Michael Van Dusen
LECTURE SERIES

ISIS is About the Arab Past, Not the Future

RAMI KHOURI
Former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; Senior Public Policy Fellow and former Director, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut; and syndicated columnist, *The Daily Star*

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Wilson Center
MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

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Introduction

Haleh Esfandiari
Director, Middle East Program

The Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars inaugurated the Michael Van Dusen Annual Lecture series on the Middle East last year, in honor of Dr. Van Dusen who stepped down as vice president and chief operating officer of the Center in 2014. He stayed on as Senior Advisor to the President for Alumni Relations of the Wilson Center. Dr. Van Dusen has been a supporter and a mentor of the Middle East Program since he joined the Wilson Center in 1999. His expertise and intimate knowledge of the region helped turn the Middle East Program into the vibrant forum it is today.

The first speaker in this lecture series was the well-known journalist and *Washington Post* columnist, David Ignatius. His subject: Congress and Foreign Policy: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. Mike had started his career on the Hill, and David had worked on the Hill as an intern. This year's speaker Rami Khouri, certainly the most prominent journalist in the Arab world, comes from Lebanon, a country, coincidentally, where Mike spent time as a student of Arabic.

At Mike's request, Rami Khouri discussed the most pressing problem plaguing the Middle East today: ISIS, its roots, aims, future, and the danger it poses to the region.

Biographies

May 2015

Michael Van Dusen is Senior Advisor to the President for Alumni Relations of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He held the position of Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer from 1999-2014. Prior to his time at the Wilson Center, he worked for close to thirty years in the U.S. House of Representatives, serving as staff consultant and then staff director of the Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the Committee of Foreign Affairs, then Chief of Staff of the Committee on Foreign Affairs; and finally as Democratic Chief of Staff of the Committee on International Relations.

He has traveled extensively in Europe, the Middle East, and the Persian Gulf, and has written widely on Middle Eastern affairs and on Congress's role in foreign policy. He has been published in media outlets such as *The Middle East Journal, Political Elites in the Middle East, the New York Times, The Middle East Journal, and the International Journal of the Middle East*. Dr. Van Dusen has a B.A. from Princeton University and holds a doctorate from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies.

Rami George Khouri is a Beirut-based internationally syndicated political columnist and book author, and a former Public Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center. He was the first director of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut, where he currently is a senior public policy fellow directing research on social justice and dignity in the Arab world. He also serves as a nonresident senior fellow at the Kennedy School of Harvard University, and his internationally syndicated column is published by Agence Global. He is editor-at-large, columnist, and former executive editor of the Beirut-based Daily Star newspaper, and was awarded the Pax Christi International Peace Prize for 2006.

He teaches or lectures annually at the American University of Beirut and Northeastern University. He has been a fellow and visiting scholar at Harvard University, Princeton University, Mount Holyoke College, Syracuse University, The Fletcher School at Tufts University, the University of Oklahoma, and Stanford University, and was a member of the Brookings Institution Task Force on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World. He is a Fellow of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (Jerusalem), and a former member of the Leadership Council of the Harvard University Divinity School, and the International Advisory Council of the International Committee of the Red Cross. He serves on the Joint Advisory Board of the Northwestern University Journalism School in Doha, Qatar, and the international advisory board of the Center for Regional and International Studies at the Georgetown University Doha campus.

He was editor-in-chief of the Jordan Times for 7 years and was general manager of Al Kutba Publishers, in Amman, Jordan for 18 years, where he also served as a consultant to the Jordanian tourism ministry on biblical archaeological sites. He has hosted programs on archaeology, history, and current public affairs on Jordan Television and Radio Jordan, and often comments on Mideast issues in the international media.

He has BA and MSc degrees in political science and mass communications respectively from Syracuse University.

ISIS is About the Arab Past, Not the Future

Rami Khouri
Former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; Senior Public Policy Fellow and former Director, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut; and syndicated columnist, *The Daily Star*

It is a double thrill for me to be back at the Woodrow Wilson Center, an institution for which I have so much respect. My experience as a fellow here one summer a few years ago was intellectually stimulating and personally very enjoyable, so it is always a treat to return and mix with old and new friends. It is especially satisfying for me to speak in a lecture series that recognizes Mike Van Dusen for his character and his professional achievements. Mike represents—in an otherwise erratic sphere in Washington, D.C.—accurate, relevant, contextualized knowledge about the Middle East and sensible policy prescriptions. His style is characterized by a combination of common sense, civility, and taking the task at hand more seriously than taking oneself.

I met Mike when he worked at the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee in the early 1970s. Meeting Mike and others like him at the start of my career was an important reason why I have never given up on the possibility that a small, sensible, realistic, and equitable strain of Middle East policy deliberations in Washington, D.C. might one day grow to help shape U.S. foreign policy. This seems to be happening to an extent for U.S. policy toward Iran. Therefore, I am pleased to have this opportunity to publicly thank Mike for the example he has always set in Washington, D.C., and for helping me and others learn to balance personal and professional qualities for useful outcomes. I am especially delighted to try to apply some of the same kind of honest, factually based analysis that has always been a hallmark of Mike's work to my comments today in this forum that honors his life's work and his example.

Since Mike and I first met nearly 45 years ago, I have been living in, observing, analyzing, and reporting on the Middle East. The region is undergoing an unprecedented period of turbulence and historic change. This era is particularly significant because, unlike much of the last century's events, most major developments in the Middle East are now driven by a combination of populist activism and the work of political, religious, and ideological organizations and movements that have emerged from within the region. For the first time in a long time, a range of different conditions and sentiments—including democratic aspirations, religious extremism, social frustrations, economic deprivations, historical resentments, environmental stresses, and demographic distortions—seem to drive political events. Understandably, this explosion of indigenous sentiment, which had been bottled up since the 1950s, resulted in a turbulent, often violent, and usually confusing picture of where the Arab world is heading.

The outcome of the situations in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Egypt, Lebanon, and Libya remains unclear, and may need years to become clear. The future of our region as a whole is similarly not known to us today. The most useful way for us to overcome not knowing how the current dynamics will play out is to try to understand how we reached this point—particularly what led to the expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The analytical challenge to understanding this problem is rooted in four related issues: What were the many historical circumstances that converged over the past half century to create ISIS? Whose policies and actions were responsible for these circumstances? What are the factors and forces today in the region and abroad that

continue to feed into the expansion and resilience of ISIS? And, what can Arab and other countries do to defeat ISIS and, more importantly, make sure that it does not rear its head again in a new form some years down the road?

I use the term "ISIS" rather than the "Islamic State" because ISIS more accurately captures its crucial Iraqi, Syrian, and Islamic lineage. I also do not feel it is appropriate to call it the "Islamic State" because I do not believe it enjoys the legitimacy among all the people it rules for it to be a credible state. In this lack of legitimacy, ironically, ISIS captures the main theme of my comments: ISIS, in all its dangerous dimensions, is the logical but terrifying consequence of the modern legacy of troubled and often violent Arab statehood.

As many Arab governments in recent decades have suffered either a total loss of, or serious damage to, their legitimacy in the eyes of their people, tens of millions of their subjects—I hesitate to use the word "citizens"—are looking beyond their governments for what they would normally expect from their state: identity, voice, security, basic socioeconomic services, and opportunity for their children's futures. ISIS is the latest and most frightening manifestation of the quest for meaningful statehood by Arabs who have been repeatedly disappointed, degraded, and humiliated by their own governments and by the policies of foreign powers.

ISIS, in all its dangerous dimensions, is the logical but terrifying consequence of the modern legacy of troubled and often violent Arab statehood.

I would like to suggest and briefly explore some crucial lessons from this situation. I believe we should understand that otherwise average

human beings seeking solace in a violent movement like ISIS is a reflection of three critical issues: the depth of their desperation for life in a reconfigured state or society; the intensity and longevity of the factors in their lives that demeaned them for decades, bringing them to this point; and the complex combination of societal factors—economics, politics, religion, culture, history, foreign affairs, basic needs, among others—that merge to make ISIS an attractive proposition.

An important starting point for such analysis is the acknowledgment—rarely accepted in Washington, D.C.—that the slow deterioration and occasional collapse of Arab societies into the current state of violence was shaped by both local and international factors. The three key factors are foreign military involvement in the region, which continues uninterrupted today; the unresolved conflict between Zionism and Arabism, which continues in what many Arabs see as uninterrupted Zionist-Israeli colonization in Palestine since the late 19th century, with new expressions of local and global resistance against this; and, most importantly among the three factors, the brutal nature of Arab domestic state rule.

Arab state rule was sometimes physically brutal—for example, state security authorities mistreated their subjects simply because of their beliefs and thoughts. Arab state rule was always, however, politically, intellectually, and culturally brutal. These states denied hundreds of millions of Arab nationals their rights of citizenship in all dimensions, including free speech and association, an independent judiciary, and credible political participation and accountability. These negative

practices also persist widely, and in some cases become more egregious and offensive, across much of the Arab world. We see this in the conduct of the Egyptian judiciary, for example, or in some Gulf Arab countries in which nationals are jailed or stripped of their citizenship, mainly for tweeting opinions and expressing views that peacefully challenge the policies of their governments.

For the few who join or support ISIS, the group represents a better social and political order than what exists in the contemporary Arab world. For the rest of us, and the vast majority of Muslims and Arabs who see ISIS as a dangerous extremist movement, the difference between ISIS and recent Arab police states is the difference in the forms and degrees of brutality they each use to eliminate anyone who does not think and act like them. It is no surprise, for instance, that we keep discovering more facts about the close relationships between ISIS and elements of Saddam Hussein's former Ba'athist dictatorship and its security apparatus in Iraq that assumed absolute power after the mid-1970s.

ISIS is brutal, frightening, and dangerous, and its goal of long-term statehood is equally troubling.

ISIS is brutal, frightening, and dangerous, and its goal of long-term statehood is equally troubling. To deal with these two immense challenges of ISIS today and in the future, we must acknowledge that ISIS is mostly a tale of its—and our—past. We should come to terms with what ISIS represents in three time dimensions, three broad geographical spheres, and multiple social, political, and economic dimensions. But first, let me make two broad comments.

First, ISIS is not an isolated or unexpected phenomenon. It is a response to every negative dimension of life in the modern Arab world for the past century at the hands of Arabs, Israelis, Iranians, Turks, British, French, Americans, Russians, and others. ISIS is the

living encapsulation of everything that has plagued the Arab people since World War I. It is the haunting ghost, the disfigured mirror, and the revenge of a century of autocratic Arab statehood that is now widely fragmenting, and collapsing in some places.

Most importantly, ISIS represents weaknesses of distinctly Arab statehood, not Islamic or Middle Eastern statehood. Our core problems in the Arab world throughout the past century have been the harsh exercise of power, the inconsistent nature of state authority, and the universal weakness of citizenship rights. We should not lose sight of the centrality of the problem of abusive political authority in modern Arab states. If we do, we will get lost in discussions about important but isolated issues like Islamic theology and values, unemployed youth, resentment of foreign powers, and other consequences of Arab state authority.

Second, we should not be surprised that ISIS has taken up the mantle of Islam. ISIS is at least the sixth Islamist-anchored mass movement and political challenge to the prevailing Arab order since the 1930s. With very few—if any—exceptions, only the movements that marched under the banner of Islam in the modern Arab world have generated significant popular support and challenged—or offered an alternative to—the dominant Arab, Israeli, Western, Iranian, or Russian powers. The first five groups are: the original Muslim Brotherhood and its many offshoots; the militant Islamists like al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya in the 1970s and 1980s; national resistance movements in Palestine and Lebanon such as Hamas and Hezbollah; *takfiri* offshoots such as al-Qaeda, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Takfir Wal-Hijra, al-Shabab, the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria, Tanzim wal Jihad, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis; and Salafist Islamists in their different manifestations throughout the region. ISIS is the sixth Arab political-social movement that challenged the status quo under the legitimizing and mobilizing power of Islam, and sought to create a separate Islamic state.

These organizations had very different purposes and forms of legitimacy; they ranged from non-militant mainstream Islamists, to

national resistance movements fighting what they regard as Israeli occupation, to extremist terroristic groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS. Their important common denominator is the centrality of Islamic identity for mobilizing their supporters. This should teach us again that any successful national or regional movement that seeks to change the status quo is likely to succeed if it anchors itself in religion's dictates, protections, and promises.

Let me say a few words about the three geographical, sectoral, and time dimensions of ISIS that we must analyze to ultimately defeat it.

Geographical Spheres

The wide political and social geography of ISIS is as vexing and scattered as the threats it poses in its Arab heartland. The three concentric circles of its operations suggest that while its adherents share a few common traits, there are many more separate reasons that explain its appeal to people from very different national and personal contexts around the world.

I. The Arab-Islamic Middle East is ISIS's birthplace and where its survival or death will be determined. The dominance of Arab actors in ISIS's birth and expansion emphasize the centrality of the problem of the abuse of power in *Arab* countries.

II. Western societies have provided ISIS with a few thousand hardcore fighters and other adherents, reflecting the combination of serious personal, socioeconomic, and political disenchantment of some young Muslims in Western societies. The dissatisfaction of this youth is grounded in a wide range of issues, such as social-political alienation, economic need, psychological stress, lack of communal mooring, family and community issues, the need to protect a threatened Islamic community, anger at Western foreign policies in the Arab-Islamic world, disenchantment with Western values and

lifestyles, and radicalization in prisons and home communities. Their search for order, meaning, and fulfillment in their lives leads them in many directions, which in some cases means joining ISIS.

III. Islamic societies beyond the Middle East—across Asia for example—reflect a combination of the disparate personal, political, and socioeconomic issues in Arab and Western societies that propel disenchanted young men—and a few women—to join ISIS. It gives them an opportunity to play their role in the global jihad to defend Islam and Muslims or to recreate an ideal Islamic society.

Social, Political, and Economic Issues

A variety of social, political, and economic issues drive tens of thousands of people to voluntarily join ISIS in its Syrian-Iraqi heartland, acquiesce to its rule if it is imposed on them, pledge allegiance to it in small entities around the world, or refuse to fight it when it approaches their region. It is difficult to define and use a single overarching strategy to defeat ISIS—or to deter people from joining it—precisely because there are so many geographic, political, psychological,

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and socioeconomic issues that propel people to join it. The most significant include the following:

I. **Religion:** ISIS provides some of its members with faith-based reasons to join the movement. These include a sense of implementing divine principles that give deep meaning and purpose to one's life, guide their personal and communal life, allow them to actively seek and hasten the millenarian promise, or allow them to express extreme idealism and commitment to their obligations as a Muslim.

II. **Sectarianism:** Some ISIS adherents are terrified by the expansion of Shi'ite and Iran-allied groups throughout the Sunni-majority Arab world, the weakness or "un-Islamic" behavior of ruling Sunni authorities, or the encroachment by foreign non-Muslim powers. In response, people join ISIS to protect Sunni Islam in the Arab heartland from both the expansion and assertion of other faiths, as well as the deeds of what they consider to be misguided or heretical Sunni Arabs. In some cases, like in parts of Iraq and Syria, local Sunni Arabs join—or at least do not oppose—advancing ISIS forces because they see ISIS as a way to be rid of the degrading treatment they have suffered at the hands of the non-Sunni ruling powers in Baghdad or Damascus.

III. **Identity:** ISIS provides some young Sunnis with a clear identity that defines their values, their sense of who they are, and their purpose in life—elements that they cannot find in other available contexts such as the ethnicity, official religion, nationality, vocation, and culture of their home communities.

IV. **Citizenship, statehood, and governance:** Some ISIS members find a clear, guaranteed set of rights and obligations as citizens of a state within the organization, which they do not otherwise experience in their lives.

V. **Collective disenfranchisement and resentment:** In Iraq and Syria, many ISIS members join the movement as a way of overcoming the disenfranchisement, discrimination, mistreatment, and resentment they have suffered at the hands of the ruling regimes. These same people may have joined other efforts in previous years to challenge or repel the regimes, but only ISIS seems to have allowed them to be rid of their former tormentors in Baghdad and Damascus. Similar conditions prevail in other countries, like Libya or Yemen.

VI. **Historical revenge and redemption:** Some people join or support ISIS as a way to avenge what they consider to be historical wrongs. These wrongs could be perpetrated by Western colonial or current powers, Arab autocrats, Israel, Iran, or others. In their view, a pure "Islamic state" simultaneously erases those wrongs and replaces them with a righteous society.

VII. **Economic needs:** Supporters of ISIS sometimes see the movement as a means of getting a job and a monthly salary. Even a modest $400 per month is a source of survival for families who are otherwise without income.

VIII. **Social norms:** For those Muslims who feel strongly about the strict social roles that should define the behavior of men, women, youth, and non-Muslims, ISIS provides the welcomed opportunity to live by those rules in an "ideal" Islamic society.

IX. **Basic human needs and services:** In conditions of civil strife and disrupted flows of food, water, healthcare, education, and trade that define some Arab societies, ISIS may be viewed as a welcomed source of predictable, affordable, basic human needs and social services. ISIS understands how important this is to ordinary people and capitalizes on their anger at often not

being able to enjoy such reliable services under former corrupt or incompetent regimes. One of the first things ISIS does when it takes control of an area is to make sure that bakeries, grocery stores, electricity, and water systems operate smoothly, so that people feel an immediate improvement in their daily lives.

X. **Justice, security, and order:** Another way that ISIS reduces opposition and gains supporters is to bring about basic security and order in formerly lawless areas, and to provide a means of swift and consistent, if sometimes brutal, justice based on literal interpretations of early Islamic precedents. Adjudicating and resolving disputes between local parties is one way ISIS generates credibility and support in areas where it is present but not yet in full control. A sense of order, security, and predictable justice is often welcomed by many in provincial regions who often suffered lawlessness and abuse by elite-connected actors and criminal elements.

XI. **Empowerment:** People may find that ISIS eliminates the helplessness, vulnerability, marginalization, and abuse that had previously defined their lives by giving them an immediate and real sense of empowerment. This can be manifested in individuals who hold positions of administrative, religious, or security responsibility in public life or in ordinary people who feel that the advent of the "Islamic state" transforms them into members of the dominant majority.

XII. **Youth adjustment, emotional anchorage, and collective belonging:** Many young recruits experience professional aimlessness, personal loneliness, and may have troubled family situations. ISIS provides an antidote to all their miseries. It instantly bonds them to a group of like-minded people—young men and women whose certitude about their purpose is clear in ISIS's requirements, absolute in its nature, widely shared in its magnitude, and "divinely" mandated in its "legitimacy." Some of the young people who join ISIS today might have joined cults, clubs, religious groups, or gangs in other times and places.

XIII. **Adventure and thrills:** A few ISIS joiners, especially young men from abroad, are attracted to the sheer thrills, adventure, and daring dimensions of the journey upon which they embark. When combined with the sudden empowerment, order, purpose, and group support that ISIS offers them, the idea of traveling to Syria and Iraq to join a global jihad that defends the Islamic community and rights the historical wrongs it has suffered in recent centuries becomes compelling.

XIV. **Social media:** One of the reasons for the successful recruitment of members and supporters of ISIS via social media and other digital communication technologies is that the pool of potential adherents is so wide, motivated by so many different reasons, and so widely located around the world.

Time Dimensions

The three dimensions of the past, present, and future of ISIS each reflects a different set of realities, concerns, and opportunities. The three dimensions are directly linked: misdiagnosing the past will lead to misguided and failed policies in dealing with the present and future, and incorrect policies toward ISIS today could allow it to continue to grow. Our first and most critical challenge is to accurately understand the many conditions and policies that allowed ISIS to begin, grow, consolidate, and expand, so we can confront and contain it today and prevent its future growth.

I. **The Past:** ISIS emerged as an expression of frustration and desperation by a small group of extremists after nearly a century in which Arabs repeatedly tried and failed to enjoy the rights of citizenship in stable modern states. The brief moment of possibilities for pluralistic and participatory national governance systems in the 1930s and 1940s was hijacked by military and family rule across the region in the 1950s and 1960s. The burden of the family-run, security-anchored, contemporary Arab state intensified in the early 1970s, because of the dual factors

of the humiliating defeat of the old order in the 1967 Arab-Israeli June War and the advent of massive oil funds. These oil funds worked their way around the region and cemented the autocratic order, which was also externally supported by the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

The replacement of the nationalist development state with the family-run security state had catastrophic consequences that linger today. Mismanagement and corruption proliferated, citizens became mere consumers with no political rights, populist political action was replaced by state-approved NGOs, free thinking and creativity were choked off in favor of stultifying media, and education systems were managed by the thought-control colonels of information ministries. By the mid-1980s Arab states and citizens' well-being suffered the added stress of economic pressures. Oil-fueled economic growth was unable to keep up with high population growth rates, which led to chronic stagnation, increased poverty, and a squeezed middle class. Discontent, poverty, vulnerability, and marginalization came to define the experiences of more and more Arab nationals, some of whom slipped into desperation when they saw no prospects for their children other than perpetual poverty and misery.

National economic statistics—such as 6 percent annual growth, 15 percent poverty, or 25 percent youth unemployment—masked the far deeper and more dangerous sentiment among what I believe is a majority of Arabs who do not live in the wealthy oil-producing states. That sentiment was a sense of profound injustice because these individuals knew they would never have the opportunity to compete with the wealthy and

connected in terms of education, jobs, income, contracts, cultural expression, health, housing, and access to clean water. This sentiment was magnified by the realization they also would have no chance at all to express their discontent or improve their conditions through political systems of accountability, participation, elections, free media, or a trusted judiciary. Tens of millions of Arabs found themselves and their children condemned to lifelong poverty, misery, hopelessness, pain, and marginalization.

The terrifying thing about the Arab past is not only that it was so painful for millions of people over three generations—but that it continues today largely unchanged.

The historic Arab uprisings and revolutions that erupted in December 2010 in rural Tunisia captured all those sentiments in their rallying cries for social justice and dignity. These uprisings reflected the combination of political and socioeconomic rights that citizens expected and demanded, but never enjoyed. The erratic modern Arab past finally led to spontaneous revolutions in six states, and to significant expressions of a desire for change in countries that did not experience street uprisings. The terrifying thing about the Arab past is not only that it was so painful for millions of people over three generations—but that it continues today largely unchanged. Autocratic, military-anchored, and often family-run Arab states remain the rule in the region, and they were and still remain widely supported by Western powers as well as others like Iran, Russia, and China.

A significant moment in the messy recent Arab past was

the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The assault on Iraq created the environment of ungoverned chaos in which ISIS's antecedents could take root and grow. This followed the arrival of al-Qaeda's Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi in Iraq shortly after the collapse of the Iraqi regime and, consequently, state order. Anglo-American militarism and the regional allies who supported the war on Iraq inadvertently played a pivotal role in the birth of ISIS.

Arab autocrats, and their use of jails as a part of the police state apparatus, also played a pivotal role in the birth of ISIS. Most al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other *takfiri* leaders—like al-Zarqawi or al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri—were radicalized and initiated their movements in these jails. The combination of Arab jails and Anglo-American jet fighters has produced many negative outcomes in the last three generations, including ISIS.

Analyzing the recent past is important because if the conditions and policies of the past persist, so will spontaneous, organic, indigenous mass eruptions like the recent Arab revolutions, or desperate smaller movements like ISIS. Both types of movements seek to replace the failed old order with something different and, in their eyes, something better.

II. **The Present:** Three important aspects of ISIS in the present need our attention. First, trying to counter ISIS today by simplistic formulae of social media messaging, appealing for "moderate" Islam to assert itself, and convening White House gatherings or central Paris photo-op marches will not work. None of these approaches gets close to the powerful driving forces across many sectors described above that have created ISIS and continue to draw adherents to it.

Second, trying to defeat ISIS with the same combination of actors that created it—Western jets and Arab autocrats' jails—must go down in modern history as among the most nonsensical attempts at conducting effective foreign policy.

The same forces that gave birth to al-Qaeda and ISIS cannot defeat them without first addressing the underlying issues that ultimately created these movements. The midwives of ISIS cannot also be its pallbearers.

Third, gathering together the forces in the Middle East that are required to contain and then eliminate ISIS requires credible and practical measures, which will indicate to hundreds of millions of Arabs that the ways of the past are changing and that a better day beckons for them. Arabs themselves will defeat ISIS and prevent the formation of other groups like it only if they see tangible improvements in the exercise of power and equal rights of citizenship in their own societies. Few—if any—such signs are visible today. In most Arab countries the trajectory in human rights, freedom of expression, meaningful political participation, and personal liberties is either totally stuck, or moving backwards.

> Right now, ISIS is mainly a horrible lesson about the consequences of the failed, inequitable policies applied throughout the Arab world.

III. **The Future:** If we collectively wish to defeat ISIS and prevent other movements like it from emerging, we must acknowledge the mistakes of the past and the unimpressive policies of the present. We must change these policies substantively and rapidly. If the Arab region persists in the mass radicalization of its citizens, there is every possibility that ISIS can consolidate itself in its current heartland, expand in adjacent countries, and continue to gather adherents in other Arab countries for decades to come. Such mass discontent is due to the modern

Arab legacy of mostly incompetent governance widely anchored in military rule; humiliation at the hands of Israel and Western armies; and the promise of lives of poverty, drudgery, and despair—or a quick death by drowning in the Mediterranean Sea—for tens of millions of people.

Right now, ISIS is mainly a horrible lesson about the consequences of the failed, inequitable policies applied throughout the Arab world. If we do not learn those lessons and react accordingly to promote a more humane socioeconomic trajectory and a more participatory and accountable political culture, then ISIS could well be the frightening harbinger of our long-term future. Many in the Arab world have been warning about this reality and working to achieve the goals of genuine citizenship, in stable states, governed by legitimate political systems. ISIS is the most dramatic form of this warning that now stares us in the face from our own backyards. We ignore it at our own peril.

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.

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