



The Next Debate with Ahmed Rashid

The Future of ISIS and the Middle East

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Rudyard: Explain to us what you think the west has gotten wrong about ISIS, the Islamic State, both as a movement and also as a military opponent.

Ahmed: Well, I think first of all, everyone was taken by surprise. There's no doubt about it. The Arab countries, the regimes in the region, the Muslim world, and, of course, the West also – and the fact that Western intelligence did not predict any of this, but I think when we look back we see the state of the civil war in Syria, it is very clear that there would be an Islamic group emerging which would be able to conquer all before it. I think the Americans are reluctant to understand the deep failures in Iraq and the vulnerability of the army and the regime.

I think the biggest mistake that has happened and is still happening when we look at Libya and Yemen and other places, is that ISIS has launched a war within the Muslim world. This is not a war against the West in the way that we say 9/11 and Al Qaeda, where the priority was to bomb the United States or Europe. The priority of the Islamic State is really to try and set up a caliphate, this Islamic entity, a new concept of a state across the Middle East and perhaps even further. And as they do that, they are coming across all these minorities who live in the Middle East, Muslim minorities and non-Muslim's like Christians and others, and they're eliminating them and, in fact, changing the entire population or status quo as has existed in the Middle East with all these ethnic groups from the time of Jesus Christ and even earlier.

The question is, if you're looking at a war within the Muslim world, that means that the Arab states and the broader Muslim world should have a much greater responsibility in dealing with this than the West. This is not America's war as such. America has to be involved, obviously, whether it's on the military side providing support, logistics, et cetera. But the Arab regime should be taking this much more seriously.

Rudyard: Is there the capacity in the Arab world to assemble troops and material for an Arab led coalition?

Ahmed: Well, unfortunately I'm not seeing that. Where the Arabs are coming together is the wrong target, and that is Yemen. We've seen just

recently the crisis in Yemen has led to Saudi Arabia claiming that the rebels in Yemen are Iran backed and so the Arab world has to unite against them. Now first of all I don't think that is the case. The Houthis, who are the main rebel group in Yemen have been oppressed and marginalized for a long time. They are asserting themselves, which makes this a civil war within Yemen. This is not a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is really unfortunate as the main target for the Arab regimes should be the Islam State rather than a side show [in Yemen]. And Yemen is a side show in the short and medium term. Of course, it's still very dangerous because al-Qaeda is there and a lot of these extremist groups have bases there, et cetera.

Yemen is not about to attack or invade Saudi Arabia. Iran is already overstretched supporting the rebels in Syria, supporting the Iraqi regime, and militias in Lebanon. Iran is not about to suddenly jump into Yemen with large numbers of troops. I think this is a very exaggerated threat by the Arabs and it's an excuse for the Saudi's to say, "Well, the main threat is Iran," whereas actually the Saudi's should be making up with Iran. The Arabs need the support of Iran if they're going to defeat Islamic State. Certainly, Islamic State cannot be defeated without Iran. Look at Iran, I mean Iran has actually put boots on the ground. They have put soldiers and officers and trainers alongside the very dishevelled Iraqi army in order to fight the Islamic State.

Now this is what other Arab regimens should have done months ago and they haven't done so. So instead we have this strange mixture. You have Iranian troops and advisors helping the Iraqi army, and you have American troops and advisors helping the Iraqi army. Well, that's fine. I mean that's the way cleavages in this region have to be resolved. I just wish there had been Saudi and Jordanian and United Arab Emirates troops also helping the Iraqis fight Islamic State. Instead of, they're all going off on this wild goose chase trying to hammer Yemen.

Rudyard: Talk to us about the relationship between Islamic State and Saudi Arabia, because it's a complex one. ISIS is the ideological progeny of Wahhabism, yet at the same time its leaders have committed themselves to the destruction of the Gulf States and the Saudi monarchy.

Respondent: If you go back to the 1980's all the Sunni extremist groups that have emerged, starting with al-Qaeda and going into all the groups in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and subsequently in the Arab world, have as their base Wahhabism. As such, many of these groups have unfortunately been admired by the Saudi because these groups are reflecting the views of the Wahhabi doctrine in Saudi Arabia. Jihad is mandatory and anybody not believing Wahhabism is almost a non-Muslim and can be killed even. Now the Saudi's are trying distance themselves. Obviously, they're the enemy of the Islamic State. They've denounced al-Qaeda, they've denounced the Islamic State, but they're not making any real changes in their own curricula and religious schools whether it's for the young people, for students, whether for their religious elite. The Ulama in Saudi Arabia is not looking at some of the precepts of Wahhabism and changing them around. As long as this doesn't happen, we're going to see more and more extremist Sunni

groups emerge around the world owing their pedigree to Wahhabism. Frankly, the Saudi's are not really tackling this issue.

Rudyard: Do you think Saudi's see Islamic State as a convenient foil to tie Iran up in Iraq, to threaten their borders?

Ahmed: Officially, of course not. I think the Saudi's are very much against Islamic State, but when you consider the Saudi hatred for Iran and Shias' in particular, Shia Muslim's who they do not consider as being real Muslim's, and you look at the Islamic State which hates Iran and also hates Shia's, yes there is a similarity of views there. The Saudi's have to walk back some of this doctrine that they believe in and preach, especially to their young people because it is very similar to what the Islamic State believes in. There is really no debate going on in Saudi Arabia on about these issues. They're brushing it really under the carpet. Now I don't believe that the Saudi's are deliberately funding or fuelling Islamic State, but this contradiction is staring them in the face and they're not doing anything about it and its effecting the entire Muslim world.

Rudyard: In a similar vein, Tom Freedman in the *New York Times*, and other American commentators are saying, "Why is it in our interest to destroy the Islamic State? Why aren't we using them as a potential cap or foil for Iran's ambitions in the region?" Are you surprised to hear prominent American voices trumpeting that line?

Ahmed: I can well understand that position and the fact that the U.S. itself is caught in this monumental contradiction, whereas the Americans want to not deploy troops any more in the Middle East and to pull out of all these commitments that they've had over the last 10-15 years. And at the same time when they see the beheadings and the actions of Islamic State on TV, they're demanding that President Obama should be committing American forces. This is a contradiction that the U.S. administration has not worked out. The administration is not offering a solution to this crisis or a comprehensive strategy. You have a very mixed bag of strategies. You're supporting some rebels in Syria, you're supporting the same rebels you're bombing in Iraq, et cetera.

I think the U.S. is, itself, very confused. The media and the public are very confused because there's absolutely no clarity. At the same time it must be said that I think everybody in the Middle East is also very confused because there is no clarity at the moment. Certainly, there should be a front established by the Arab governments against the Islamic State and that should be firmly held. That has not happened. What you are getting is individual governments helping the Iraqi's or acting against the Islamic State. You're not getting a comprehensive strategy from the Arab world, from the broader Muslim world. It's amazing for me – and very depressing – to see that the Saudi's have got a ten nation alliance against tiny Yemen which is not a threat to anyone in the region. It is a threat to itself because it is fighting a bloody brutal internal civil war. And yet that same alliance should have been formed by the Arab leaders against the Islamic State.

Rudyard: That's a vital point. Why tiny Yemen? Why in one case a ten country alliance, yet with the Islamic State it is America who should lead.

Ahmed: That is the real contradiction...this fourteen nation alliance against the Islamic State which is lead by the Americans should have been lead by the Arabs or a number of Arab states working in harmony. At the same time, these Arab states should be making up with Iran so that Iran could, at some stage, also be part of this alliance. That has not happened. I think one thing what the Americans should have been doing much earlier, was to have set about diplomatically trying to build such an alliance with the Arabs in the lead. Muslims around the world are fed up with American intervention just as the Americans are fed up with all their own interventions around the world. We don't want to see American generals decide when Tikrit should be bombed or when this town or that town should be bombed. We should be seeing Arab generals deciding how to take the war forward in Iraq against the Islamic State. The Muslim world is not seeing that. I think what the Americans should have done is to have spent much more capital in a real diplomatic offensive to bring the Arab states together and at the same time try and bring the Arab states in Iran closer together – maybe the second part of this will be possible once we have a nuclear deal between Iran and the United States. But diplomacy is severely lacking. We have the Secretary of State John Kerry traveling in the region extensively, but there doesn't seem to be the kind of intense diplomatic follow-up that is needed to build these alliances which obviously are not going to happen overnight.

Rudyard: You've pointed out that the analog for Islamic State isn't Al-Qaeda. It is, in fact, the Taliban to the extent that what makes them a significant military threat is their control of territory and their ability to use that to advance their own ends.

Ahmed: Al-Qaeda's whole philosophy was to create a caliphate in the Middle East. They want to get rid of the Arab regimes. But their whole strategy was that we have to undermine the props of these corrupt Arab regimes, and that is the United States and Europe. So we have to undermine capitalism, we have to blow up the Twin Towers. We have to attack the far power rather than the nearby power. The Islamic State is just the opposite. It wants to directly challenge the Arab regimes and overthrow them and set up a new state which would comprise almost all of the Middle East and do away with the borders. To do that, they don't want to just launch terror attacks against the targets in the Arab world. They have formed a regular army which is extremely well armed because of the weapons they've captured from the Iraqi army. It carries out conventional warfare as well as guerrilla warfare and suicide attacks. They are also trying to create a state in the areas that they have conquered, just like the Taliban did once they set out to conquer/reconquer Afghanistan.

Above all there's been this obsession with controlling territory. They have defended the cities and towns they have taken as long as they could. That, to them, is the hallmark of their persistence and their commitment to what they believe in. This is altogether different from

al-Qaeda which focused almost entirely and continues to focus almost entirely on terrorist attacks against the west. In Yemen we do have an area where al-Qaeda is actually in control of territory. But it's a desert area and it's not very well provided with logistics and supplies that could enlarge al-Qaeda's strength.

So there is a marked, strategic difference between Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Clearly the Islamic State has hit upon a formula that is very appealing not only to many young Muslims in the Arab world, but also now young Muslims in the west. This is something that al-Qaeda was never able to do.

Rudyard: Why is the attraction to Islamic State as strong as it has been within some Western countries as compared to al-Qaeda which after all brought down the World Trade Towers?

Ahmed: By taking territory and seizing cities and towns and revealing how weak the Iraqi sovereign regimes are.... I think the Islamic State is actually got something to offer young people if they want to do jihad. Joining al-Qaeda was much more difficult. It was almost impossible for ordinary people. And here you've got a situation where you've got young Americans, British, Europeans, et cetera; who have literally no background in Jihad or anything else, have no connections with militants, going on the Web and being able to arrive in Iraq via Turkey or whatever. So I think the whole thing of joining a jihad has just become much easier because of the control of territory that these people [Islamic State] have.

What is actually going on in the minds of these young people in all these countries is a much more difficult question. I think Western governments and Western academics and psychoanalysts and therapists are all trying to grapple with this problem. There's no single overwhelming answer which can explain this. One important factor is the immigrant population in many of these European countries are deeply dissatisfied with their lot if life. They lack jobs, education, et cetera. That is certainly one part of it. I think the second part of it is that many of them are literally looking for a purpose in life which is completely missing from the sort of ghettos that they live in Paris or London or anywhere else. We should also be looking at is the ease of travel to Iraq and Syria and how once arrive there they can apparently be useful in the camps of Islamic State. Also where does this twisted brutality, the beheadings and these Western Muslims carrying out these beheadings like Jihadi John and other such characters come from? What deprivations have they suffered back at home which has turned them into such brutes? I find this impossible to answer this question. I think there will have to be much more work and research done in the West about what is motivating these people and obviously countermeasures as to how to stop them.

Rudyard: Where does this conflict go from here? Is this a kind of twilight war where you and I, five or ten years from now will still be talking about the Islamic State? Or is this a movement and a conflict that burns itself

out over the coming months as Arab states form a coalition that can achieve results on the ground?

Ahmed: If the Arab states were able – in the next year or so –to put together a serious coalition and boots on the ground and help and support each other in combating it, I hope that Islamic State would be in recession, as it were, and sputter out eventually – except for the terrorist angle because remember that so many thousands of young people have joined this war and joined Islamic State from all over the world. They still will have that potential of carrying out suicide attacks, et cetera. But if – and it's a big if –the Arab states don't get their act together, I think what we will be seeing is the destabilization of the Gulf. I think we will start seeing terrorist attacks in the Gulf States, perhaps in Saudi Arabia itself, but more vulnerable than Saudi Arabia are places like Dubai and Abu Dhabi and Qatar. God forbid, if terrorist attacks start there, as you will see a global impact because of the wealth, the oil, the gas, etc. Bringing down the Gulf States or creating economic chaos in the Gulf States would be catastrophic for the whole Arab world and would really prevent any kind of joint military action.

It would demoralize the wealthiest part of the Arab world just as the Iraqi army was demoralized so badly when it went first went up against the Islamic State. So they [Islamic State] have a lot of strategic options. There's a lot of talk about the presence of Islamic State in Afghanistan, in Pakistan. I don't believe that's true right now, but of course this could happen. They could also spread westwards into Jordan and Lebanon. Lebanon is very fragile right now and, of course, it's a multi-ethnic state with a very complex ethnic base – and a conflict between Sunnis and Shias. They have a lot of options. I hope something changes in the next year or so where we will see the Arab world responding in a much more aggressive and positive way but unfortunately we are not seeing them take up these options.

Rudyard: Ahmed Rashid, always insightful, always a pleasure. Thank you for talking with us today.

Ahmed: Thank you.

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