

Michael Van Dusen Lecture on the Middle East
Transcription of "Syria, Sectarianism, and ISIS: Where is National Identity Headed?"
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Henri, thank you so much for inviting me here.

And I would just like to begin my remarks by thanking Haleh Esfandiari, who I knew at Princeton as a graduate student and who was a constant presence and a bright light in our Near Eastern Studies Department. And I'd like to thank Michael Van Dusen and his wife, who I know from Vermont because they have a house right next to ours in the little town of Rochester, VT, but I knew Michael Van Dusen first because I read his dissertation many years ago on "Intra- and Inter-Generational Conflict in the Syrian Army" when I was trying to begin to write a dissertation.

After my Master's at Harvard, I wrote a letter to Michael Van Dusen, which he would not remember, because I was trying to get a job in that terrible phase after a Master's degree. And I was just sending off letters to every place in Washington that seemed like it would be fun to work. And Michael had a job that everyone coming out of a Master's would like to have had. After not hearing back from anybody of course, I decided well you better get a Ph.D. and that was the end of that.

But let me turn to Syria. What I want to do in this talk is make an argument about what is going on in the larger Levant with sectarian and national identity. And in order to do that, I want to make a comparison to central Europe. Now I know that seems far flung, but this is the "class of 1919." The nation-states that were created in 1919 in Paris, that include those from Poland down to Palestine, are all carved out of multi-ethnic and multi-religious empires at roughly the same time. And they have the same problem, which is: how do you build a national identity out of a multi-ethnic community? And almost none of them did it well. It's been a long and bloody process of ethnic cleansing and really flattening out the ethnic map of each nation-state, getting rid of minorities who are accused of being fifth columns and rearranging the population to fit the nation. The borders were not changed after 1919 to fit the people; the people were changed to fit the borders.

It's in WWII of course that the big ethnic rearranging, the "great sorting out" as I have called it, takes place in Europe, in central Europe. And if we look at a country like Poland, which goes through a devastating sorting out during WWII: before 1939, Poland was about 68 percent Polish, by the end of WWII, it was 100 percent Polish. Three million Jews were destroyed in Poland. Ruthenians, Ukrainians driven out; Lithuanians driven out. But over about seven million Germans were also ethnically cleansed and driven out of Poland. You can look up here in Königsberg, the top, this whole German area completely emptied out of Germans by Russians, and that's the home of Kant and other things like that. So this entire region was reorganized. Between 1945 and 1950 alone, at the end of WWII, seven million remaining Germans were expelled from Poland.

Let's go to a map of the Austro-Hungarian Empire of course, one of the other big multi-ethnic empires to be destroyed. If we just look at Czechoslovakia, for example, we can see this about three million Sudeten Germans were of course ethnically cleansed. The Jews were driven out. And even then Czechs and Slovaks couldn't live together and went through their Velvet Divorce in 1990. That's not to mention what's going on in the rest of these countries where there is tremendous ethnic cleansing. Here are the Germans of central Europe, about 12 million. Hitler of course though he was going to build a

Grossdeutsch, a bigger Germany, and capture all these Germans and drive out all the non-Germans. He fails, and all these Germans paid for being a fifth column by being ethnically cleansed. Even little Crimea, which has been in the news so much lately, is five percent German at the beginning of the war. Hitler occupies it and uses those Germans as a collaborative elite, much like Saddam Hussein used the Palestinians in Kuwait as a collaborative elite. As soon as Stalin reconquered it, all those Germans were either marched out to Siberia or killed, or they fled. And there are no more Germans left in Crimea. We know this happened to the Crimean Tatars who were marched out to Siberia in the middle of the war. And today Crimea is 78 percent Russian because it was completely, in a sense, it has been rebuilt.

So that's my little European tour here. It's to, in a sense, try to talk about nation-building. Long and bloody, lots of ethnic cleansing. The borders don't change because in the international order, we want to keep the borders. But we sort out people to fit their borders. Here is a map of nation-states. This is a new phenomenon; we've heard people like President Obama talk about nation hatreds and so forth, but really these ethnic and sectarian differences get reanimated by nation-states and the building of nation-states. So they become much more lethal.

Of course nation-states are a modern phenomenon. We don't have nation-states before the French Revolution and the American Revolution. The world has shogunates, caliphates, kingdoms, principalities, bishoprics, free cities, all sorts of political configurations but no nation-states. With that French Revolution and American Revolution, the map of the globe begins to change. And today there are 193 nation-states in the UN, but they're all brand new. And the vast majority of them were created, and got their independence, after WWII. One hundred nation-states got their independence between 1945 and 1973. So any professor that tries to tell you we're in a post-national age lives in Belgium, because they're looking at the UN and NATO and other things like that. For most of the world, nation-states are very new. And trying to figure out where the borders, who's in and who's out, how do you deal with minorities, is something that is on the menu like it is in Syria and Iraq today.

Of course nation-states, you know nationalism, changes authority 180 percent and that's what's so magical in a sense about nationalism. The sovereigns become subject, and the subjects become sovereign. All of our leaders have to run around every four years telling us that they're public servants and how much they love to serve us. And we get to, it's the nation, the people that are sovereigns, and in the constitution of course sovereignty is invested in the people. And that changed from a medieval great chain of being where you have God, angels, kings and so forth and serfs, slaves, and unfree going down to the devils and various circles of hell. It gets flattened. And so the national transformation of building these new nation-states of course also expires that complete change in authority, which is part of what is going on in the Middle East. And with the Arab Spring, it was an attempt to capture the nation of divided people away from the sovereigns and to make the sovereigns subjects.

Let us just take a very brief tour of the Levant to see what has happened already in terms of the great sorting out. If we look at Anatolia, it was 20 percent Christian in 1914. By 1923, by the time Ataturk consolidates the nation-state, all those 20 percent Christians are gone. The million and a half Armenians out in the East, we know what's happened to them; they've been accused of being a fifth column for the Russians in WWI. And they're destroyed, driven out, scattered. The Greek Orthodox, of course, the Greeks think they can reconquer Anatolia, rebuild the Byzantine Empire. And all the Greek Orthodox living along the coast and in the west of the country get destroyed as Ataturk moves his army to the coast. And a big population exchange of course, the Christians being sent to Greece. One out of every four Greeks has the DNA of an Anatolian because of the refugees of a million point something Greeks that were sent to Greece (Greek Orthodox, Anatolians). And 800,000 Muslims from Greece were sent to

Anatolia. But we can even look at Cyprus, which is a beautiful depiction of this great sorting out. Here's a religious map of Cyprus before the 1973 Turkish invasion. It looks like your prototypical mosaic with your Muslim villages scattered around the Christian villages. Nationalism, war, after 1973 it's like this. Every Muslim lives in the north, every Christian lives in the south—a complete demographic separation and a great sorting out.

I don't want to belabor Lebanon because this is not a talk about Lebanon. But Lebanon doesn't really get sorted out, which is I suppose the beauty of Lebanon and also the difficulty of Lebanon. Iraq, of course the United States invades in 2003 and thinks it's going to build democracy, but what it does is it kindles this great sorting out by taking the Sunnis at the top of society and passes them down to the bottom. And catapulting the Shi'ites from the bottom of society to the top. It sparks an ethnic war that leads to something that could look like the great sorting out. Of course Saddam Hussein, Sunni, with the army dominated by Sunnis at the top; the Ba'ath party, a bastion of Sunni control—with all those destroyed by America, disbanded or made illegal, the Shi'ites have an opportunity to take over. And the Sunnis, by and large, join al-Qaeda, get destroyed by America but then revive in the form of ISIS. And in 2014 conquer almost all the Sunni parts of Iraq. Of course Sunnis are only 20 percent, Shi'ites are 60 percent and so forth, but instead of creating democracy what you're creating is you're allowing the Shi'ites to dominate over the Sunnis.

And it's been a very brutal conquest. In Ramadi, Tikrit, Fallujah... in Ramadi 80 percent of the housing stock was reported to be destroyed and uninhabitable by the time we had reconquered it from ISIS. Of course that's the big anxiety about Mosul, and we're going slow theoretically so we won't destroy it all. And we won't allow the Hashed al-Shaabi and the other Shi'ite military groups to come in and take revenge. That's the promise, we don't know what the reality will be in the end.

Let me even just force into this procrustean bed I'm laying out for you the Israel-Palestine conflict. Israel-Palestine, Palestine is about 5 percent Jewish in 1850 before the rise of cultural Zionism or political Zionism. By WWI, maybe 15 percent Jewish. By the time the British leave in 1948, it's a third Jewish. The Palestinians believe that they're going to be able to dominate. In the 1948 war, of course they lose spectacularly, and 800,000 or 2/3 of Palestinians get driven out of the country. And the Yishuv wins; it's the only minority in the Middle East that's able to transform itself to a majority. Now of course to be fair to the Jews, the Jews have already been sorted out. They've been sorted out in Europe, where six million were destroyed and they had to flee, and they've been sorted out in the Middle East. The Jewish community in Baghdad in 1914 was the single largest religious community in Baghdad. And of course the same thing is true for in Damascus and Aleppo—there are no more Jews in the Middle East. I guess in Istanbul there's a Jewish community and in Iran there's a Jewish community, but it's very diminished and it's very beaten down to a certain extent. I guess maybe not in Istanbul so much. But in the Arab world, they're gone. And many have gone to Palestine. Half of all the Jews in Palestine, of course in Israel, are Middle Easterners. So that sorting out of course displaces Palestinians who then become refugees and leave this turmoil... at any rate I'm trying to paint a bleak picture for you. Long and bloody, a zero-sum game for minorities who get destroyed because they often go to a foreign power to look for help, get accused of being a fifth column and get wiped out.

And that brings us to Syria, where of course the minority of interest is the Alawites. Now in every Levantine state, the minorities capture the state and that's because of colonial history. Because the colonial powers divide and rule to give a leg up to the minorities who are able to capture the state after the colonial power leaves. So it's Maronites in Lebanon, the Alawites in Syria, the Sunnis in Iraq, the Jews in Palestine. In Syria the Alawites, as we know, capture the state in 1970 with Assad, put the

brother in charge of security; it's a family affair at the top. And it's traditional all the way, despite Ba'athism, nationalism, and all the external rhetoric, it's all about patronage and family values that hold this edifice together. And that's why Assad cannot reform. He can shrink his state all the way down to Latakia, he can expand it, but he cannot change the structure of his government. He cannot sit down with Ahrar al-Sham or other militias, Sunni Salafist militias, and say OK you can be the generals because the entire edifice would completely crumble. His Alawite generals are not going to accept that. And it would destroy, there would be immediately internal fighting. His state structure cannot be reformed. Hafez al-Assad put his brother in charge of intelligence, Rifaat al-Assad. Bashar put his brother in charge of the Republican Guard. The structure is identical, because it works. So all this idea that Americans said in the Geneva process about how we're going to sit down and have a political solution where the generals of this and these guys are all going to somehow compromise and Bashar is going to leave was a non-starter, because they can't do that. The whole structure would collapse, if they were to get rid of the Alawite generals that Michael Van Dusen wrote about in his dissertation.

Here's just a little picture of what happens to Christians. One of the minorities in the Middle East where you can see this tremendous decline for every country. The only ones that are growing of course are Saudi Arabia and the Gulf where of course they're just guest workers, they don't have citizenship, so it's an illusion. Christians are leaving the Middle East in giant numbers in every country because they're preyed upon like all the other minorities. The Jews went before them. We've seen the Yazidis get pounded and so forth, so this is the great sorting out that I would propose to you is taking place today in the Levant.

Saddam Hussein, Bashar al-Assad, these dictators were like little sultans, Ottoman sultans that ruled over their chunk of the Ottoman Empire with the jackboot of the military, but they kept the minorities in place more or less. Once they're gone, and the sentiments of national identity come to the fore, you get this great sorting out. And everybody is fighting for who is going to be on first.

And in a sense, religion in the Middle East is the new ethnicity. So Maronitism, Jewish nationalism, Shi'i versus Sunni, Assyrian, these identities are largely formed by religion not so much by ethnicity. Of course there are the Kurds, there are the Assyrians, and others who claim an ethnicity, or the Maronites who are Phoenicians, but religion is the real marker for these differences. And they're becoming more than just confessionalism or more than just religion, they're becoming an ethnic identity. We don't know if they will or if after these civil wars they'll go back to being Iraqis and Syrians.

The danger though is that you get a Poland or a Czechoslovakia and that we're in the middle of a process. That's the danger. I don't know the answer to this, but I'm trying to draw a paradigm based on this "class of 1919," a model based on one simple, the identity question. I'm not talking about economics, which of course plays a big role, class, city versus countryside; there are tons of divisions that are eating away at national identity in the Middle East. But this one, I'm trying to just give a narrow guide.

So let's look at, here's ISIS. What does ISIS do? ISIS carves out a giant Sunni state that reaches from Baghdad all the way over to Aleppo and Damascus. This is ISIS at its height in 2015; it's the ultimate Sunni nationalist expression. It of course goes back to caliphism and it's going to resurrect these old ideas, but it's also a new nationalist idea as well. And this is very threatening to everyone in the region. The United States is determined to keep the borders between Iraq and Syria, and we're bombing away in order to carve that border out again and keep the borders. So the borders aren't changed to fit the people, but the people are being changed to fit the borders.

ISIS will be destroyed, and in a sense what is happening today is you've got the United States Air Force flying at the shoulder of a very sectarian government in Baghdad with Hashed al-Shaabi and these other militias to destroy Sunni resistance in Iraq, devastating these Sunni cities. The Russian air force is doing something very similar in Syria. And what we're seeing is a new security architecture being imposed and developing in the northern Middle East—Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran with pro-Iranian governments dominating in each of these countries with Russian support, combating a Saudi-Turkish-other Sunni states who are furiously trying to destroy this new security architecture that is taking place. But I would submit to you that this is going to be the new security structure in the Middle East in the next several decades because Iran is determined not to let Assad rule.

So why is Assad winning? I've got to say that I was convinced by a bunch of analysts at the Middle East Institute and other places in town here who in 2012-13 said you know the Alawites are finished. They're only 12 percent in Syria; they cannot win. This is a war of attrition. As long as the Sunni rebellion and Sunni militias keep on struggling, they're going to wear down because there's only 2.6 million Alawites and how many men and it's a bad army, and they'll all either die or run away, which sounded very convincing because they began to flag.

But if you look at this region, if you don't look at Syria as Syria with borders, you look at it as a regional war, there are more Shi'ite Arabs in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq combined than there are Sunni Arabs. Shi'ite Arabs predominate. If you get rid of the Kurds in both Iraq and Syria and just look at the Arab population, Shi'ite Arabs predominate. And that's one reason why they're winning, because Hezbollah has jumped in, Ahl Al-Haq (Shi'ite militias from Iraq), the Iranian army, and of course the Russians have been key, but they haven't allowed that, the Sunnis have called for jihad and a broad Sunni mobilization around the world, but the Shi'ites have... So that's one reason.

The second reason is fragmentation of the Syrian opposition. The Syrian opposition, according to the CIA, had over 1,500 different militias. They were organized according to town, clan, tribe, strongmen, but they couldn't combine into a national uprising. The only bigger combinations that were really powerful amongst the opposition were the Islamists, who presented a caliphate and other backward ideas that could never sell in the West. So the fragmentation and the Islamism of the Syrian opposition doomed it, because the West turned their backs on it eventually. And Obama made the determination that he didn't want them to win. Because if Damascus fell, who was going to take it? Possibly ISIS or Obama.

And that led him and the United States to take a singular focus on ISIS and say we're only worried and only want to fight ISIS. We do not want to fight Assad. And despite many people in this town arguing in order to destroy ISIS, you have to destroy Assad first, which is the Turkish and the Saudi argument and so forth. Washington was not convinced, and they left Assad and they refused to get into the battle against Assad. Assad had better friends, needless to say. Turkey is absorbed in internal strife, Saudi Arabia is now sucked into Yemen, low oil prices. And Iran was willing to go all in; Hezbollah was willing to go all in. And Russia ultimately made the big difference, because air power is transformative in the Middle East. Ever since the 1967 war we've seen how air power has won almost every war in the Middle East.

So what does this do for national identity? Where does this leave us on the question of Syria's future national identity? I am presuming Assad is going to reconquer much if not all of Syria. It'll be years, but it's hard to look out and see any militia out there that can really stop him. The world is now turning their

backs on these militias. With the fall of Aleppo, the center of gravity for the rebellion switches to Idlib. Idlib is dominated by al-Qaeda and Ahrar al-Sham, who are about to fight it out it looks like over control there. They're falling apart, but the world is not going to help them.

When we look across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, the Palestinians, we don't see a good formula for national understanding. We see fragmentation, we see the predominance of sub-national identities and transnational identities. Lebanon is the best model, and of course everyone in this town likes to say Lebanon is beautiful because we all like to go there, it's multicultural, there hasn't been a great sorting out in the sense the third-third-third Shi'ite, Sunni, Christian balance has meant that no one group could dominate the other two despite trying for decades. And that has led to, in a sense, a peace.

But it's a peace that is still very divided. Lebanese national identity is a negative identity. They don't want to be Syrians, they don't want to be Israelis. But the confessional, the religious structures, are embedded in every element of Lebanese society. How can an Assad-led Syria rebuild? My worry, and I just came from a conference of Syrianists at Rice, where a lot of people from the Middle East Institute and other institutes in this town were saying, well the insurgency is going to go on. They're going to keep on fighting. Saudi Arabia and Turkey are going to keep on funding. They're not going to give up.

The trouble with that is that already we have the language of a fifth column. That's the way that Assad depicts the rebels, as they are really crypto-Saudis, crypto-so forth. They will keep on destroying them. I don't see where the rebels can win. If there isn't a modus vivendi that emerges between these two different communities, the Sunnis will be destroyed. In the way the Germans were destroyed in central Europe, possibly. It's very hard because the Sunnis are the dominant factor in Syria; they're 70 percent. Sunni Arabs are 70 percent of Syria.

But Assad has been successful in dividing the Sunnis and many of the urban elites, the urban middle class have stood by him or at least haven't gone to the opposition. It's mostly in the country where the rebellion has been the most ensconced. So I don't have an answer for how Syria is going to build a new national identity, because you cannot see a good solution with the combination of forces today.

Assad believes that once he destroys the insurgency, he's going to be able to rebuild. That China, Russia, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, they will all begin to invest and that there will be rebuilding, that the country as a transit place will be too important not to rebuild. I don't know if that's true; it's possible it could happen. Many people see a North Korea. I don't see a North Korea simply because Syria has too many friends. It has lots of friends, Iraq's a friend, Lebanon's a friend, Jordan wants to be a friend again just in order to get rid of some of the refugees. So in that sense, I can see a rebuilding.

Many wealthy Syrians tell me we're going to rebuild, and they try to put an upbeat face on it. But how those sectarian relations will ultimately mend themselves is hard to see today. And it's hard to see in Iraq. On that depressing note, I'm going to conclude and take answers. But I tried to do a model, in a sense I've tried to draw a model that makes it not just an exotic, Middle Eastern problem, but shows that the nation-building in these multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies is fraught with long-term bloodshed. And whether it's Poland or all the way down to Palestine, the different religious and ethnic communities have not found a good way to get along. Yugoslavia has got to be the best example. And in a sense that great sorting out is still taking place in corners of Europe like Ukraine, but it's in full bloom in the middle of the Levant.