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Transcript

The Political Future of the Middle East

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Author, *The New Middle East: The World After the Arab Spring*; Middle East Bureau Chief, BBC (2010-13)

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Fawaz Gerges:

I would like to welcome all of you to today's event. My name is Fawaz Gerges and I teach the modern Middle East at the London School of Economics. It gives me a great pleasure to introduce today's speaker, Mr Paul Danahar. Paul is with us today to speak about his new book, *The New Middle East: The World After the Arab Spring*. We have plenty of copies.

Paul naturally does not need much introduction. You all know Paul from the BBC, bureau chief in the Middle East between 2010 and 2013. He was on the ground when the historic events in the Middle East, in the Arab world, exploded. I really envy you for being there and witnessing great events first-hand. I think in this particular sense, Paul brings a first-hand experience and also a big-picture experience as well. What I really like about Paul's book as well is that he also brings to his observations and reflections on the Middle East a rich comparative perspective. As you know, Paul served as the BBC bureau chief in East Asia and also South Asia as well, during the rise and fall and return of the Taliban in the 1990s and early 2000s. So in this particular sense, Paul has not just served in the Middle East, he has served in some of the most critical theatres in the world, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt and many parts of the world. Of course, in 2013 he was appointed as the BBC bureau chief in North America. He now resides in Washington.

The session today, we are told we have 25 minutes for basically a conversation between Paul and myself. Then we will open the floor for questions and answers for another 30 minutes.

Let me say first that as an academic, as you all know, I think this is one of the most difficult sociological and historical moments in the Middle East, truly. Fast-evolving and changing developments on the ground. We have eaten our words quite a great deal in the last two years and a half. I think there is a great danger, as you well know, focusing on headlines and micro-events. My take is that instead of focusing on what's happening in Syria or Egypt today, or in Libya or Yemen or even Iran, I think we should focus on what I call trans-patterns, conceptual keys that help us unlock the puzzle of Middle Eastern politics and help us understand the complexity of Middle Eastern politics.

What do I mean by that? Take the question of political Islam, for example. The Muslim Brotherhood, Ennahda, or whatever in Morocco, the various Islamists. Immediately after the Arab uprisings in 2011-12, many Western commentators and many Middle Eastern commentators predicted that the Islamists would take ownership of the Arab uprisings. That this is an Islamist moment *par excellence*, that the Islamists would hijack the Arab uprisings. It

became a sacred truth. Newspapers, think tanks – we all began to think and reflect on the potential, on the policies, on the mindset of the Islamists. Less than a year after their electoral victories in Egypt and Tunisia, the Islamists have fallen like ripened fruits almost everywhere, in Egypt and Tunisia. There is a major structural shift taking place in Arab and Middle Eastern societies.

Let me reverse the question and say: shall we now do as some commentators say, and shall we write the obituaries of the Islamists in the same way that many commentators initially predicted the rise of the Islamist moment? My first question to Paul really is: how do we make sense of the rise and the swift fall of the Islamists? This tells you a great deal about the nature, the structure of Arab societies.

Another question I want to put to Paul before we give him the floor – take the question of Syria. Another question about the pitfalls of predictions. The question to me, and to you probably, is: why did the West get Syria wrong? How did the West get Syria wrong? How many times have we heard the Americans, the British, the French saying that [Bashar al-]Assad's days were numbered? His ship was sinking – that was almost more than two years ago. Think of the mutations that have taken place in Syria. It started as a political uprising, mutated into an internal arms struggle between Assad and the opposition, mutated into all-out civil war. Two top-down fault lines: a fierce geostrategic struggle and of course a global struggle between the United States and Russia.

Also what I would like to hear from Paul is: how do we make sense of the uniqueness of Syria? Because the reason why many of us got Syria wrong – many policymakers, not myself or many of you – is that they really made a major and radical mistake by looking at Syria through the lens of Tunisia and Egypt. In what ways does Syria differ and in what ways is Syria similar to the various contexts in which the Arab uprising unfolded? It's all yours.

Paul Danahar:

I think if you were on the ground in Egypt after the revolution, you could see that the Islamists were rubbish. They just didn't know what to do. They had suddenly been handed the country, and the Muslim Brotherhood had spent its entire history hiding in the shadows, dodging every single issue, not having an opinion on anything and not being expected to have an opinion on anything. They were allowed to basically get away with fudging everything, and suddenly they were in charge, and they were not very good at running things. On top of that, to be fair to them, they had no experience of it, and the

state – the deep state, as people call it in Egypt – was still there. The old man had gone but the bureaucracy worked against them, the police worked against them, the army worked against them.

So you can say that the Islamists in Egypt did a very bad job, and they did. [Mohammed] Morsi was not everyone's first or second choice probably. He got elected almost by accident. He was a very bad leader and very disorganized. But it was probably impossible for it to work for the Brotherhood because they inherited a mess, everyone was working against them and they slowly lost any sympathy that the Egyptian people had for them. The thing about the election was that people voted for the Brotherhood because – some of them because they believed in what they talked about, some because they felt quite sorry for them. These were men who had largely been banged up in jail away from their families, had been tortured by the regime. People said: they deserve a chance, after all the things they've suffered they deserve a chance. But Egyptians lost patience with them very quickly when things didn't work. It got to the point where you were walking around Egypt and it was quite dangerous. Law and order just fell apart.

The thing about security – I was in Iraq in 2002, and people moaned about Saddam, but they could walk home from school, they could walk home from work, their wives were safe when they went out shopping at night. When the security broke down in Iraq, everyone just wanted the Americans out because they blamed them for that. The same happened in Egypt. As soon as security started to break down, people lost all faith in the Brotherhood being able to run the country and keep their families safe. Because that's basically what we care about: we care about the environment and politics once we know that our family are safe. The Brotherhood failed in that. They were worked against by the authorities. They kept saying to people: trust us, we'll get this right, we're on your side, we believe in it. But they made absolutely no effort to engage with people, to work with what you call the secular revolutionaries.

They were inevitably going to fail. The question was when would they fail, and how big a failure would it be. I think the really sad thing about Egypt is it's not just been the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood, it's been the failure of Egypt in terms of trying to get some kind of democratic process going. Because at the end of the day, he was incompetent, the Brotherhood were lousy. I suspect that if he had been voted out, the Brotherhood would have gone away and looked again at themselves and they would have changed the way that they ran their organizations. They would have been able to get rid of some of the old guard. Because there were young members of the Muslim Brotherhood – if you remember, they tried to set up their own party and they

were immediately kicked out of the Brotherhood for trying to do that. So I think you would have had a transition within the Brotherhood. They would have modernized. There may have been a chance for them to actually perhaps come back in different form and govern relatively well. But they blew it, and they blew it because they were very bad and the state was against them.

Fawaz Gerges:

So you don't think there is any structural deficiency in the fact that there are no ideas out there – no economic ideas, no political agenda?

Paul Danahar:

That was true of the Brotherhood but it was also true of the revolutionaries. The great thing about the Arab Spring, the reason why it happened, was because you could get organized without having anyone else in charge of your organization. So when it began the leaders would walk around and go: well, there's no one to lock up. There's no one to scare away or bribe, because it wasn't being run by anyone. It was just happening. You'd be on the streets and people – there were no leaders. There were no names being shouted. The Western media used to go on about [Mohamed] ElBaradei and how he was going to come in – you never heard his name in Tahrir Square. He was never, ever, a realistic leader for Egypt. Nobody took him seriously. The Egyptians particularly didn't take him seriously, which is why he ran off as soon as it all fell apart.

So there was no leadership, which was great because that meant you couldn't stop it. But then after the revolution, there was no one to talk to. There was no one to create a political alternative to the Muslim Brotherhood or the army. So slowly the army and the Brotherhood started kind of doing deals behind the scenes to work out how it was all going to play out. The revolutionaries, rather than step back and say 'let's build something', they just went out and marched. They marched and they marched and they really started getting on the nerves of a lot of people in Cairo because the city kept – I mean, it shuts down anyway, but you couldn't move around Tahrir Square for rag-tag groups of people. Some said we shouldn't have elections, some said they were above elections, and some just wanted to basically moan a lot. So there was no alternative built. There still isn't any alternative built.

So when the Brotherhood failed, dramatically, there was nobody else but the army to turn to. That's why you've ended up with [Abdul Fattah al-]Sisi effectively running Egypt.

Fawaz Gerges:

So should we write the obituary of the Islamists?

Paul Danahar:

No. If you look back at the history of the Brotherhood, [Gamal Abdel] Nasser did a much better job of crushing the Brotherhood than I think even Sisi will manage to do. They were never going to be the only force in the Middle East and they're not going to disappear now. The thing about the Brotherhood is, when you shine a light on them and you ask them to make decisions, they couldn't do it. But if you push them back into the darkness, that's where they feel comfortable. When you make them feel paranoid, when you pressure them – I mean, they had this institutionalized paranoia, which is quite understandable after the events of July. But they are better underground because they understand what to do. So I think the fact is that, in many ways, you can argue that the best way for the Brotherhood to have been left to disintegrate would have been to have left them in power, because then they would have changed and they would have reformed and they would have had to have adapted. But by pushing them back into a corner, by making them basically go underground again, all you're going to do is rebuild the Brotherhood and probably in a much tougher, more militant way.

Fawaz Gerges:

Can Syria be rescued, Paul? Is it too late? Has Syria gone too far? We talk about Geneva II – is this more of a luxury talk between the great powers?

Paul Danahar:

Yes. I think it's very hard to imagine that Syria will stay as an entity. The thing about the Geneva II talks, if they happen, is: who are they talking to? The SNC (Syrian National Council) has just been disowned by every serious fighting group in Syria now. So even if they had an agreement on a peace process, the people that are doing the fighting are not part of it. The SNC – the only continuity we've had in the Middle East in the last few years is that

the SNC began rubbish and they still are rubbish. They don't control anybody but the people in the room with them and sometimes they don't even control them. You may remember in Egypt they had a big fight – literally, a fistfight – at one of their meetings. They are a bit like the exiles that the Americans tried to create with Iraq. They are self-serving, they're out of touch, they have no command and control structure over what we loosely call the FSA (Free Syrian Army). That problem is combined with the fact that the FSA doesn't exist. It's just a rag-tag group of people that generally used to be all pointing their guns in the same direction, but are now increasingly pointing their guns at each other. So you've got these criminal gangs, you've got what's left of the moderates that began the revolution, you've got the different Al-Qaeda-linked groups. There is absolutely nothing that is unifying the opposition. They're not even all against Assad in the same way, they are often against each other.

The problem with Syria was – it's a couple of things. One was that people didn't really want to own the mess, particularly America, which was going through an election in 2012. And if you took it on, it was basically different degrees of failure. Obama didn't want to do that so he completely took his eye off the ball. They pretended that the SNC were an organization that was worth dealing with but nobody in Syria, when I used to go into Syria, thought they were anything other than a bunch of people they didn't even want to talk to.

The big problem was that because there was no attempt to try to build an opposition, when Obama and the West basically said, 'We don't really want to get involved', the Gulf countries do what they always do when they are confronted with a difficult political dilemma: they opened their wallets and they threw money at it. They just chucked money around all these different Salafist groups and you ended up with a situation where at the beginning of Syria the funding for the fighters was coming from Syrian businessmen, and they were competing with the money that was coming in from the Gulf, mainly from – individuals in the Gulf were funding the real hardliners, some of the Salafist groups were getting money from Saudi Arabia, the Muslim Brotherhood-linked fighters were getting money from Qatar. The problem was that the money for the moderates began to dry up because the businessmen basically used up all the cash they had, but the money from the Gulf kept coming and it was the only reliable form of finance. You would talk to people in the FSA and they'd say: the thing is, we get some money from the West, we get some arms and then it dries up, and then it starts again and then it dries up. Because whatever the politics was that was going on in the region at the time or in the world at the time meant the flow either started or stopped. But the Gulf money

just kept piling in. You basically had a situation where – I met fighters from the FSA at the beginning and they were basically saying: look, I'm losing my people, they're going off and joining all these Salafist groups because they want a gun, they want some bullets.

I think the only thing that's slightly encouraging is that a lot of the people that are wandering around with short trousers and growing their beards and pretending to be Salafists are actually doing it because they want some money. I met a woman who's very involved in the underground in the FSA in Damascus and she said to me: 'I went to meet some people from the Nusra Front. I went like this' – and she had her hair uncovered and a pair of tight jeans – 'they shook my hand, they looked me in the eye, we had a good conversation. We didn't agree, but these guys are just growing beards because they need some cash. When the war is over they'll shave their beards and they'll come back to being on our side.'

I don't think that's necessarily true but I do think it's partly true. I do think there is a possibility that when or if this ever ends, a lot of people now claiming to be Islamists will actually prove that they're not really. But the longer it goes on, the more radicalized people become, the more brutal the war becomes, the harder that's going to be.

Fawaz Gerges:

I want to stay on Syria for two or three minutes. There seems to be a consensus emerging within Western policy-making establishments that the Salafi-jihadi elements are the most potent, the most skilled, the killer elements in the equation. If Assad were to fall today or tomorrow, any particular vacuum would be filled by the Salafi-jihadi elements. I'm talking about consensus in the US intelligence services: Syria is 'emerging as threat number one to American security and international security. Syria would supersede Afghanistan the longer the conflict continues'. But you don't seem to buy this particular line of thinking about Syria –

Paul Danahar:

No.

Fawaz Gerges:

– that the Salafi-jihadis are really gaining momentum, they are building networks, they are co-opting people, they are appearing in Dayr az Zawr, Idlib, up to the Turkey-Syria borders. We're seeing now major battles – ... the Islamic State in Iraq is winning most of the battles. In Aleppo they are clearing most of the neighbourhoods that – it's not just about money, it's about basically the narrative. So you don't buy it?

Paul Danahar:

No, I think if you look at what's happening in Syria now, these Salafist-jihadi groups are not trying to take over Damascus. They are trying to create a little enclave of their own in the north. So I think we are looking at a situation where we may have the northern part of Syria in the hands of these people, we may have the south – if Assad was to go – in the hands of the more moderate opposition, and we may have a kind of enclave on the coast, the odd Alawite state, where the remnants of the regime may be. If you look at the fighting that's going on now, a lot of it is going on in those areas and it is in the north. These groups are basically trying to clear out the opposition so they have a foothold in that part of the world. That is very dangerous. The only good thing about it is you know where they all are. So in terms of trying to track the jihadists floating around the world, it is a magnet for these people. In some ways you could argue that having them all in one place with borders that you may well be able to do a reasonable job of tracking is perhaps better than having them in Peckham and Lewisham or wherever else they might be in the world.

But it is a big problem and you are destabilizing a very fragile bit of the region, and you are destabilizing a bit of the region where the sectarian conflict could explode not only into Lebanon but actually kind of feed and poison the whole of the region. So I don't believe that Syria will necessarily stay as it is. I can see it kind of going the way of Yugoslavia in many ways.

I don't really know how you end it now. I think there was an opportunity at the beginning to stop it getting this bad. I think if a safe zone had effectively been created in the north in the beginning – if they had put Patriot missiles on the north to stop planes coming over – you would have got defections from the Syrian army. The problem with being in the Syrian army is that if you defect, it's not just your kids and your wife you've got to take. If you don't take granny and granddad and Uncle Joe and all the rest of them, they'll all be killed. They will all disappear into a torture cell. So the problem with not having an area

where people could go to was they didn't want to defect because they did not want to leave their extended family vulnerable to Assad. That slowed the process down. It put people off making the decision. Plus you had Iraq – a lot of the Christians in Syria looked at what happened to Christians in Iraq and were very nervous. They were sitting on the sidelines. There were a lot of businessmen who weren't quite sure where it was all going to go.

The problem was the Syrians needed help from the outside world. They did need some guidance, they did need some support. They got very, very little of it. So basically it was all in on itself, it kind of began to disintegrate and now I think it's pretty much impossible to put it back together again.

Fawaz Gerges:

A final question before we open it. Let me put a contrarian question to you and say that there is unity to the struggle taking place in the region. I was hoping you would link Syria to the whole debate, the whole struggle between the Islamists and the nationalists – let's not call it secularists. There is unity to the Islamist front in Syria – relative unity. It's not just the Salafi-jihadis; whether you're talking about Suqur al-Sham or Ahrar al-Sham and what have you, they are coming all together. Now we have Jaish Muhammad, we have Jaish al-Islam – the Army of Muhammad and the Army of Islam. More and more units are coalescing around the whole idea of an Islamist frame of reference. Would it be fair to say that Assad has benefited a great deal in the narrative that he has been able to really sell and advance – a particular narrative that he is the embodiment of sovereignty in Syria, he is the protector of minorities, he is fighting a greater struggle for Arab nationalism, for nationalism, for diversity, for secularism? This particular narrative really– as you know, he has been hammering this particular narrative. Just in an interview three days ago he said: the Egyptian army and we are fighting the same war, it's the war against the Islamists, the war against these people who are trying to destroy the social fabric of our societies. This has played a key role in his ability to at least maintain his social base of support.

Paul Danahar:

I think it has. He began right at the beginning by saying 'we're fighting terrorists', when he wasn't. Now he can say 'we're fighting terrorists' and much of the world would agree that he is. That was a consequence partly because he went out of his way to sectarianize the conflict. If you look at what happened at the beginning, the Shabiha were basically sent up to create

sectarian strife, and they did it fantastically well. It did create this – either you join your own sect, your own religion, or you will be killed. So he created the environment where you could basically see that that was going to happen. These guys, many of the people now in Syria, they only had to drive back across the border from Iraq. They'd gone in via Syria and then they came back again. They were supported by Syria in Iraq, they've come back to fight the Syrian regime.

But you're absolutely right. Assad now has a pretty good case to make to people that are worried about Islamic extremism around the world, and he's been doing it very well. I think the irony of where we are now is: it wasn't very long ago that people said Assad must go, and now they'd quite like him to stay at least until next year when they get rid of their chemical weapons. Frankly, maybe stay a little bit longer until we work this out. So this is a man who's presided over mass murder, torture, rape, 100,000 people being killed, chemical weapons being used, and now he's being allowed to wander around – well, not the world, but wander around the 'international stage' as a statesman again. It's a real turnaround, it's incredible. You had John Kerry praising the regime for being quite helpful in terms of getting rid of the chemical weapons. That's pretty catastrophic when you think of where we were a couple years ago.

Fawaz Gerges:

So what did the West get wrong about Syria?

Paul Danahar:

The West didn't want to get involved. I think a big part of it was that it was going to be messy, they didn't want to get involved. They took their eye off the ball in 2012 because of the American elections. The Israelis – and I've met a lot of people in the Israeli military and intelligence establishment – at the beginning they didn't want him to go. Then when they thought he was going to go, they said: just let's get rid of him quick. They didn't get either one of those. If you look at the bigger picture, it's a massive failure of American foreign policy that its most important ally, Israel, now has Al-Qaeda on its border. The conflicts Israel used to fight people over were about land. These were resistance groups – Hezbollah or Hamas – largely about land. Now they have on their border a fight over god, over religion, whether it be in the Sinai or whether it be on the Syrian border. That's a big problem for Israel because

you can have a negotiation about land. It's very hard to have a negotiation about god. People often don't agree.

Fawaz Gerges:

So after all, it's not good to have all the jihadis in one place.

Paul Danahar:

It depends where you live, I guess. There are certainly a lot of people who would be quite happy to have them all in Syria, I imagine.

Fawaz Gerges:

Surely if you're living in Lebanon or Amman or Istanbul you would not say what we're saying now.

Paul Danahar:

No, we certainly wouldn't. But that's the European perspective.

Fawaz Gerges:

A final footnote, just to put three ideas about why we got Syria wrong and see whether you buy what I'm going to say. We have seen very few defections in the Syrian army. Think how much we have heard about the Syrian army. Think of how few defections have taken place, you can count them in really dozens or so.

Paul Danahar:

Very few.

Fawaz Gerges:

The idea is that because they are worried about their loved ones – could it be that the Syrian army is an ideological army, built over 40 years to maintain the political regime? Unlike the Tunisian army.

Paul Danahar:

And the identity of Syria, yeah.

Fawaz Gerges:

Point two. Could it be that we have underestimated the social base, the social support, of Assad? Is it fair to say 30 per cent, including a sizable Sunni segment of the ... and the business class, are fighting to the bitter end? Is it fair to say that we underestimated the geostrategic nature of the struggle? That somehow really what's happening in Syria is not just a Syrian war, it's really multiple wars by proxies. The Iranians are fighting to the bitter end to maintain the so-called axis of resistance. In this particular sense, as you said, it comes to the unwillingness of American foreign policy to get engaged in another major theatre in the Middle East.

Paul Danahar:

I agree with all of that.

Fawaz Gerges:

So it's really more to we're getting Syria wrong or just a failure of American foreign policy?

Paul Danahar:

No, it was – I remember speaking to someone in the UN and they basically said: America missed the train, the West missed the train, the Europeans missed the train, they left it to the Arab League and the Arab League radicalized it. I think that's a fairly sensible way of looking at it, because at the end of the day I think we – when the Arab Spring happened, the instinct of the West was: let's try and keep a bit of stability here, we've got to worry about Israel, we've got to worry about oil. So they tried to keep things stable. Once the Gulf states worked out that they'd dealt with their home problems, they looked to the region and said: we can't stop it, we can't make it stable, so let's try and shape it, let's try and see what we can get out of this. I think that was the – you're absolutely right. The Gulf states saw an opportunity and the West saw a big problem. The Qataris like to have friends. Small countries like to have friends. They spent lots of money trying to buy up lots of friends. The Saudis saw it as an opportunity to put Iran back in its box. Iran used to be

boxed in by the Taliban and by Saddam [Hussein]. The Americans took both of those away and that made the Saudis worried and nervous, and they saw the Arab Spring as an opportunity to basically put things back in order.

I think you're absolutely right. It was never going to be easy in Syria but there was never much of a chance given to the people who were trying to get rid of Assad.