



## JORDAN REIMER: META WARS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

(Begin audio)

**Joshua Holo:** Welcome to the College Commons Podcast. Passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball Campus in Los Angeles, and your host.

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JH: I'm very excited to welcome you to this episode of the College Commons Podcast because we're gonna speak with Jordan Reimer, who's currently a policy analyst at RAND in the Defense and Political Sciences department. He has an MPA from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University, and he studied in Egypt and Yemen. He served as a policy maker at the Department of Defense and was an intelligence analyst at the New York City Police Department. He's also a lecturer and course instructor on such topics as conflict and insurgency in the post-Arab Spring Middle East, radicalization, and political Islam, most recently at New York University. Jordan, it's a pleasure to have you. Thank you for joining us.

**Jordan Reimer:** Thank you for inviting me.

JH: I wanna start off with the perspective of an informed and engaged lay person with respect to the policy and security issues in the Near East, especially in light of the fact that Trump recently withdrew our small forces from Syria, but it's a general question I wanna ask. It seems to me, in my imagination as a non-expert, that the collective interests of what I'll call the West, US, European, and Israeli... For the moment, we'll call them a bloc of interests, and you can correct me if that's not appropriate. But it seemed that that bloc of interests now, even more than in the past, trips over itself in the Middle East. So, when Trump, for example, leaves Syria and Kurdistan, he helps the Turks, who on one hand are our traditional allies, which you would want to help, but he also harms our ability to work with the Kurds in order to fight ISIS. Similarly, for example, Assad is both an enemy to Israel and the United States, but over the years, over the generations, really, of his family, the Assad family has kept a lid tamping down all kinds of bad actors against us who happen to be in Syria. So, it seems like our own interests run at cross currents to one another in highly complicated ways. Is it just that we're aware of that more now, or is that built into any complex political reality in the world, and certainly in the Middle East?

JR: It's funny, it reminds me of this letter to the editor that came out in a newspaper right in 2013, right when the Egyptian military overthrew the Morsi government. And it just laid out the fact... And I wish I could have memorized it, but it essentially lays out the fact that the US supports democracy and the Muslim brotherhood was democratically elected, but the US also supports Saudi Arabia, which is a close ally against Iran, but Saudi Arabia is supporting the overthrow of the democratically elected government, and meanwhile... And so, just the nature of the complex ties between all these different factions, it's inherently complex. Every single actor in the region has multiple interests, and they don't always coincide. US interests don't always coincide with European interests, or necessarily Israeli interests. And the way I like to think about it is that there's no absolute villain and no absolute hero in the Middle East, for the most part. ISIS, I think, we could all agree, is an absolute villain. But for the most part, it's just helpful

to not think in terms of good guys and bad guys, but on particular policy issues, who are your allies on this issue and who are your adversaries on this issue, and how do you balance those inherent natures?

JR: I think with Turkey right now, you're seeing that exact same thing play out. Not only do we support the Turks as a NATO ally, and yet, we have their concerns with their actions over the Kurds, but same thing with Russia. Turkey has embraced Russia much more closely since the Syrian Civil War, or since Russia's entry into the Syrian Civil War in 2015. And so, now you have Turkey, who's getting air defense systems from Russia. And so, now you have a NATO ally using Russian weapons. So, that's inherently a complex dynamic. The dynamics all across the region are inherently complex, and that is not just the case today, it was the case in 2013 since the Arab Spring, and even before that.

JH: But basically, complex is a polite way of saying meshuga. It's crazy the cross-currents here.

JR: Exactly. The way I like to talk about it is, simultaneous and overlapping wars in the Middle East. The way I like... You try to break it down to its most basic building blocks. And the way I like to think about it is that there are essentially three meta wars, three big wars happening in the Middle East. And from that framing, you could sort of understand where everybody's interests lie. So, the first big meta war is the campaign against Iran, or the Sunni-Shia conflict, but Israel being on team Sunni, where all across the region the Sunni state, the Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are trying to push back against Iranian interests and Iranian allies.

JH: Allow me to interrupt. Including the Arab countries such as some of the Gulf states and Iraq that have other significant minorities, or even Iraq, I think, has a slight majority of Shia population. Is that true?

JR: A number of these countries do have a significant Shia populations. I would not include Iraq in that bloc. Iraq is very deliberately, because it has such a large Shia and such a large Sunni and such a large Kurdish population, really tries to avoid taking sides in the Sunni-Shia conflict, does not want to be the site of US, Iranian hostilities, but it is much more so like Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates. Bahrain does have a Shia majority, but it is ruled by a Sunni monarch. And Saudi Arabia has a large Shia plurality in a oil-rich region, but they are a predominantly Sunni country controlled by a Sunni family.

JH: So, I've diverted you to the weeds. Back to our original point about these cross-currents. But you're trying to give us the meta.

JR: The first meta-war...

JH: Is Sunni versus Shia.

JR: Sunni versus Shia. And that took place in Syria, that's taking place right now in Yemen, that's taking place directly between the countries themselves in the Gulf region this past summer. You had direct hostile activity from Iran into Saudi Arabia. It's taking place amongst proxy groups in Iraq and Syria. And in Bahrain, you had the Arab Spring in Bahrain and the Saudis shut that down very, very quickly because they were afraid of Iran lending support to the popular protest. And then, the other big meta war in the Middle East that helps explain a lot of what's going on and what a lot of what people see is an intra Sunni conflict, a conflict amongst the Sunni's themselves, where you have traditionalist powers, again, like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, who like keeping the pre Arab Spring status quo, where regimes are in power, the governments controlled the religious atmosphere of the country themselves, versus political Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood and their state allies like Qatar and Turkey,

which push for or acknowledge a more grassroots sentiment amongst the Arab people for more "representative" or "democratic governments", most popularly represented by political movements, political parties represented by the Muslim Brotherhood.

JR: And same thing in Turkey. The Turkish government is not a Muslim Brotherhood... Erdoğan's government is not a Muslim Brotherhood party per se, but it is very much aligned with the same political Islamist tendencies or ideologies. And so, what you have now... In 2017, you had the embargo against Qatar, which seems to come out of nowhere by Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and United Arab Emirates. That was due to Qatar's trying to support Muslim Brotherhood, political Islamist elements in the region. And so, that war is still playing out very hotly in Libya, where you have a would-be strong man trying to take over the whole government. And then, you have Islamic political parties who have a second government, or supporting part of the a UN backed internationally recognized government. And so, you have Qatar and Turkey supporting the UN-backed government that has political Islamist militias against Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Egypt, who are supporting the strong man in this Libyan civil war. So, that explains the embargo against Qatar, it explains the civil war in Libya. And then, the third, big meta war is the war against ISIS, which is so inherently wrapped up in the Syrian civil war that it's almost impossible to distinguish where one starts and one ends for the purpose of regional analysis.

JR: And so, trying to understand Saudi Arabia or Turkey's motivation just so inherently wraps up in that conflict. And so, you have the knock on effects of that war, like Turkey's war against the Kurds, but you also have the Kurdish war against ISIS, but they're also carving out their own interests in Syria. Again, it's really hard to distinguish, but essentially, you have those three big wars in the Middle East: The Sunni-Shia conflict of which the Syrian civil war is a component of, the intra Sunni conflict, where you have the traditionalist trying to fight against the political Islamists, and then you have the war against ISIS and all the other regional effects that result from that, like the Kurdish situation in Syria or the US' presence in Syria and Iraq was predicated on the fight against ISIS.

JH: To eradicate ISIS. I wanna go back to a previous point you said about... You said it about the Middle East, but I think it applies probably to geopolitics at large, which is that it's not analytically helpful to think about angels and demons or heroes and villains.

JR: Correct.

JH: That I'm reading you to say that if you dive into any aggressor's motivations, you will find some reasonableness in those motivations. That if someone is aggressive, that they're probably aggressive for a reason that, if you boil it down, is a reason that on one level or another, most of us can probably identify with, even if we find ourselves on the opposite side of that conflict.

JR: Agreed.

JH: If that's the case and I heard you right, and since your job as a policy analyst, and since as we were saying before, your job is to present policy-makers with actionable, straightforward analyses that can shape not only their perspectives, but their decisions, those policy-makers whom you're serving by giving them the best, most accurate information you can muster, their stock-in-trade is often villainization and demonization. In other words, when I say policy-maker, I'm overlapping to some degree with politics.

JR: Exactly. That's where I would push back against, policy-makers versus politicians.

JH: And you think that the politicians rely more heavily on the caricatures than the policy-makers?

JR: I think that in any democratic government, at some point, the policy-makers are the politicians. Which is what you want, because the politicians are elected by the people, and policy-makers are largely appointed by those individuals. But the policy-makers are appointed because they are subject matter experts in the topic. And the politicians are elected, ideally, because they can translate both what they're hearing from the policy-makers, from what they're hearing from the subject matter experts, and what they know their constituents desire, to synthesize, to come up with a plan that is consistent with our interests of the subject matter experts advocate and consistent with people's political desires, which is where the constituency falls in. So, to get to the heart of your question, I think that politicians might speak in polemics, but policy-makers tend... Or subject matter experts within the policy-making bureaucracy don't speak in polemics.

JH: I get the fact that there's a difference in speech and analysis. I'm worried about the fact when those two things conflict. And I'm worried about our President Trump, for example, who is comfortable reverting to demonizing language, and most presidents have been when the rubber meets the road. George W. Bush and Barrack Obama also relied heavily on demonizing language with respect to our enemies in the Middle East to achieve their goals, vis-a-vis, the war in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq for Bush, or for the assassination of Osama bin Laden by Obama. So, this isn't a partisan remark on my part. It's an observation that sometimes, surely, the political tendency, maybe even need, to villainize, might cut against what is probably rationally the right thing to do.

JR: I would say that the way I think about it is that presidents' senior officials, who might be both politicians and policy-makers, are given the information by the subject matter experts to say, "This is the situation as it is. This is as complex... In all its complexity..." Again, boil down to the two pages, but still conveying that nuance. And then, the politician comes up with, "Okay, well, I understand the cost of what this policy action is going to be, but nevertheless, it is the right policy action for the United States." And then, the decision-maker then will work with the political communications team to figure out, "Okay, well, what's the best argument that I could convey to the American people that this course of action is actually the right one?" And so, that's where maybe polemical language comes into play, but you like to think that before the polemical language comes into play, they've already considered the nuance of the situation. That's an ideal role and that's the role that I like to operate in, because again, like you said at the beginning, all the interest thrives in the nuance. And the devil is in the detail. So, in order to fully inform a policy-maker, and I think that, ideally, we'd like our policy makers to be fully informed, you have to talk in the details and in the nuance. And then, how they do the political communication back to the American people is something that's no longer in the subject in the subject matter experts' hands.

JH: I understand why it's appropriate for a person of your temperament to want to stop your task where you still can have the integrity of your intellectual analysis. But I'm worried that that politicians maybe legitimately do rely on the villainization. And then, it comes back to haunt us when we have to work with the people whom we villainized, or alternatively, to push away from the people whom we've harmonized.

JR: You're absolutely right. It's actually my first... That you mention, that my first lesson in geopolitics and this is gonna age me, give away my age.

JH: He looks 20 by the way, let's just say.

JR: I was... In 1990, I was five years old, and I remember this vividly. And in Time magazine there had a pull out. This was right at the beginning of Operation Desert Storm, the Persian Gulf War, there was a pull out of a map of where the US forces were being stationed outside of Iraq

and where Iraqi forces were stationed to face off against US soldiers. And the map in Time magazine mentioned what weapon systems the US had and what weapon systems the Iraqis had, and what was the providence of those weapons. So, all the US weapons were naturally US-made, but the Iraqis had, presumably, Chinese-made weapons, certainly Soviet-made weapons, and they also had American-made weapons. And I remember asking my father, again, five years old, I said, "How does Saddam Hussein, the most evil person on the world, have US weapons?" And he said, "Oh well, just a few years ago, he was a US ally and we were providing him weapons when he was fighting a war against a different country, namely Iran."

JR: And that to me was the craziest notion in the world, that this guy who was demonized as the most evil person on the planet in 1990 was an ally, or the US supported him just a few years earlier. And maybe I'm retconning here, to use the pop culture term, but that to me is when I first fell in love with geopolitics and the nuance and complexity of geopolitics and what made it so interesting.

JH: I certainly have an interest as does the Jewish community in Israel. And Israel has a reputation for some, I guess we could call it existential practicality that they'll deal with whomever they have to deal with in order to survive and to get what they need. So most of us remember when Israel was working with Jordan behind the scenes long before they had any official peace with Jordan and that was an open secret in society.

JR: Yes. Right.

JH: It begs the question though, what do you learn when you look at Israeli interests? In light of the fact that they have all these multiple layers, 'cause they're in it, they're in it more than any other western country arguably with the exception of Turkey, but they have... They just have a unique set of stakes and a unique set of interests, and they seem to play themselves out in rather interesting and complicated ways. So how should we understand Israel in this complicated map of the meta wars, Sunni versus Shia, a democratic Islamist Sunni versus traditional regime Sunni, and the Syrian civil war?

JR: So, Israel, you know, you're absolutely right, Israel does have to work with unsavory characters and works with people under the radar, below the scenes but Israel's actually been very open about its policy in the past few years. With regards to the meta wars Israel has gone all in on team Saudi Arabia, Emirates. So it is all in on team Sunni against the Shia, against Iran, and it is all in on team traditionalist against political Islamist. It has a very close relationship with President Sisi in Egypt. It does have, like you were saying, an under the table relationship with Qatar, which funds activities in Gaza to help keep Gaza stable. But nevertheless, it is very much aligning itself with Saudi Arabia and the Emirates in their war against political Islam. They were very happy when Sisi overthrew the democratically elected government of President Morsi in Egypt.

JR: With regard to the meta wars and with regards to the war against ISIS and the war in Syria, Israel's actually been not so involved in the war against ISIS, other than the fact that it has good intelligence capabilities all throughout the region. ISIS, for all of its rhetoric, that we're gonna liberate Jerusalem like any good jihadi organization, they have to claim that they're gonna liberate Jerusalem, Israel... ISIS remarkably held off against targeting Israel. I guess it had its own top-line priorities before it can get to killing the Jews. So Israel was not very involved, certainly not in any open way in the war against ISIS, again, maybe with... In terms of some intelligence capabilities. And then in the war in Syria, it has also pursued its interest very, very carefully, where it had a top-line, and again very much in the Sunni-Shia conflict, on team Sunni against Iran, where it did not want any Iranian arms transfers to Syria, and it did not want any establishment of Iranian or a Syrian terror group presence along the Israel-Syria border.

JH: Hezbollah, basically.

JR: Hezbollah and a few other, and the IRGC, the Iranian revolutionary guard corps, and its Quds Force, its external arm.

JH: Are they... Do they export them to...

JR: There are a number of IRGC Iranian revolutionary guard generals operating in Syria to help direct militias. And for a while, they actually set up, Israel actually killed an Iranian general and there was an exchange of fire afterwards but essentially, they let it go 'cause they didn't want it to get out of hand. But yes, Iran has tried to set up cells of its own senior officers on the Israeli border that Israel has pushed back against. But it really didn't try to get involved in the day-to-day of the Syrian civil war. It provided some humanitarian relief to wounded fighters, nominally helped support some local Jewish fighters, but in a very local way. They really didn't try to get involved, they really tried to stick with their own predominant interest, which is pushing back against Iran.

JH: Keep the border and... Right.

JR: Exactly. But with regard to Israel needing to deal with some unsavory characters, surreptitiously, I think what's really interesting is where Israel has to deal with Russia in Syria in a way that the US wishes it didn't have to or that the US wishes the US didn't have. Whereas the US is very frustrated at Russia's resurgence in the Middle East and their new power broker status in Syria, it almost comes as a sort of salve to Israel. Israel has a very good relationship with Russia. Prime Minister Netanyahu has a good relationship with President Putin, they meet frequently, and Russia understands Israel's interests in Syria namely pushing back against Iran or any anti-Israel terror group and allows it to operate in a way that is consistent with Israel's interest and it's...

JR: It's not a moderate... Russia's not a moderating force in Syria for Israel's interests, but at least it's an open ear in a way that if Russia were not there, things could spiral much more out of control. The fact that Russia has a good talking relationship with both Israel and Iran and Assad helps maybe keep things from... Toning down, keeps the political communication, as it were, from instead of being hostile communicating via shooting at each other, maybe this provides an intermediary of communicating.

JH: A channel of sorts.

JR: Exactly. Exactly.

JH: Is it accurate to say that Israel's engagement with one of the meta wars, namely Sunni versus Shia...

JR: Okay.

JH: Is it accurate to say that from Israel's perspective that basically means dealing with Hamas and Hezbollah?

JR: No. So by Israel push on Team Sunni, in the Sunni-Shia conflict, it helps provide a regional coalition against Hezbollah. Hezbollah is a Shia group that's aligned with Iran. And so Israel for the first time now has regional allies in helping push back against Hezbollah's presence, which has been a boon to Israel. Hamas is actually a very interesting, sticky wicket as it were, 'cause Hamas is a Sunni group that has its origins in the Muslim Brotherhood. It is the quote unquote, the Muslim... Or was the Muslim Brotherhood affiliate in Palestine, the Palestinian territories. It

views itself... It viewed itself as the Muslim Brotherhood affiliate in Palestine. It has interestingly distanced itself from the Muslim Brotherhood given this regional war against the Muslim Brotherhood, but it also distanced itself from Iran at the beginning of the Syrian civil war, because the region was dividing itself into team Sunni or team Shia, Hamas, which was a Sunni group, but receiving weapons and aid from Shia, Iran, had to make a choice. And it did make a choice and it chose team Sunni.

JR: It pulled itself out of Syria where it had, where its leadership had a home, and it stopped talking in favor of the Assad regime. However, because simultaneously in these meta wars, you had this war within the Sunni world of the traditionalists against the Islamists, Hamas found itself doubly isolated, having isolated itself from the Shia camp, it then was isolated from the Sunni camp because it still was affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Only now after several years where the... After it formally distanced itself from the Muslim Brotherhood and from its charter dropped its official affiliation although it didn't really change its ideology, it's still... Hues to a political Islamist ideology. Only years later, as the world has really stopped paying attention to the Syrian civil war in terms of the Sunni Shia conflict, has Iran been able to re-establish links with Hamas and after Hamas finding itself so isolated, is happy to re-establish links. The Syrian civil war, as I mentioned, started out as a popular uprising and then quickly became part of the Sunni-Shia war. But right now, you don't hear a lot about Saudi or Emirati or Gulf support to the Shia rebels, it's the Sunni rebels. It's mostly about Turkey, Iran, Syria, Russia, the US. It's become a much more internationalized conflict. And the rebels have become such a shell of their former selves that their only real backer is Turkey and it's... It doesn't really fall into the Sunni-Shia conflict as much.

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JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu) for in depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click sign up at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu). Oh, and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes. But whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

JH: So I'd like you to take a step back from your purely analytical role and speak as a Jew in America, a person who experiences the communal conversations that we have, and reflect on what you think American Jews, when we talk about, when we think about Israel, the Middle East, what are we missing? What's the key ingredient that we're not talking about? Or alternatively, or additionally, what are we misunderstanding?

JR: So I think the best way to relate to it, like you said is to relate to it myself personally. And I remember when I was growing up, I went to Jewish day school, and I remember, you know, it was the time of the Intifada when I was in high school and I remember always hearing about Hamas and Hezbollah, Hamas and Hezbollah, the terrorist groups wanna destroy Israel. But I never learned about them with any degree of detail and they were... We were never taught about them with that... Any degree of detail. It took me till college before I learned that Hamas was a Palestinian group, a Sunni group with roots in the Muslim Brotherhood, whereas Hezbollah was a Lebanese Shia group, that real... That started with Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. So understanding that there are differences and... Between the different enemies of Israel, and instead of just categorizing everybody as terrorists, but actually understanding what their individual motivations are, their individual origins are, who their networks of support are, I think then gives you the tools to then analyze, "Okay, well, how do we combat them? How do we push back against them?"

JR: "Oh, Hezbollah takes... Hezbollah is a political party in Lebanon. Okay, well, what factions in Lebanon can we support against Hezbollah where it can then be marginalized in the country itself?" Right? We've... As Israel learned in 2006, fighting a shooting war with Hezbollah isn't necessarily going to destroy the movement but possibly and as we see right now in Lebanon as we speak right now there are protests in Lebanon against all of Lebanon's leaders. Possibly through domestic Lebanese politics you can marginalize Hezbollah in a way that maybe the Lebanese wake up and say, "Hey, maybe we shouldn't have an armed militia in our country." Maybe in any country where the government is, a political scientist would say, "A government is a government because it has a monopoly on legitimate forms of violence." Maybe only the Lebanese Armed Forces should have weapons and should be the monopoly of legitimate use of forces.

JR: Similarly, with Hamas, when in 2006, a little bit later on when Hamas won political elections against Fatah, I think that the American Jewish community was tremendously concerned and even the Bush administration was tremendously concerned. "Oh my god, this violent, this terrorist political Islamist group won an election. How awful is a terrorist group about to become the politically elected legitimate leader?" Whereas, if you understand the problem in context where you have to put yourself in the shoes of the average Palestinian in 2006 and they said, "Okay, well, I could vote for Fatah who has been controlling the PLO, the Palestinian Authority for decades and is thoroughly corrupt, or I could vote for this alternative, which due to their more religious influences views themselves and holds themselves to a higher incorruptible standard, maybe instead of voting for the corrupt people, I'll vote for the incorrupt people." And I'm not saying that everybody voted for that, based on that dialectic but that seemed to be, according to public opinion polls, that seemed to be the real indicator that they were trying to vote out of office their corrupt leaders.

JR: And meanwhile, so much of the American Jewish community talks about, well, corrupt leaders, that the Palestinians have no popular mandate. So maybe this was an opportunity to recognize that fact and to try to bring Hamas as a responsible stakeholder. You then had the civil war where the factions broke up so you didn't really have an opportunity to cultivate that. And I'm not saying that it would have necessarily succeeded, but the fear that was inspired by Hamas taking office is one that missed the nuance and the context of why they were elected. And you might say, "Well, it doesn't matter why they were elected because they are a terrorist group, they would have been in power." But to me, I would argue, well, you have to look at the average Palestinian who voted for them and why were they voting for them? Was it because they wanted to destroy Israel or was it for their own domestic political needs? And much like American voters who you can't get them to think about foreign policy when they vote, they think about their own domestic needs, the economy, education, health care, maybe the same holds true for the Palestinians who think more in terms of domestic issues than, quote unquote foreign policy issues of which Israel would constitute.

JH: Is there something about the Israel security question writ large, that you have conversations around the Shabbat table or with friends who happen to be Jewish? And is there something that you just like, "Guys, we're not paying attention to this."

JR: I think the problem becomes when your whole regional outlook or your whole foreign policy outlook or your whole regional outlook is focused on one specific problem. That's a pinhole, you're missing the whole picture. And that's when you're caught by surprise of why did Hamas win or how do we push back against Hezbollah? When you're only looking, when you're missing the complete picture, you're inherently misunderstanding the situation. And so, if you... Wanting Israel's security to be... Is your predominant foreign policy choice is certainly an understandable foreign policy choice for the American Jewish community. But the question becomes, what is the full picture? What is every actor, every stakeholder that affects Israel's security whether they are full foreign policy considerations? They're not just thinking about in terms of Israel. So for us to



just think in terms of Israel when evaluating the actions of the other actors in the region is inherently going to miss something.

JH: So when you were at NYPD in the wake of 9/11 given your age... [chuckle]

JR: Yes, yes.

JH: How much of your work was intended to be analytical, taking a snapshot of reality and then analyzing it versus predictive where you were putting your expertise on the line to say what you think would happen?

JR: So the NYPD, you were engaged in both tactical analysis and strategic analysis. So tactical analysis revolved around ongoing investigations into individuals who were potentially going to commit terrorist attacks or provide support to terrorist groups in the New York area. And so, from a very tactical perspective, it was, "What are these people doing? How do we thwart them? What do we need to do to make sure that either they're not really doing what we fear they might be doing or stop them if they really are doing it?" And then, the second component was the strategic perspective. And looking at the different regions around the world, different terrorist trends, and I was on the Middle East team so I very much looked at what was happening around the Middle East, in particular, what was happening in Syria, to try to figure out, "Okay, well, what groups are emerging and where are people traveling to and what groups are they joining when they travel there?" Predictive in so far as it didn't cross the threshold of everybody knowing about it or taking notice, but there were a few hints of a phenomenon that you could then tease out and say, "Oh, you know what? This is going to be a phenomenon that we need to watch very closely."

JR: So in 2013, I had just arrived at the NYPD, there were stories of like two or three foreign fighters, of Americans who were fighting in Syria with mostly with groups like Jabhat al-Nusra which was the Al-Qaeda affiliate at the time. And the NYPD leadership said, "You know what? This is going to be a phenomenon. There are gonna be more people traveling to Syria." And ISIS had only just announced itself about a month before, they had not really committed any terrorist attacks or any spectacular terrorist attacks other than the fact that they were belligerent in Iraq and Syria. They were committing terrorist attacks in Iraq but they weren't as externally focused. So that was a trend. "Okay, well, foreign fighters is going to be an issue." And at the time, foreign fighters was an issue both to the Al-Qaeda affiliate and to the ISIS affiliate and then as ISIS became more and more powerful, everybody more or less just shifted over to ISIS. But teasing out those trends, other trends was teasing out the white supremacy trends and then trying to think about, "Okay, well, is white supremacy actually going to be a phenomenon that's going to affect the security, the terrorist landscape of New York City? Let's get ahead of that. So to me, it's about talking about what's happening right now and then what are the kernels of information that indicate that a future trend and trying to get ahead of that trend and briefing the bosses, as we said, about potential future trends and what we need to do right now in order to prepare ourselves for those trends.

JH: Does NYPD's anti-terrorist infrastructure far outstrip any other American cities in terms of size and budgetary commitment?

JR: I would say that that's true. The NYPD has its own apparatus as part of the Intelligence Bureau that is dedicated to terrorism cases. And they also have dedicated over 100 officers to helping the FBI and their Joint Terrorism Task Force. Most other law enforcement agencies around the country just dedicate officers to the Joint Terrorism Task Force, that's led by the FBI as part of an inter-agency process in different cities across the country. The NYPD does that but also maintains a parallel organization. And they also dedicate more officers to the JTTF, to this Joint Terrorism Task Force than any other police department. So not only are they working with

the FBI closer than any other law enforcement, but they also have an entirely parallel apparatus that works with the FBI but is its own stand up unit.

JH: It's quite a commitment.

JR: And they have officers in cities all over the world that provide... This network of local law enforcement agencies that they're able to work with and share information as needed.

JH: So one tends to think of one's own time as the most chaotic, most dangerous, most extreme, whatever.

JR: Right.

JH: And that's natural enough, but you have an analytical perspective of some stretch of history into the recent past to today. So I'd like you to kinda rate the complexity and the chaos and the violence in the Middle East today as compared to previous iterations that you have expert experience with.

JR: I think that there has been a number of periods of turmoil in the Middle East, you had the Arab Cold War in the 1950s, where you had Egypt fighting, what people call its own Vietnam in Yemen. You had the Iran-Iraq War. You have a lot of periods of turmoil. I think to me, the Arab Spring was an inflection point where for the first time you had real democratic uprisings in the region, and that, the turmoil that resulted from those uprisings and they didn't always turn out democratic. Tunisia is still limping along with a very fragile democracy. The region today is still feeling the after-effects of the Arab Spring. We tend to think of the Arab Spring maybe as, well, that was a phenomenon that ended, but the Syrian civil war resulted from the Arab Spring, the war in Yemen was a direct outgrowth of the Arab Spring. The conflict in Libya was a direct outgrowth from the Arab Spring. And so, right now, today, as we speak, in November 2019, we have another period of massive turmoil where it's been even more hectic than a few months ago or even a year or two ago. Right? The wars of... Yesterday, we were concerned about the Yemen Civil War, the Libyan Civil War but those are still ongoing but we have even more. This past summer, there was a lot of concern about Iran attacking the Gulf Shipping and Gulf Oil infrastructure.

JR: We don't talk about that anymore. Just a few months later, we nearly went to war against Iran and no one talks about that. Over this past year, we've had democratic... Or transitions, political transitions in Algeria and Sudan and Arab Spring 2.0 that people aren't really talking about. In the Yemen Civil War, when the United Arab Emirates pulled out this past summer that led to an intra civil war, a civil war within a civil war where one of the factions fought against itself. And these are all the conflicts that we're not talking about because we're talking about the conflicts of today. And today you have Turkey's war against the Kurds in Syria and trying to figure out the ceasefire dynamics of that. You have the death of al-Baghdadi and his deputy. You have ongoing protests in Lebanon, which led to the official resignation of the prime minister. You have protests in Iraq, where the prime minister has indicated that he'd be willing to step down in a constitutional process. You have protests in Egypt for the first time since 2013. So, as we speak today, the region, once again, seems to be in turmoil for various different endogenous reasons, not necessarily, there's no necessarily a grand coherent narrative of why this has happened.

JH: Right. The meta wars make a lot of sense out of a situation but fundamentally, there are wheels within wheels all the time.

JR: Exactly. The way I like to think about it is that the meta wars are top-down. That's the state's imposing themselves on local players. So you have Turkey imposing itself on the Kurds, you have the Emirates and Saudi Arabia fighting Yemeni proxies in Yemen or in Yemen

predominantly today. Whereas, right now, these protests seem to be a bottom-up where you have protests in Egypt against the regime, protests in Iraq against the government, protests in Lebanon against the government. So you have the... Both these top-down and bottom-up forces.

JH: Which is why you used the term Arab Spring 2.0?

JR: Well, it's actually very interesting that you say that. So the Arab Spring 2.0, I said with regard to Algeria and Sudan, which were authoritarian governments that were overthrown or put into political transition due to mass popular protest. What I call, what's happening today in Lebanon and Iraq, I would actually call the bizarro Arab Spring.

[chuckle]

JR: So whereas before the Arab Spring and again in Algeria and Sudan earlier this year, you have authoritarian governments that don't allow political expression or representative government. The only way to indicate to the government that, "Hey, I have a problem with the way you're governing things, with the way you're running things is through mass protest, ideally, non-violent protest." But what you have in Lebanon and Iraq are actually nominally and not just nominally, but fairly representative governments. Right? Iraq holds free and fair elections, Lebanon holds free and fair elections, albeit in a confessional sectarian system. But right now it's almost as if the protesters are taking the lessons learned from the Arab Spring of saying, "We need mass protests to overthrow our leaders."

JR: And while in fact, they're trying to overthrow democratically elected leaders and yes, there might be a lot of discontent with the way they're running things or the inefficient way that they're running things, or the corrupt way that they're running things, but I would say that they need to be careful of what they wish for to overthrow governments in an extra-constitutional process, especially representative governments, is asking for would-be populist dictators to take control and to say, "The elite are corrupt. Let me represent your interest." And that's exactly what happened in Egypt in 2013, where you had the military step in and say, "You know what? We're gonna take over. We heard the voice of the people, we're on the side of the people, and we're gonna overthrow this government because they're corrupt and not representing the people." And now you have President Sisi who is just as much a dictator as Hosni Mubarak was. In Lebanon, there's less of a fear of that, the military is not particularly a powerful institution, but Iraq, you never know if a military leader could step forward and take over.

JR: So it's almost a situation of "Be careful what you wish for." Ideal... Political expression is very important even... And especially in a democracy, we have protests in the United States all the time. But trying to overthrow a government via extra-constitutional means is not an ideal recipe. You would like to ideally work through more representative constitutional means to do so.

JH: I think a western-oriented maybe at the risk of being chauvinist, western-oriented analytical approach to that phenomenon would be to say that these countries don't really value constitutional democracy in the first place. And that therefore the bulk of the people, even when they have a cycle or two of free and fair elections, at end of the day, they don't really put stock in the constitutional idea. They'll put stock in elections as long as they serve their interests, but they will not sideline their interests for the sake of a greater constitutional commitment especially when it's only conceptual and not particularly useful to them. Because they're not really constitutionally democratic societies. And this is... So while you may be right in saying that, "Sure, they're shooting themselves in the foot and they might... They should be careful what they wish for," it's on a canvas of... With lots of holes in it anyway.

JR: [chuckle] What I would say is, rather than talk about a monolithic "they", I would talk about

it in terms of what's happening in Lebanon and in Iraq right now, you have the people protesting against the government. And the people are demonstrating their frustration with the government and they are not calling for a dictatorship, they're calling for their interests to be represented, granted possibly via extra-constitutional means, and that's where I'm saying they need to be aware of what they wish for. But then you talk about like the government themselves, Iraq has a real politics and maybe we don't focus on it enough, but there was coalition building, everyone talks about Bibi Netanyahu trying to get to 61 to build a coalition. Iraq had to build a coalition. The prime minister was a dark horse candidate that was agreed upon by two main factions who won the Iraqi elections and the prime minister is not from either of their party leaderships but became a more technocratic prime minister because he was the agreed upon, the concession candidate.

JR: Iraq does have a real politics, and I think it is in the US interest to cultivate that politics. Because maybe I am being a Western chauvinist, but the best way to have representational government or the best way to have stable government, is the representational government reflecting the will of the people, that is the way to have the most stable government. There's this popular notion that isn't always true that democracies don't go to war with each other, but the ability of more governments to be representative of their people, the greater that a government, any given government is representative of their people is a long-term, is a recipe for long-term stability and ideally is in the US's long-term interest. So we need to be cultivating a representational government in Iraq and in Lebanon. If for instance, in Lebanon they wanna get rid of the confessional system, which has a real problem, you need to ensure that it is still a representational system. And again be careful what you wish for. The reason that it is a confessional system in Lebanon is because it was the only way to get out of a 15 year civil war.

JR: And it was like... Churchill said that democracy is the worst form of government except for any other government. Consociational democracy, to use a fancy term, a sectarian democracy where things are inherently divided into different sects is the worst form of democracy possible, except for the alternative, the alternative... Game theory. Don't think of it, is the alternative as being, "Oh, you know, standard majoritarian democracy." The alternative to sectarian democracy is chaos and civil war. And so consociational democracy for all it's faults is at least preventing civil war from breaking out. The problem is that you then have this, it has its own knock-on effects of freezing confessional politics, sectarian politics, where you just can't break out of that.

JH: Right. Right. You can't become a citizen to quote...

JR: Exactly. You have to belong to a faction, a Sunni, a Shia or a Maronite Christian faction or a Jewish faction.

JH: Well, Jordan Reimer thank you very much for the time, it was really a pleasure to talk to you.

JR: Thank you for having me, this was so much fun.

[music]

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