do what happened to ISIS, where everyone was able to focus in on ISIS, on ISIS-ville, and eventually topple their caliphate. Whereas if you have it in Somalia, and Mali, and Libya, and maybe Algeria, and Syria, and Yemen, then suddenly we have just a much bigger problem on our hands, and we haven't really thought about the scale of that problem. That's my guess as to what the longer-term thing is. It's destabilization across multiple theaters, and eventually announcement across multiple theaters.

YOUSSEF: If that's happening, Robin, I'm curious if you could delve into this. If indeed you have the expansion of these regional controls that we're not really publicly pronouncing, does threatening the West become as much of a priority? Is that a shift in resources towards more running these ill-defined or at least not publicly embraced states?

SIMCOX: At the moment, I think, and as part of the strategy Daveed outlines, it doesn't make sense for them to focus on the West and bring the attention that that would drive. At the moment, they seem to be operating in this model where if you can get Al Qaeda in Yemen or Pakistan, they will offer some form of training, and they may bless an operation but not give the

day to day guidance that maybe they once did with someone like Rashid Rauf in the UK, that UK-Pakistan link. They will approve a target, but not provide hands-on guidance.

I think that the problem we have had in the West in this is we've been terrible, really, at focusing on multiple threats at the same time. I think especially of the time where we went from after the In Amenas gas complex attack, everything was all about North Africa, and then the schoolgirls get kidnapped in Nigeria, and then all of our focus is on West Africa. Then ISIS start taking territory, and now everything, the obsession is with Iraq, which we'd ignored for half a decade before essentially. I really feel as if we're not in a terrific place governmentally to be able to focus on these threats, because we're constantly chasing the brightest, shiniest object at that time.

JOSCELYN: I'll say one thing just real quick to that.

YOUSSEF: Sure.

JOSCELYN: In Syria, Ayman Al-Zawahiri orders men to start laying the groundwork for plots against the West, but as far as we know, up until about a year ago anyway, didn't give the official green light to launch an attack on the West because the focus was on long-term emirate building in Syria, and he didn't want to compromise that project in Syria by maybe drawing more scrutiny on their operations.

You have to be very careful in terms of what Al Qaeda is actually doing, because if you track the U.S. military reporting, who they're launching air strikes against and why they say they're launching air strikes, since October of last year they have struck senior Al Qaeda operatives in Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen, all of whom were involved in plotting against the West. In the first three weeks of January of this year, the Pentagon says they killed more than 150 Al Qaeda terrorists in Syria, some of whom were involved in this anti-Western plotting. Late last year, they killed a guy named Farouq Al-Qahtani. Think about this. You want your mind blown about this, and this is why we do what we do, or this is why I do what I do as a nerd. 15 years after 9/11, this guy Farouq Al-Qahtani was still plotting attacks against the West from Afghanistan, he and his men. We know this from a lot of different sources, and the U.S. finally found him and hung them, and killed them. They're still doing that. They're still planning plots in Yemen, too.

You have to be very careful. I just testified last week for House Homeland Security and said, "Look, you never know when they're going to change their calculation, and it is a calculation, and say now's the time to maybe we're going to have a go against the West again." You just don't know when they're going to make that internal calculation.

YOUSSEF: That's fascinating. Yes?

BAYAN SAMI ABDUL RAHMAN: Thank you. Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman. I'm the Kurdistan Regional Government Representative. I have a question for whoever would like to answer on the panel. Can Iraq and Syria stay as sovereign states after the caliphate is ended?

YOUSSEF: Look at you nervous boys up here. Oh, my goodness.

JOSCELYN: You could just drop the mic on the floor.

YOUSSEF: I'm going for Daveed, just because.

GARTENSTEIN-ROSS: Nominally, yes. In practice, no. In practice, they were shattered, certainly shattered in 2014, arguably before that. KRG at this point is a de facto state, not de jure but de facto. Northern Syria, I don't think anybody except for maybe Turkey believes that Syria can exercise control over northern Syria again. You're having the emergence of a Sunnistan straddling the two states, which is looking at some point to basically be a de facto state of its own.

I think the only degree to which you'll have actual sovereignty exercised throughout their territories, it'll only be nominal, because I don't think you could put these back together. Joshua Landis refers to it as a process of state-building. Actually, it's a very interesting piece, called The Great Sorting Out, which argues that what we're seeing is the end of the colonial borders that were drawn and a redrawing of the map more along lines that actually reflect, and he analogizes it to the process of state-building in Europe, which I think in the longer term is right, with the X factor being violent non-state actors and the way that they are able to benefit from the chaos that results, which can significantly complicate the process of the great sorting out.

YOUSSEF: You know, Mike, I can't help but wonder, though. The guys on the ground who are fighting, who are putting their lives on the line. Presumably, are they fighting for a state, the state as they see it? Are they fighting for their brethren? Is there a definition in their mind in terms of what emerges if they are victorious beyond a defeat of ISIS? Is there vision when you talk to them?

GIGLIO: That's a great question. I remember it was right when Iraqi special forces just entered eastern Mosul, which was a big moment, and they were starting to take really heavy casualties. I sat down one night at the forward base with the battalion commander, and I asked him, "What are you telling your guys that they're fighting for?" He said, basically, "That question is addressed for me by being as simple as possible, so I tell them first that they're going to fight for their families, and I hope that if they fight for their families, they're going to fight for their neighborhoods. I hope if they fight for their neighborhoods, then they'll fight for their region, and then I hope after that we can get to fight for the country." I think that's as good as you're going to get right now, as far as the Iraqis go.

If you speak to the Peshmerga, who I've also been embedded with, a lot of them are fighting in their minds for their own statehood. A lot of them are just fighting to push ISIS from Kurdish land, which doesn't necessarily have to mean that they're fighting for their own statehood.

YOUSSEF: Militarily, we're starting to see that question play out, maybe.

JAMES KITFIELD: Hi, I'm James Kitfield, Atlantic Media. We've got a President now who's not afraid to say Islamic extremist terrorism. He's very happy to say that very often. We have people around him who've expressed a worldview that's very, very close to a clash of civilizations. I'm curious. I've had a discussion with Daveed in the past where he walked me through the Salafi strain of Islam that we have a problem with, but when you look at some of the statements of Gorka and others, it's the Koran itself. Trump himself, our President, has said, "Muslims hate us. Islam hates us."

Is there a danger of feeding into a narrative here of a clash of civilizations, and are we getting dangerously close to that, or is it all good that now we're calling a spade a spade?

JOSCELYN: I'll take that.

YOUSSEF: Sure.

JOSCELYN: I get this question often, and the way I always start this is by saying 99.999% of the violence we cover at Long War Journal is within the Muslim majority world, where Muslims are killed by the jihadis. It's very obviously a war within, if you want to call it Islamic civilization, that's being fought. The idea that it can be reduced to all Islam or all of Islamic teachings, and that basically Islam is at war with the West, I think is basically ludicrous when you just take out a map and look at what's going on.

There's a massive fight within these Muslim majority countries that's going on, and the most important thing for the U.S. to do long-term, so we can stop talking about a long war eventually, is to identify and bolster the local Muslims in all these countries who are on the first line of defense against the jihadis. That's the most important thing that has to be done, whether it's in Iraq or Syria or North Africa or Somalia or Afghanistan. If you think that all the Muslims in all of those countries are against us, then you don't have a bloody clue what's going on. You haven't been paying attention.

We actually at the Long War Journal don't use radical Islamic terrorism, because I'm not really sure what it means, to be honest with you. We use jihadism as a shorthand. The reason we use jihadism as a shorthand is because it speaks to what you just said about Daveed talking about the Salafi strain of Salafi jihadism, which is a particular ideological view.

I'll say this about radical Islamic terrorism. I think it's an effort to differentiate between, at least the people I've talked to who use it, it's an effort to differentiate between all of Islam and radical Islam, but I don't think it goes far enough in terms of actually explaining what those differences are or it actually captures the differences in terminology.

YOUSSEF: Robin, do you see an effect in this in terms of recruitment, the use of that language? Does it play into a broader recruitment campaign?

SIMCOX: Personally, I've always been very dubious about this. I think that we make a mistake where that we place ourselves at the middle of this conflict that's going on. We're not. We're one part of it. These groups and this ideology has its own propulsion, which can be I think

impacted at the edges by what we say and do, but ultimately is going to exist regardless of what President Trump calls it.

I do think that the phrase radical Islamic terrorism, people will take it or leave it, but there hasn't been much serious thought, I don't think, gone into who is it that really is our adversary in this, because I think everyone in this room would agree with Al Qaeda and ISIS, but there are a whole bunch of groups connected to the broader ideology that we may not agree are part of the problem. I don't think a lot of serious thought has been given to the extent, how about quiet Salafists, quietist Salafists? How much attention do we focus on them? How about Jamaat e Islami? How about the Brotherhood?

At the moment, the radical Islamic terrorism thing, I think it obscures the fact ... I prefer that phrase, to be honest, rather than violent extremism, which I thought was a nonsense phrase, but I do think we need as a society to have more of a conversation about who exactly. Are we pushing back on all forms of political Islam? Is it just the violent elements of it? I feel that we should be further along in that conversation 15 odd years into this than we are.

YOUSSEF: Mike?

GIGLIO: I can't answer that question, I think. I can tell you how ISIS views this, but I just want to preface this. I think there's a real danger, and there's something gross about members of the media finding things that ISIS say that support what they already think, and using that to make a political point.

GARTENSTEIN-ROSS: Yes, good point.

GIGLIO: I did an article recently that was really vulnerable to this, and I tried to be really careful, but I actually wanted to speak to ISIS defectors who had defected since the election to try and get some sense of what was the actual reaction inside the caliphate on election day, and try and do that in some kind of genuine way where I wasn't just trolling ISIS propaganda boards. I did speak with some defectors who had been there, and I did also pass a question to some ISIS local officials that I'm in touch with.

At least the reaction from ISIS was that they did see that as a positive, because they do see from a propaganda and recruitment standpoint this clash of civilizations narrative as helping them. I think that's as much as I should say, though, because I think whether ISIS is correct is a whole other discussion, and I think whether we should care, how much we should care what ISIS is using for its propaganda is another question. I think just in terms of how did they react to the election, and how did at least the members that I was speaking to, which does correspond with some of the stuff they put out on their own media channels, how did they view that question that you've asked? I think they viewed it as a positive for them.

RAHIM RASHID: Thank you. Rahim Rashidi from Kurdistan TV. What will happen after ISIS, what will happen for Kurdish state and Kurdish situation in the region? Thank you.

YOUSSEF: I'm sorry. If ISIS ...?

JOSCELYN: He says what will happen after ISIS.

YOUSSEF: Everybody's so nervous today.

GIGLIO: We give the hard ones to Daveed, right?

YOUSSEF: Okay, Daveed is on it.

GARTENSTEIN-ROSS: As I said, I think we de facto have a Kurdish state right now. As you know, there are internally some political problems brewing within KRG. I think that you won't have a recognized Kurdish state until some of those problems are sorted out, including budgetary problems and others. Obviously getting a state could actually help to solve them, but I think that the international community had a bad experience with south Sudan, in granting statehood with the hope that it would help to sort out problems. That obviously hasn't worked out very well.

I think that what you have already is KRG just acting much more like a state. When Turkish troops went in, it was with KRG's blessing, and with the Iraqi central government wanting them out. That's the kind of thing that doesn't happen in a sovereign state. You don't have Mexico deploying troops to Texas, and Trump wanting them out, and the Texas governor saying, "No, no, we want these troops to stay." You already have basically KRG with its own fighting force affecting its own foreign policy.

The thing people are really nervous about, Turkey in particular, is northern Syria and Kurdish forces in northern Syria, the links between YPG and PKK. I think that we're moving in the direction of statehood. I don't think it's going to happen quickly, but there's all these referenda, referendum as to whether people in KRG want statehood, a referendum as to whether northern Syria, the Kurds want autonomy. I think that what you'll see is multiple referenda passing. Once, for example, northern Syria with autonomy, who's going to take it away from them? In practice, nobody's going to.

We're seeing more and more signs that this is a real state in a way that ISIS wasn't. If you look back a few years, you can see all these dumb think pieces about, "It's time to recognize ISIS as a state." The stupidest one was this piece about how you had to recognize ISIS as a state because it had a 30-page bureaucratic plan. Sorry, that doesn't make you a state. For KRG-

This was in the Independent. Anyway, it's one piece I tweet about a lot, because it's so stupid, but what you actually do have is a Kurdish state, and one where people haven't made that same argument yet because it's not as in your face. I think anyone who looks at it understands that there is a de facto state, nobody's taking it away, and it's moving towards international recognition.

YOUSSEF: I'm going to give the last question to this gentleman here.

SHLOMO BOLTS: Hello, thanks so much for your talk. A very interesting talk. I'm Shlomo Bolts with the Syrian-American Council. You talked about how the end goal should be

to have local Muslims within their towns and villages stop the threat of radical Islam and stop ISIS. I still remember, in early 2014, when there were mass protests in Syria against ISIS by the local population and the Assad regime responded with the fiercest wave of barrel bombs of the entire war. Iranian militias, who many of them are now supposedly our partners with ISIS and are fighting alongside the special forces in Mosul, they have committed many acts of slaughter in the southern Aleppo suburbs. The effect of this was to stop a massive rebel offensive against ISIS. ISIS regrouped. They marched east. They took Mosul, and you understand what happened after that.

Looking at this talk today, very interesting talk, but almost no mention made of a whole class of jihadists who are working with Iran and have carried out every manner of massacres and slaughter against the Syrian people that have been carried out by ISIS in much larger numbers. There's no attention to them here. All the talk is on extremists, even fairly minor extremists, that are fighting among the rebel camp. If you're a Syrian and you're looking at this, it seems clear that they're not really concerned. They're more concerned with minor extremism and hints of extremism in the rebel camp than they are against the slaughter that's being committed by the other side.

What do you expect Syrians to draw from this conclusion that the West is very much concerned with even minor degrees of Sunni extremism but not as much at all concerned with the slaughter being carried out by the other side? This is the second narrative of clash of civilizations. As you said, it's not only about the West. It's also about what's happening in the Muslim world, but what do you expect local Sunni populations to do when they are being slaughtered for being Sunni and the West allows it to happen and sometimes even works with the killers?

YOUSSEF: Sir, I'm going to give it to our panel. It's just we're short on time. How do you see the ability of I guess the level of Iranian influence? How do you make that assessment?

JOSCELYN: I don't know. There were all sorts of assumptions loaded in that statement that I really don't even want to dignify, but the bottom line is, at Long War Journal we cover the Shia militias and their atrocities and everything they're doing all the time in Iraq and Syria. Obviously when you're on a panel you can only address so many issues in the amount of time you have, but obviously we cover Hezbollah and IRGC, which I mentioned, in Syria fighting against some of the other bad guys you mentioned. Obviously this is a big part of the dynamic.

Certainly when we talk about Iraq, obviously the PMF and what's going on there, and Daveed brought up. That's a big problem. My colleague Bill Roggio is not here today. He's documented in great detail the role of U.S.-designated terrorists who are actually leading PMF forces in Iraq as part of the coalition. This is something that my colleague Roggio has complained about or documented and brought to the attention of the public for many, many years. I'd just say there's plenty of good reporting on what Iran has been doing, and we've spent a lot of time on it.

YOUSSEF: One of the things I take away from this talk is we have such an ability to have a conversation about Al Qaeda's long-term plan and even ISIS's, and yet we still seem to be

stuck on the question about how the West is going to approach a myriad of problems, from the ISIS threat, from the Al Qaeda threat, from those who want to form a state, from those who want to present external threats. I think it's so important that we have a discussion here in Washington in particular to start to at least bring attention to these questions and the need to answer them.

I want to thank our panel for such a lively conversation, and to all of you for so many great questions and for coming tonight. Thank you so much.

JOSCELYN: You did a great job.