



The Latest in the Middle East with Bernard Haykel (9/28/17)

00:00:20 Jessica Chen: Good evening, everyone. My name is Jessica Chen, and I'm the director of public programs here at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. It's my pleasure to welcome all of you to tonight's program. As always, we welcome our museum members and those tuning in to our live web broadcast at 911memorial.org/live.

We welcome back for his sixth public program appearance, our dear friend Bernard Haykel. Bernie is one of America's leading experts on the Arabian Peninsula, as well as on Islamic law and Islamic political movements. He is professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, where he is also director of the Institute of the Transregional Study of the Contemporary Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia.

00:01:04 He is the author of "Revival and Reform in Islam" and "Saudi Arabia in Transition," both published by Cambridge University Press. He is also the author of numerous articles on Salafism, al Qaeda, ISIS, and Wahhabism. He has received several awards, including the Prize Fellowship at Magdalene College, Oxford, and Carnegie Corporation and Guggenheim fellowships. And he may be very familiar to you, since he frequently appears in print and broadcast media, including PBS, NPR, "The New York Times," Al Jazeera, BBC, and others.

00:01:36 Bernie has been with us since the beginning of our public program series, and he has become a staple speaker in our roster. As always, we are so grateful for his time and his pointed insights. And I would also be remiss not to thank the Berg Foundation for their generous support of the memorial & museum's 2017-2018 public program season. So without further ado, please join me in welcoming Bernard Haykel in conversation

with 9/11 Memorial & Museum's executive vice president and deputy director of museum programs, Clifford Chanin.

(applause)

00:02:11 Clifford Chanin: Thank you, Jess. Welcome, everybody. Welcome back, many of you. Second program in our new season, and as you can see from-- if you've seen the program itself, we have a lot of interesting things coming up. But it has become kind of a tradition with us, and Bernie has been so agreeable in allowing us to establish this tradition where, with-- on a regular basis, we turn to him. It's like those serials on the radio in the old days, you know, "When last we met."

00:02:40 And here we have some updating to do, Bernie, because you're in a line of work where it never stands still, and there's always something new to talk about. When last we met, ISIS was still expanding in Syria. The military campaigns—the U.S.; the Russians and their allies; Iran, its allies there; the Syrian government-- have closed large portions of that country off to ISIS. ISIS seems to be in a desperate state.

00:03:13 And just today, it was announced that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, released a statement, a fairly lengthy statement that I'm not sure has been fully translated yet, but you were aware of it. We talked about it a little bit before-- in which he seems to acknowledge that the walls are closing in. So let's start there. And on the basis of this new statement, what is the tone and what is the sense you're getting from where ISIS is now through the eyes of Baghdadi?

00:03:44 Bernard Haykel: First, thank you, Jess, and thank you, Cliff. It's lovely to be here. This is kind of like a home for me, and I feel very proud to have been involved in this museum. It's really an honor to be here.

So let me turn to ISIS. So that's right. Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the so-called caliph of the Islamic State, issued a very long statement, flawless classical

Arabic, lots of religious talk in it. There was a tone of desperation in, in what he said, almost a lack-- also a lack of acknowledgment that ISIS has been defeated on numerous fronts. And I think ISIS will, as an organization, not last very long. I mean, I, I doubt it'll be around, if we were to meet again next September.

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However, this tone of desperation, the lack of acknowledgment about what's going on in the world, but there's also a tone of desperation in what he says, because he calls for greater attacks, more violence, especially in the West.

So he explicitly says this. He keeps reminding his followers that God has promised them paradise, but also promised them ultimate victory on this planet, and that if they only hold steadfast to their beliefs, if they only kind of engage in more violence, that ultimately this contractual relationship that they have with God, where if they offer sacrifice, God will reward them.

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My broader sense about ISIS is that it has really given jihadism a bad name. And jihadism is already a pretty bad thing to begin with. But the excesses that they engage, that this organization engaged in has, I think-- is making a lot of people who might otherwise be attracted to it think twice about whether this is the way to resist a feeling, you know, or people or groups that are committing an injustice against Muslims or against Arabs.

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And so I feel that there's a tipping point here, and that jihadism, as a phenomenon, may actually be, you know, waning, perhaps even disappearing. Now, I hesitate to predict this, because a lot of people have predicted it in the past and have been wrong. But I think that we are seeing a shift in the attraction away from this, from this movement.

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Clifford Chanin: How would you track such a shift? In what ways would it manifest itself? And, you know, the territory that ISIS controls is much smaller, and it's harder to get to.

Bernard Haykel: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: So the flow of foreign fighters, if you will, coming to the Islamic republic is both smaller and more difficult to attain. But in terms of sort of this culture that has justified and supported this idea of radical, violent jihadism, how would we see the impact of this sort of negative consequence, if indeed that's the case?

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Bernard Haykel: So, I mean, that's an excellent question. And I think it involves a kind of connoisseurship, a kind of, that someone who is an antiquities dealer would have when looking at a piece and knowing a real piece from a fake one. I, I can, I can sense it instinctively and almost intuitively because I see, for instance, in countries like Saudi Arabia, that the government is exerting tremendous pressure on the Islamists, whether it's the radicals, the violent types, or even the ones who claim to be nonviolent.

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And there isn't a single word of support for Islamism and for Islamists in, in a country like Saudi Arabia. So that tells you that people are beginning to think, "You know, these guys have misled us. They've led us into a blind alley," ultimately with ISIS representing the most extreme version of Islamism, and that this is not the way forward.

The way forward is actually to, to find something else. And the Saudi leadership, in particular, is offering an alternative to, to the Islamist model.

00:08:06

Clifford Chanin: Let me ask about, a little bit more about this sort of social rejection of Islamism, if it turns out-- or jihadism, if it turns out to be that. So there's obviously, you know, official channels which can be mobilized and controlled. But social media and sort of popular sentiment are much harder to control. In fact, Saudi Arabia has a very active social media

world in which people do express themselves. So would you see it there?
Are you seeing it there already?

00:08:35 Bernard Haykel: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And, in fact, that's one of the places where I look regularly. And so you see attacks on jihadism, but also on Islamism, on social media-- people mocking them, literally mocking them, mocking their way of being, their way of looking, their dress, their ideas. And there's no response. There's no-- there's almost acceptance to this, to this mockery. So that tells me that something is happening.

00:09:04 Clifford Chanin: Now, it's certainly the case that, while that is a very positive sign, I would say-- I mean, the Saudi government has had decades-long investments in supporting, if not jihadism itself, the underlying ideology behind it, as the true interpretation of Islam, whether it's this, you know, very restrictive, conservative, rejectionist path that rejects pretty much anything from the outside. So is that still an underlying ideology the Saudi government is trying to produce, or as part of the bigger picture, which we'll be discussing, about change in Saudi Arabia, is this sort of fundamental underlying ideology of extremism also somehow being questioned or called into play?

00:09:50 Bernard Haykel: I think it is being called into play. And in fact we see a shift away from a kind of literalist interpretation of Islam happening in Saudi, a move away from Islamism, also, in the U.A.E., in the United Arab Emirates. I think part of the tensions that exist between Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., on one side, and Qatar on the other, is precisely over this point, because Qatar has not been willing to abandon Islamism.

00:10:14 In fact, it's still a major sponsor of Islamism, not the jihadis, necessarily, but just Islamism as a movement. And I think there's a profound sense that in the gulf, at least—in Saudi Arabia, in the U.A.E.-- that this is a dead end. "We have to find something different." And what, what's different is, you know, and what is being posited as an alternative to Islamism, is still not very clear to me.

00:10:41 So there's definitely nationalism. So the states, the governments are emphasizing nationalism, you know, national day celebrations. Football-- that is, soccer—is hugely emphasized, you know, the flag. You're seeing that kind of, that kind of thing emerging as an alternative. And we'll see whether it has legs. I mean, that's... You know, it's an interesting kind of experiment that's happening as we, as we speak.

00:11:14 Clifford Chanin: I mean, to uproot that from Saudi thinking, society, would seem to me, would take an enormous effort. There are so many years and institutions behind that perspective.

Bernard Haykel: Yes, but the argument that's being made is not-- I mean, that the government is making, and here, specifically, by the crown prince, a man called Mohammed bin Salman-- is not sort of, "Let's become socially liberal and more open and more nationalistic and less sort of Islamic in orientation." He's not making that argument for ideological purposes or because he's a social liberal.

00:11:52 He's saying that, "If we want to economically develop, if we want to compete with China, if we want to compete with the West economically, we have to find another way. We cannot persist in this rigid interpretation of the religion and this heavy focus on it to the detriment of teaching math, teaching science, empowering women."

And so just now, a couple of days ago, women have been finally given the right to drive. This, this was, this was a decision by royal decree. They will begin driving...

00:12:31 Clifford Chanin: Next June, I believe.

Bernard Haykel: Next June, yes, when the licenses will be issued. And, and, again, this is a real slap in the face of the religious establishment, because the religious establishment has always-- and the Islamists in Saudi Arabia-- have always used this issue of women driving as a symbol

of their relative power and domination of society and of the public sphere and public space. The government is saying, "You don't have that control anymore."

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Now, the fear is that the government may end up saying, you know, "We're going to dominate the public space ourselves," and the government is authoritarian. And so, therefore, the new public space may be socially liberal, but maybe politically extremely illiberal, right? Just as illiberal as any Islamist would want it to be. And that's, that's what we're, I think, in the process of seeing. And one...

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Clifford Chanin: Let me just ask, if the impetus for allowing women to drive, and I assume there will be other aspects of women's lives that will be opened up consequently...

Bernard Haykel: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: If the impetus is not a more liberal order, what is the logic of allowing this to happen, which is a major, major social shift?

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Bernard Haykel: Yeah, so I think—you know, as I said, one, one purpose is to show who's boss over social space. It's not the religious establishment anymore. It's the government. So, you know, the royals, one particular royal. That's one, that's, but that's not all of it. This, this royal, the crown prince, looked at his society and actually saw that women are the better-educated, the harder-working, the more intelligent half of this society.

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And he can see this from university degrees and results at universities. He can see it from high school graduation rates. He just knows that if he wants to reform his economy, which is the big drive that he's trying to push-- again, to compete against China, to compete against the West, and so on, and to move away from this huge dependence on oil as the exclusive source of revenue to the government-- if he wants to make that shift, he can't do it without the women.

00:14:47 And so it's very interesting to see that economic necessity, economic imperatives are actually driving socially liberal, or at least a bit more social opening, in giving the women the right to drive, which basically means autonomy. Because, you know, Saudi Arabia is a country that's a lot like Arizona, in the sense that, you know, there aren't great public transportation services. You need a car to get around. And so it's a big deal for women to be able to drive.

00:15:17 Clifford Chanin: And they will be on their own in cars, if need be.

Bernard Haykel: That's right.

Clifford Chanin: Yeah, now, again, when last we met, Mohammed bin Sultan was the deputy crown prince.

Bernard Haykel: Right.

Clifford Chanin: His cousin, Mohammed bin Nayef, who was an older, well respected, former minister of the interior, with very strong relationships with Washington, was the actual crown prince. And King Salman was-- King Sultan was the king.

00:15:41 Bernard Haykel: King Salman.

Clifford Chanin: Salman, sorry. But there was a change in the intervening months, in which the deputy crown prince was moved into the crown prince position.

Bernard Haykel: Correct.

Clifford Chanin: The older successor was moved aside. The younger man, skipping a generation, now becomes crown prince to his father.

Bernard Haykel: Correct.

Clifford Chanin: This happened just months ago. Explain it to us, if you will. What was the impetus for it? Is this simply a matter of, sort of family affiliation trumping all things, or is there something else involved here?

00:16:15 Bernard Haykel: So it is a game of thrones, and watching-- and we're talking about very few individuals. So watching it is quite difficult. I mean, it's really difficult to know what's going on when we're talking about two or three people and everything is basically dependent on what's in their head.

00:16:34 My reading of the situation, and, by the way, just for purposes of full disclosure, I know the king and I know the crown prince personally. I mean, I've met both, and in the case of the crown prince, on multiple occasions. So the king is an absolute monarch. He is Louis XIV, okay? He can-- anything he decides is the law. And no one dares, in the family, stand up to him or disagree with him. There's a culture of obedience, total obedience, and deference within the royal family. And this is something that's inculcated in the princes and the princesses from, you know, birth, that, you know, the king has final say.

00:17:19 And there's a pecking order. It's extremely elaborate, and it all has to do with age. I mean, the classic, you know, the kind of anecdotal story that's often told about the Saudi princes is that if you had 50 of them here on the stage, and you were to take a photograph, and you told them, "We're going to take a photograph," they would immediately line up based on rank, based on rank, and the rank would be age, and the age could be the difference of two hours, you know, older than another person. And they're fully aware of who's older and who's younger. And they would just immediately line up in that way.

- 00:17:51 So there is a culture that's extremely formal, extremely deferential, in this family. And the king wants two things. He wants Saudi Arabia-- I mean, as he said to me-- he wants Saudi Arabia to be able to become a military regional superpower. He wants it to be able to defend itself and not depend on the United States for the protection of the, of the regime and the dynasty. Especially, he wants it to be strong enough to stand up to Iran, which is a country that has four times the population of Saudi Arabia and a much more advanced country in, you know, economic, educational, and other ways.
- 00:18:32 So he wants to build that capacity. And he knows that that's a generational effort. It's not something you can do overnight, to reform the military. The second thing he wants to do is to reform the economy, diversify it, move it away from dependence on oil, in order to produce the jobs for all the young people, because there's a big demographic bulge of young people in the country who are coming onto the labor market every year. He wants to-- he wants the private sector to produce the jobs for these young people. He's, he knows that the system where the public sector, that is the government, providing two-thirds of all jobs in the country, is unsustainable.
- 00:19:12 So think about this. You know, 70% of all Saudis, working Saudis, work for the government. It's, you know, unsustainable. It's kind of a massive welfare state with a system of entitlements that, you know, that, that, you know, again, is unaffordable. So he wants to move that away. I think he sees the former crown prince, who is a man called Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, an extremely able man, a security man, head of... He was the minister of the, minister of the interior in Saudi Arabia. And basically, the man who defeated and destroyed al Qaeda in the kingdom when it emerged in 2003.
- 00:19:57 That's why he's loved by U.S. intelligence and security services and Western intelligence services. He knew that this, this individual was great at that job, but he could not transform the country in these two other

ways, the military hegemon and the economic reform. He feels that this son of his, who is now crown prince, can pull this off.

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Clifford Chanin: Tell us about the crown prince. I mean, he's 33 or so.

Bernard Haykel: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: He is not educated outside the country, I don't believe.

Bernard Haykel: Right.

Clifford Chanin: I don't know if he speaks foreign languages at all.

Bernard Haykel: No.

Clifford Chanin: So that-- what is your impression of him, not just in terms of his vision, which I'd like to know about, but also, you know, his capacities to deliver the things, these extraordinarily ambitious plans, that you're describing?

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Bernard Haykel: Yeah, so he's in his early 30s. He's a very charismatic person. He's a lot like Bill Clinton, in the sense that, you know, if you ever meet Bill Clinton, he makes you feel like you're the center of the universe for that three seconds that he's talking to you. He has that. He has that touch, which not all, you know, people have, and certainly not all royals in the family have.

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So, you know, he really has that charisma. He's also, I think, someone who is capable of, you know, of inflicting violence if necessary. I mean, of resorting to violence if necessary. He has that capacity. You can sense it. And I think his father, the king, knows this, and he knows that a country

like Saudi Arabia cannot be ruled by a kind of softy-- that you need a tough guy.

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Clifford Chanin: The Saudis have gotten deeply involved, perhaps through this instinct of violence, because the effort in Yemen is principally the product of the crown prince's sense of the Iranian threat next door, and so on and so forth. But the effort in Yemen is not going well. There's a stalemate, at best, in terms of this enormous Saudi investment of wealth and military capacity and so on, and it's not a very well- developed military capacity. So is that, starting in terms of the horizon of what the Saudis face, is that Yemen involvement something that is already pulling them away from the kind of progress they're looking at, or is it undermining their claims to military strength?

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Bernard Haykel: Yeah, so let me, let me give you a slightly different perspective on the situation in Yemen. So, Yemen is a country that's to the south-southwest of...

Clifford Chanin: We can pull up a map of the region, of the gulf region, so you'll get a sense of Yemen in that picture. You will see it in front of us down there.

Bernard Haykel: So, you know, it's a country to the south and southwest of Saudi Arabia, about 26 million people. I see that you're going to have Sheila Carapico come later on.

Clifford Chanin: Yes.

00:22:53

Bernard Haykel: She knows it well, and we spent time in Yemen together. In any event, Yemen was undergoing a civil war, and here I'm just going to give you a thumbnail sketch of what was happening. Iran took advantage of the civil war by arming and mobilizing and indoctrinating a particular militia in Yemen that took over the capital city and effectively took over the government. Then there were regular flights from Iran into

Yemen, into Sanaa, that were carrying troops and trainers, personnel, missiles, and...

- 00:23:31 Again, to cut a very long story short, what the Iranians wanted to do was to needle the Saudis and make life difficult for them on their border, on their southern border, by placing missiles on that border, just like Iran has done with Israel in Lebanon, in southern Lebanon, by equipping and arming a militia there called Hezbollah, with at least 100,000 missiles, all aimed at Israel.
- 00:23:54 So they wanted to, Iran wanted to reproduce that model in Yemen, sort of projecting force on the cheap, through a proxy. The Saudis saw this happening, and so did the other GCC countries. And they said, "We're not going to allow this to happen." So they initiated a war against the Houthis, and they blockaded the entire country navally. They did stop, more or less stop the... Certainly no Iranian flights can come into Yemen. They stopped the flow of arms, or most of it into Yemen. They did not defeat the Houthis, that's true.
- 00:24:34 But in the process of doing this, they're also building up their military capacity, which I was telling you earlier. For the Saudis to become a military hegemon regionally, they need to get into wars. I mean, you don't build up a military without real-world experience and real training. And this is what I think this war is actually doing. It's building up a certain capacity, which will take time. And with that, they are—and now Saudi Arabia is, I think, the third-- the country that spends the third-most amount of money on military weapons and procurements and so on.
- 00:25:12 So Yemen is, you know, a half-victory for them. It's not a, it's not a defeat, in that they stopped the Iranians, and they've, you know, put a line in the sand. And they're building up their military.

Clifford Chanin: But if your goal is to establish yourself as a credible military power, is a half-victory under these circumstances going to support that claim to power or undermine it, because it's not a full victory?

00:25:39 Bernard Haykel: Yeah, I mean, basically, the Saudi military, to put it very bluntly, was useless before the Yemen war. Now they know how to target better. Their air force is building up this, this capacity to fly better, to, you know, to coordinate better with ground troops. I mean, this is... Again, this is something that you can't, doesn't happen overnight. But I think if you were to compare the Saudi military today with what it was before the war, you'll see a marked difference.

00:26:06 Clifford Chanin: That implies, though, that there may well be other opportunities for the Saudis to exercise their forces. Because the logic of it is, you've got to do it to get better at doing it.

Bernard Haykel: Yes, you do, and you have to train, and you need a tremendous amount of coordination with the United States, as well, especially, because America is the one country that has this capacity-- again, because of the wars that we've had-- to coordinate ground troops with air forces, with naval forces, with satellite imagery, and all that.

00:26:38 That entire kind of way of fighting a war that Americans are good at, is something that the Saudis want to learn how to do. And so, I mean, the other way in which you see this kind of more pugnacious Saudi Arabia is the situation with Qatar. But they did not want to go militarily into Qatar for a whole number of reasons. But you do see with the situation in Qatar, that, again, Saudi Arabia is trying to say, "Look, there's one kid who dominates this block, and it's us."

00:27:11 Clifford Chanin: Well, let's go to that, because at roughly the same time as this new succession of the crown prince, there is this break within the Gulf Cooperation Council, the GCC, which is the Saudi- dominated regional association of six states, Qatar being one of them.

Bernard Haykel: Yep.

Clifford Chanin: But you mentioned earlier this divide between them on support for political Islam around the region.

Bernard Haykel: Right.

Clifford Chanin: And now there has been this major break among a group that previously had done everything it could to paper over its differences.

Bernard Haykel: Yes.

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Clifford Chanin: So the Saudis and the Emirates seem to have a similar kind of strategy, because they've also been very militarily active in Yemen.

Bernard Haykel: Yes.

Clifford Chanin: And rather bellicose in relation to the Qataris, as well. So lay this diplomatic standoff over the military situation that we've described, and also, of course, the question of Iran in the background for all of us.

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Bernard Haykel: Yeah, so, I mean, one point I should make before I address the Qatar-- your question and Qatar-- is to say that the United Arab Emirates, which is, you know, the country that you see up there, dominated by one of the emirates, called Abu Dhabi, has also a crown prince, also called Mohammed. In this case, it's Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, known as MBZ; whereas, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia is

known as MBS, Mohammed bin Salman. So we have MBZ here and MBS there.

00:28:35 Clifford Chanin: We'll have a test at the end of all this, so take notes.

(laughter)

Bernard Haykel: Right, so MBZ is, I think, and the United Arab Emirates, is a model that the Saudis, I think, want to emulate. The Emirates, by the way, has been involved militarily in Afghanistan. They sent special forces there. Very active in Yemen, extremely effective in Yemen. So they're building up that kind of capacity, which the Saudis want to, also, emulate and do. So it's worth keeping that in mind.

00:29:05 Clifford Chanin: I just want to-- it's a sidebar, but nonetheless-- I mean, the United Arab Emirates has a tiny population.

Bernard Haykel: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: And they're obviously punching above their weight if they're acting effectively militarily. But there are the simple natural limits of how many people they have to put into any kind of military action. So they must, presumably, align themselves with the Saudis or with some larger country, if they have any intention at all of getting involved in something.

00:29:27 Bernard Haykel: That's right. And, also, if the Saudis were to build a special forces capacity like that of the United Emirates-- it would be much larger, of course-- it would be a formidable regional power. And that's, I think, where they're headed.

Now, to turn to Qatar, so, that's right, you have the Gulf Cooperation Council, six countries. Qatar has always been with Oman, you know, slightly idiosyncratic, or at least doing its own thing. In the case of Oman, it doesn't matter so much for the Saudis, because the Omanis don't really meddle in other people's affairs.

00:30:07 The Qataris are different. The Qataris do want to punch way above their weight. And here we're talking about a population of-- a native population-- of maybe 300,000, maybe. Richest place on the planet. The average Qatari is, on a per capita GDP basis, you know, four, five times richer than the average American. So a very rich place, mostly from gas. They share the largest gas field with the Iranians.

00:30:39 And Qatar has done-- and there's long history of rivalry with the Saudis. Saudi is the big brother. The Qataris have chafed under Saudi domination for, you know, a century. And the Qataris have tried to adopt a policy which is difficult to explain, except to say that they're friends with everybody. That's, that's their, that's been their strategy.

Clifford Chanin: The U.S. has a major military base.

00:31:06 Bernard Haykel: That's right. One of the largest military base-- one of our largest military bases is in Qatar. But, you know, if you want to meet the Taliban, you can go to Qatar. If you want to meet al Qaeda, you can go to Qatar. If you want to meet Hamas, you can go to Qatar.

Literally, you know, there isn't anybody that you can't meet in Qatar, including Israelis at times. So they've had this sort of, you know, "Let's get an insurance policy with everyone," you know. And that has, you know, and that has really rubbed the Saudis and the Emiratis the wrong way, in particular because they use Al Jazeera, which is a television—a satellite television station-- not the English, the Arabic. This is the Arabic version. They use that as a kind of megaphone for projecting some of their policies, especially when it comes to supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, and also dissidents.

00:32:02 The other thing that the Qataris do is that they have supported dissidents inside Saudi Arabia. So, you know, the Saudis discovered recently that, you know, several hundred military officers were on the payroll of the Qatari state. They discovered that the Qataris were bankrolling Saudi dissidents in London. So the Saudis said, "You know, enough." And that's what this latest tiff with the Qataris is about.

00:32:30 Clifford Chanin: So this is now at a standoff. And, you know, there was a Saudi-led blockade of Qatar in terms of...

Bernard Haykel: There's a boycott.

Clifford Chanin: A boycott, excuse me, yes. And, you know, where do you see this going? Do you see this crossing into a military exercise? The Qataris are getting closer to Iran in some ways. And how does this evolve, in your mind?

00:32:53 Bernard Haykel: Yeah, I mean, the Qataris have always been close, as I said, to everyone, and so there's nothing new in their relationship with Iran. The Saudis and the Emiratis miscalculated in terms of the resilience of the Qatari state, and of the Qatari regime. And they miscalculated in the following ways.

First, I told you Qatar is the richest place on the planet. So you can boycott it, but they can fly in cows from Turkey if they have to, if they need milk, you know? And, literally, that's what they did. So they're able to pay around any boycott.

00:33:24 Clifford Chanin: That's really steverage class, isn't it?

(laughter)

Bernard Haykel: Yeah, absolutely.

Clifford Chanin: I couldn't resist.

Bernard Haykel: There's some great...

(audience groaning)

Clifford Chanin: Hey, hey, hey, hey, come on.

Bernard Haykel: That's a good one. No, there are some great photographs of cows coming off planes in Qatar.

Clifford Chanin: I know how they feel.

(laughter)

Bernard Haykel: And, and so I think they miscalculated on the financial capacity of the Qataris to, you know, to basically resist a boycott. The other thing that, where the Saudis and Emiratis miscalculated is, well, in two very important ways.

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One is, they knew that President Trump was definitely on the side of the Saudis. He had just been feted in Saudi Arabia earlier this year, and he loved the, you know, what they were doing, especially this move against the Islamists and reforming the economy and all the rest of it.

What they didn't know was that our secretary of state, Tillerson, had a very long relationship with the Qataris that pre-dated his being secretary of state, as head of ExxonMobil. So ExxonMobil has a massive investment in Qatar and a long-standing interest and personal relationship with the Qataris. So that was one error. The secretary of state basically was not going to side with the Saudis.

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Clifford Chanin: Can I just ask, how do you miss that? I mean, if you're trying to be a regional power with, you know, real impact, that seems like a fairly elemental fact you ought to be on top of.

Bernard Haykel: Yes, well, yes. Maybe they also thought that Trump was boss, and he could bring his two, you know, his two cabinet officers to heel. The other thing they miscalculated on was that the American base there is super-important.

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Every American operation from Afghanistan to the Mediterranean is managed out of Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. and Secretary Mattis, who is the secretary of defense, said, "You know what? I don't care what this guy or that guy says or what they feel. I don't that want base affected in any way by this, by this dispute."

00:35:29

So Mattis, not for any love of Qatar, said, you know, "There's-- I want this to end immediately." And so when President Trump saw that Mattis on the one hand and Tillerson on the other were not on board with his initial tweets, which is that Qatar is this awful place and it's a good thing that the Saudis are, you know, are bashing it up and so on, he backtracked.

Trump backtracked, and that caused a problem, because had Trump not backtracked, had he in fact had his cabinet with him on this, it is very likely that the Qataris would have buckled.

00:36:08 Clifford Chanin: So we're now at, basically, continued at loggerheads in this situation, in your view.

Bernard Haykel: Yes, yeah, there is-- yeah, there are some attempts at negotiations and mediation by the Kuwaitis, by the Americans, but I... Yeah, I don't see it being resolved any time soon.

Clifford Chanin: Let's talk about the Trump administration and the emergence of a new policy in relation to Saudi Arabia and the Middle East overall. But, first, of course, the relationship between President Trump and the Saudi king and the royal family, in fact. How has that evolved? And where are the priorities in terms of the U.S.'s restructuring of its relationships in the region with the new administration?

00:36:52 Bernard Haykel: Yeah, so, look, I think one thing should be made very clear, and that is that President Trump has no financial interests in Saudi Arabia. He doesn't have a hotel in the kingdom, he doesn't have any investments in the kingdom. So it's not like, you know, the Saudis-- that is the dynasty, the rulers-- and Trump had a relationship. They had no relationship before he was elected president.

00:37:15 Of course, after he was elected president, they put out feelers, and they wanted to develop a relationship with him, and it worked pretty well in that the first country he visited was Saudi Arabia. The key thing, though, about President Trump and Saudi Arabia I think has nothing to do with Saudi Arabia. It has to do with the fact that President Trump decided that anything President Obama did, he wants to do the opposite, right?

00:37:41 And the one thing that President Obama did, in the Middle East, in particular, was to abandon his-- the long, strategic long-standing strategic allies of the United States. "Abandon" is maybe too strong a word, but least sort of, you know, distance himself somewhat, both from Israel, with Prime Minister Netanyahu, and Saudi Arabia, with King Salman.

Clifford Chanin: Egypt, as well.

00:38:01 Bernard Haykel: And Egypt, of course. And he tried to sort of play footsie with Iran with the nuclear deal, and with the hope that this nuclear deal would lead to an eventual softening of the Iranian regime, and that Iran and the United States could not necessarily become friends, but at least have some form of detente.

00:38:19 This Obama policy was anathema in Saudi Arabia. I mean, they disliked him. They disliked everything that he, he stood for, because he wanted to reorder the relationship with the United States, with the region. He wanted to, you know, lessen the footprint, the military footprint of the United States in the region. And if you recall, President Obama was talking about pivoting to the East, which is that he wanted to move into the Pacific, American power and so on, because China was really the main, you know, issue in the 21st century.

00:38:55 And so the Saudis basically did not like him. I mean, that's putting it mildly. And-- nor did the Israelis, for that matter. And Trump basically said, you know, "To hell with this. Our long-standing strategic allies of the United States in the region are our friends, and we're going to go back and re-establish those relationships, Saudi Arabia and Israel." And Saudi Arabia and Israel actually see eye-to-eye on a lot of things today, because of Iran.

00:39:20 Clifford Chanin: Now, there have been reports-- there's a famous Saudi blogger who may or may not have, but claims to have sort of behind-the-scenes information about this, about much more intensified contacts between Israel and Saudi Arabia, the possibility of, if not open diplomatic relations, much more open travel. Some senior Saudis have actually gone to Israel on sort of testing type of visits. That would be in the context, of course, of this new American diplomatic initiative in the Middle East. Do you see that evolving? Certainly, behind the scenes, we know it's happening more. But is this be something that can come out of the closet, if you will?

00:39:58 Bernard Haykel: So, you know, I mean, there is the kind of old adage, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend," and that's definitely at play here because both Saudi Arabia, you know, are, terrified of Iran and Iran's force projection into the region, especially through these non-state actors and the proxies.

00:40:13 So they are, they do, as I said, see eye-to-eye on a number of strategic issues for the region. But fundamentally, what one has to understand when it comes to the Arab-Israeli conflict and specifically the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, is that the only serious and legitimate effort that the Arabs made, and that is on the table for negotiation, is what is called the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, which was then led and essentially authored by the then-crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah, who then became king after 2005.

00:40:39 So the only serious offer by the Arabs to the Israelis really is penned in Saudi Arabia. And I think that President Trump, and especially, I think, his son-in-law, would like to see something resolved. You know, they would like to see some resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. I'm not sure what form that might take.

00:41:13 Of course, the Palestinians may end up with the short end of the stick in that resolution, which is typically what has happened to the Palestinians over time. But the Saudis are instrumental for any possible peace with the Israelis, going back to that Arab Peace Initiative of 2002.

And, so we are in a new Middle East, in which the Saudis think Iran is the principal threat. The Israelis think that Iran is the principal threat. Both, I think, Saudi Arabia and Israel would like, certainly Saudi Arabia would like, to see the Palestinian issue resolved.

00:41:44 Now, the question is, how would that issue be resolved? The Saudi leadership may feel that, you know, "Let's do a peace with the Israelis."

But I doubt that they... I doubt that they really think it, because when you seriously think about the issue, you know that the Saudi population is still very pro-Palestinian. And the one thing about the Saudi leadership, despite it being kind of an absolutist, an absolute monarchy and an authoritarian state, they do-- they are attuned to how their people feel. They don't, you know, they will not do something that is radically against the, the street in their country, okay? And so I think there are limits to how far the Saudis can be pushed when it comes to Israel.

00:42:35 Clifford Chanin: But a certain level of increased cooperation doesn't seem to cross that line.

Bernard Haykel: No, it doesn't. Especially if it's, you know, at the level of intelligence and it's a sort of under- the-table type relationship.

Clifford Chanin: So in relationship to the Saudi street, and it brings us back to something we were talking about at the beginning, these economic changes, these social changes, does the Saudi royal family, the crown prince in particular, have a sense that there is a popular support for the kinds of economic and social changes that he's pushing?

00:43:05 Bernard Haykel: I think that he-- he has explained very explicitly to his people, through a series of interviews long interviews, in Arabic, and he does understand English, but he doesn't speak English. He is an... The other thing about him that I should say is that, you know, he is very authentic. Not just charismatic, but, you know, he's really a product of that country and of its culture. And that's important in that part of the world. So I think that he has explained that the country has to change. It's unsustainable.

00:43:41 Now, the question is, who do you-- who do you make-- I mean, where is the pain going to be felt the most? Is it going to be the rich, or is it going to be the middle class?

So initially, in these reforms, he tried to cut the allowances, the public-sector allowances, which hit 70% of the population, the middle class. And it really did not go well. It did not go down well. People really resented that policy. And he reversed it. He gave the allowances back. I think that he realizes that if he is to bring his people along with him through these austerity reforms-- which are going to be very painful, because people will now have to really pay for gasoline, the real price, the real price for electricity, for schooling, for education, and so on and so forth, and health-- that for them to do that, he is going to have to inflict pain on a particular sector of society.

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And I suspect it will be the rich. And I suspect it will be the royals, actually, as well, that he will do this to, through, you know, taxation on land, because many of the royals own a lot of the land, for example. But this is all now being kind of worked out in the country. And, you know, we don't know how the place will react.

00:45:07

By the way, if the price of oil were to go up to \$200 a barrel, which doesn't look like it will any time soon, or even \$100 a barrel, then I think the instinct will be to, you know, throw more money at the people, forget the austerity reforms, and just kick the can down the road.

00:45:23

Clifford Chanin : Right, right, right. It's a-- you know, it's, it's... You're describing so much happening in so many sectors so intensively over this very short period of time. Is there a risk that the whole thing comes down? That, you know, this recurring question of, you know, how long can the Saudi royal family hold on? He's playing a very, a very big bet right here.

Bernard Haykel: He is.

Clifford Chanin: And the question is, this doesn't have to be a winning hand he's holding.

00:45:52 Bernard Haykel: That's right. And he's a risk taker, as well. I don't think so. I mean, I don't think the place will implode, and I'll tell you why. I think there are several reasons.

One is that this is a regime that still has very considerable legitimacy in the eyes of its people. It is a government and a royal family that has, for all its faults, and there are many, has actually spent a lot of money on its own people without taxing them. And so there's that.

00:46:26 And, also, the other thing is, when Saudis, who are about 20, 22 million people, look around, they see chaos in Iraq, they see chaos in Syria, they see chaos in Yemen, they see chaos in the Sinai. Basically, you have chaos all around. And they stand to lose a lot if the same were to happen to them. So, you know, it's better to stick with what you know than, you know, try to venture into, into the unknown.

00:46:50 The other thing about this state, aside from the legitimacy question and the fact that the people don't want chaos, is that this is a government that has incredible coercive capacities. I mean, it is a government that has formidable intelligence, security apparatus, that, you know, monitors everything that happens in the country and is building up that capacity even further. So, you know, you mess with it at your peril.

00:47:19 Clifford Chanin: Let's talk about Iran, because, you know, if the Saudis get their muscles flexed a number of times and feel confident on a military level, do you see a direct military confrontation between the two states as a possibility? Certainly, if that were to happen, there's the possibility that Israel and the United States could be involved, as well. Do you see things heading in that direction, or are the Saudis and the Iranians going to keep one another at somewhat arm's length?

00:47:47 Bernard Haykel: Well, I mean, the worrying thing about their, about the way they have squared off right now, is that they see... They see the pie of the Middle East, control of the Middle East, in zero-sum terms. So it's a winner-take-all system where, you know, if the Iranians have won Iraq,

then the Saudis have no say in Iraq or no influence whatsoever. If the Iranians are trying to take over Yemen, then, you know, the Saudis would lose. Or if the Saudis win Yemen, then the Iranians lose, and so on. And that way of thinking about politics is extremely dangerous.

00:48:16 This is why the role of the United States is extremely important in that part of the world, because I think the U.S. remains a hegemon. You have to remember, you know, there are 40,000, 45,000 troops permanently stationed in this region. There are two aircraft carrier battle groups in this region. That's 60 ships. You know, a massive amount of firepower. The U.S. is by far the most powerful actor in this region.

00:48:42 So as long as there is this presence, I don't think there's a likelihood of war. What there is a likelihood of is both Iran using non-state actors-- so, you know, trying to get the Shiites in eastern Saudi Arabia, or the Shiites in Bahrain, to militarize, to arm themselves and act as terrorist groups. Saudis could do the same on the Iranian side with certain Sunni populations in Iran. You would see that kind of behavior.

00:49:10 But I don't think, as long as America is there, there's ever likely to be an all-out war. The one other point I wanted to make about the Saudis, and this should be very clear to an American audience, is that if this country were to implode, the U.S. would have to immediately send military troops to, at least to safeguard and maintain the flow of oil from the oil fields. Because it's a country that produces about 10 million barrels of oil a day, and the world consumes about 95 million barrels of oil a day.

00:49:39 So it's, you know, a little over ten percent. And it can produce up to 12, 12.5 million barrels. If that amount of oil were to be disrupted, in other words, not come to market, our economy would go into a tailspin depression. So would the global economy. And that's not going to happen.

Clifford Chanin: Let me ask, though, in terms of U.S. policy under the Trump administration, you know, you described a traditional U.S. role as kind of balancing things and sort of keeping everything in its place.

Bernard Haykel: Yeah.

00:50:12

Clifford Chanin: Is that the impression you have? It's early days still, there are mixed signals. But where do you think U.S. policy is going in relation to this more traditional approach of trying to keep things cool rather than heated up?

Bernard Haykel: No, I think-- I mean, look, there are certain kind of fundamental issues when it comes to this region that I think any American president just, just gets immediately. It's probably the first thing they teach them when they, when they come to office.

Clifford Chanin: New Presidents' School, yeah.

00:50:46

Bernard Haykel: Yeah, I mean, basically, look at this map. You know, you have three of the most important maritime choke points in the world in this one place. You have the Strait of Hormuz, which is between Iran and the U.A.E., and Oman. Right, so that's the tip at the end of the Persian Gulf that goes into the Arabian Sea. Then you have Bab el-Mendeb, which is the little bit that goes into the Red Sea between Yemen and the Horn of Africa. And then you have the third, which is the Suez Canal in Egypt. Those three choke points—I mean, a tremendous amount of global trade just goes through there. And, you know, the world wouldn't function without the safeguarding of these choke points.

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The other is oil, of course, and gas. Again, its importance to the global economy. So, you know, any American president knows that as long as we're dependent on oil and gas for our mobility, which we are... If tomorrow, you know, a battery were to be discovered that would render oil, you know, useless, then I think the Americans would, and an

American president would say, "You know, well, we can maintain the shipping and so on, on the cheap. We don't have to worry about what goes on between these countries." But until that time, we're there.

00:51:59

Clifford Chanin: Okay, we're going to turn to a couple of questions. Bernie is actually heading to the airport from here, so we have, we have a hard stop tonight, rather than our usual sort of wandering to the end. But let's see if we have a hand or two. We can go right there. Just please stand up.

Woman: The Kurdish referendum's results recently came out, and over 93% of the Kurdish people in Iraq voted in favor of, you know, to separate. Does Saudi Arabia have any disposition towards that being...?

Clifford Chanin: Everyone hear about the Kurdish referendum and the Kurds going for independence?

00:52:39

Bernard Haykel: So, I mean, Saudi Arabia officially, and this is state policy, is for the unity of Iraq, for it not to break up. And that's-- you know, most states are like that. Most states don't like to see other states fragmenting, because it always, you know, sends shivers down their spine, because it could happen to you, and you don't want that. So there's an inherent desire for states to remain united and unified.

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That said, I think that many Saudis feel considerable sympathy for the Kurds, because they feel, A, the Kurds are largely a Sunni population by religious faith, and that Iraq is dominated by Shiite government in Baghdad, and that, you know, Sunnis should not be ruled by Shiites. So there is sympathy there, and I've seen it in the social media. But the official policy is, you know, Iraq should remain a unitary state.

00:53:39

Clifford Chanin: Another question right there. Please stand up.

Man: Would this whole movement by the royals to kind of weaken the Wahhabi movement in a way...

Bernard Haykel: Yes.

Man: ...deprive them of their legitimacy? Because, after all, they came to power thanks to the Wahhabi.

00:53:56 Bernard Haykel: Yes, that's an excellent question. Yeah, there's always been a very strong relationship between the ruling dynasty and the Wahhabi, who are the religious scholars. And the religious scholars gave legitimacy to the dynasty. The dynasty gave the religious scholars their control over education and public space and social affairs, and so on.

00:54:17 And that-- what we're seeing now is a distancing between the royal-- from the-- at least this one royal and his father-- and the religious establishment. In trying to replace that legitimacy or the source of legitimacy should not just be Islam, but it could also be nationalism. There is a very heavy emphasis on nationalism that's emerging.

00:54:44 Now, having said that, I think the Saudi rulers instinctively understand that as keepers and guardians of the two holiest sites in Islam, Mecca and Medina, Islam will always be integral and constitutive of who they are. They cannot dissociate themselves from Islam. Nor do they, I think, want to. I think they want to have their cake and eat it, in the sense that they want to have Islamic legitimacy from scholars that they control and dominate, which is not difficult to do. Because they can, you know, they have jobs to offer and so on. And those Islamic scholars who don't want to be co-opted can be crushed, which is what they're doing.

00:55:28 And they want to have, also, nationalism as a source-- as an alternative source of legitimacy, with which to, you know, remind the religious scholars that, "Hey, you know, we have other tools in our kit that we can deploy."

Clifford Chanin: One more, all the way in the back.

Man: When you talked about Qatar, you obviously talked about Saudi and the Emirates, but Bahrain seems to be a noisy, a tempting player in this.

Bernard Haykel: Yes.

Man: Is it simply because you feel they don't matter?

00:56:00 Bernard Haykel: That's a-- well, you know, that's a sad thing to say that they don't matter. I mean, basically, Bahrain-- which is a tiny little island off the coast of Saudi Arabia, you can barely see it there between the finger, the thumb of Qatar and the mainland of Saudi Arabia—Bahrain has become a dependency of the Saudis. They've run out of oil, and the Saudis essentially fund and subsidize that country. So they don't have much autonomy in terms of, you know, in terms of, you know, how they feel about the world.

00:56:33 Now, that said, there's an identity or a complete, you know, agreement on what the interests of the Bahrainis, the Bahraini government, is and that of the Saudi government. The Bahraini government is a minority government of Sunnis, majority population of Shiites. So the Bahrainis basically need Saudi support and will also agree with the Saudis and see things the way the Saudis do for their very survival.

00:56:57 Clifford Chanin: That is the evening we have, because Bernie's time is limited. But I think once again, you have proven how lucky we are that you're willing to come here and talk to us. So please join me in thanking Bernie Haykel.

(applause)

Bernard Haykel: Thanks.