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ISIS AND THE STATE OF TERROR:
THE GENESIS, EVOLUTION, AND IMPACT OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. McCANTS: Good afternoon. Welcome, everyone. We are here today to celebrate and to launch the new book written by the two folks on the panel with me, J.M. Berger and Jessica Stern, called "ISIS: THE STATE OF TERROR". You have seen the weighty black tome outside.

I'm going to introduce the panelists and then we're just going to have a conversation for the first half of this panel.

I have learned a lot from both of them over the years. I've found both of them to be very challenging thinkers. When I was first starting to work on terrorism, I think one of the first books I picked up from a Barnes and Noble was one of Jessica's, and I found it to be a very frustrating read, not because it was poorly written -- it was very well written -- but because it challenged everything I thought about terrorists. You know, she had a lot of original interviews with the people who actually do that stuff, which is -- you know, you don't want to read interviews with real people, you want to keep sort of your general stereotypes of what drives terrorism.

And in J.M., I think, is known on Twitter for being a doubter and a skeptic of most of our theories, which can also be very frustrating because for those of us who are trying to hype the threat and get everybody very excited, J.M. is always saying, calm down, the world's not ending.

Anyway, that's my real intro, but let me give you the formal stuff.

So, Jessica Stern, to my left, is a lecturer on terrorism at Harvard University. She serves at the Hoover Institution Task Force on National Security and Law and is a 2014-2015 Fulbright Scholar.

J.M. Berger is a non-resident fellow in my program, the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World here at Brookings and he's the founder of IntelWire.com.

He's an expert on extremist groups of all stripes, across the ideological spectrum, and he especially focuses on extremist use of social media.

Brookings recently published a report written by -- coauthored by J.M. looking at the ISIS presence on Twitter and it was one of -- I think it's the only one to give like a full accounting of all of the ISIS Twitter accounts, so it's handy and you can find it online.

So, let's get to the book. I am in the process of writing my own book on ISIS. It is a very daunting prospect because everything is changing so fast, and just when you've come up with an amazing line to capture everything, they go and do the complete opposite, so then you have to revise and come up with another amazing line, so I've started to be much more vague as I'm working.

But when I look at the history of ISIS, it gets a little better, right, because then it's a bit more stable and you're only really limited by your sources, so that's where I want to start. We'll start with the more durable facts about the organization and then as we go on in our conversation, we'll talk more about the more slippery bits of information because of the very dynamic environment in Iraq, Syria, and across the Middle East.

So, J.M., this first question is for you, and Jessica, feel free to jump in at any point.

The first question is just about the Islamic State's foundation. Where did this thing come from? I think for many of us, it just sort of leapt off the television screens last summer, but the organization has been around for quite some time and was at least nominally some part of al-Qaeda. So, if you could talk about its origins and its early relationship with al-Qaeda to get us started, that would be great.

MR. BERGER: Sure, and thank you. So, ISIS, yeah, does have its origins in what we know as al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was an organization that never

existed until after the United States invaded and destabilized the country. There had been, you know, some -- as most countries have, including the United States, there was always some al-Qaeda guys passing through, there's stuff that happened, but there was really no serious al-Qaeda presence in that country until we removed Saddam Hussein and the resulting destabilization, this, at first very small, organization was formed.

Its founder was Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, who was a notoriously brutal jihadist who had come up through al-Qaeda networks but he had never joined the al-Qaeda, he had never sworn loyalty to Osama bin Laden --

MR. McCANTS: And why was that?

MR. BERGER: Well, they didn't see things quite the same. Zarqawi had a very sectarian view of what jihad should be. He was very focused on Shias, on killing Shias, on targeting just about anybody that he thought would advance their agenda, whereas bin Laden, for all that al-Qaeda has done over the years, is much more discriminating in how he targeted his terrorist attacks and particularly concerned about targeting Muslims because he had seen the blow back that had happened in some of the earlier al-Qaeda attacks.

So, Zarqawi was much more of a loose cannon and he originally went to Iraq to fight to U.S. invasion under his own auspices, but his organization swore loyalty -- he finally caved in after years of pressure to swear loyalty to bin Laden in 2004. So, his organization became al-Qaeda in Iraq and it became a huge thorn in the side of the U.S. forces that were trying to stabilize the country.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq, very quickly, took the insurgency against the United States occupying force into a sectarian realm by targeting Shia -- prominent Shia politicians who were trying to cooperate with the United States to bring the country together, by targeting Shia mosques and landmarks.

MR. McCANTS: And was there any strategy to that or was that just purely driven by doctrine?

MR. BERGER: I think it's a little bit of both. I mean, it's pretty clear that he had a very ideological mind and that he truly believed that what he was doing was the right thing, but at the same time, he was able to rally the Sunni population in Iraq, which had been significantly disenfranchised under Saddam Hussein, so they had a lot of grievances, and what they saw was a Shia regime rising up and they wanted to find ways to resist that.

I mean, you know, obviously some people did it in the political process, but some of the more discontent people took to violence, and so al-Qaeda in Iraq was able to create some alliances in that structure, in that environment.

Over the course of a couple of years they became the top source of U.S. casualties and civilian casualties in Iraq and the organization started to come under pressure from al-Qaeda, which was cautioning them against this really brutal and sectarian kind of approach. They're saying that it's got a backlash. Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was then the number two guy in al-Qaeda, is now the leader of al-Qaeda, wrote a letter to Zarqawi saying, you know, it may feed your ego that they call you the Sheik of Slaughterers, but this is going to come back in a bad way, and Zarqawi grudgingly took some of that guidance and they did tone things down a bit.

At the same time, with the U.S. surge and U.S. counterinsurgency kind of approach led to the rise of a Sunni resistance that was more committed to stabilizing the country in exchange for political assurances that they had received and the combination of those factors drove al-Qaeda in Iraq down to a really tiny nucleus and we put them under very heavy pressure, we killed their top leadership, Zarqawi died in a U.S. strike in, I believe, 2006, yeah, and his successors will killed soon after, and the organization was

really kind of at a low point as the United States was exiting, but that was also something that they had discussed in their strategy is waiting for the United States to exit and then starting the machinery back up again.

So, you know, as we departed, they rose back up to try and fill the vacuum and in the course of this, one of the more interesting things that happened was that they really -- this split with al-Qaeda became overt. There had always been internal pressure back and forth over the strategy and tactics and a key thing that happened in this process, as we took out the successors to Zarqawi, it became unclear whether the new leaders had sworn loyalty to al-Qaeda. So, that kind of created an opening.

MR. McCANTS: Can you -- either of you, actually, can either of you talk about the creation of this entity called the Islamic State? Because I think for many of us, we understood that al-Qaeda had kind of rebranded itself the Islamic State, but it's a bit more complicated than that and I think there's good reasons to reassess the way that we were thinking about the creation of this entity and especially how the al-Qaeda guys in Iraq thought about it and thought about, as you're saying, their oaths of allegiance back to the mother ship in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

MR. BERGER: Yeah, well, I mean, the Islamic State -- I mean, many of us, and I think, myself included, you know, saw it as a rebranding, which we have seen other al-Qaeda groups do. They try and change the name if their reputation has become sullied or they have political pressures, they want to hide in some way. But what this really seems to have reflected more advice from al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda had advised them to set up an Islamic State and to start governing and while they changed their name right at the point that they were under maximum pressure, so we didn't really see the physical signs of that. So, I think that's part of the reason why we saw it as a tactic.

But it was really kind of a fundamental shift and Zawahiri had urged the

successors to Zarqawi to do this, to set up an Islamic State and start working toward the caliphate, which in Zawahiri's mind probably meant 200 years from now this will be the base of the caliphate and so they took his advice to heart perhaps a lot more than Zawahiri expected and quickly grew into a very robust organization, and then it was fueled in part -- there were a lot of different factors going into this -- the war in Syria created an influx of foreign fighters into the region and influx of resources for jihadists to use, at the same time, the Malaki government had instituted a number of political changes that left Sunnis feeling disenfranchised again, including the ones who had risen up to help us get rid of al-Qaeda and Iraq in the first place, and they had felt that there were promises that weren't kept and so this fueled what, from the outside, seemed like a very rapid growth, rapid resurgence starting in -- especially in 2012, as Syria began to deteriorate and certainly into 2013, we just saw very sudden spurts of growth. A lot of this stuff was happening under the surface, so when they actually fully emerged and took Mosul, everybody kind of felt surprised by that.

MS. STERN: I think I would add that there were a couple of almost foreshadowings of what we see today, one is that Zarqawi, who was this thug and a criminal who started al-Qaeda in Iraq, was famous, as you know better than anyone, for beheading. He was famous for beheading Muslims, Westerners, but also especially Shia, so that was, I think, a pattern that was established. He also filmed his atrocities, so that was also a foreshadowing. And finally, that famous letter that I spoke with a senior intelligence official not too long ago, I happened to be sitting -- former intelligence official, I happened to be sitting next to him on a train and I was very excited, but alas, we'd already turned the book in. This is not a secret, but he told me he wouldn't tell me if we hadn't turned the book in, he said it was the most exciting intercept of his career, the letter -- the famous letter that Zawahiri sent to Zarqawi saying, gosh, you shouldn't

behead so many people, this is not good for our image. But in addition to that he said, and by the way, could you send a check?

So, it was clear even then that this predecessor organization to ISIS, ISIL, Islamic State, whatever we call it, was interested in atrocities, but also very good at raising money on its own. It wasn't relying on inputs from foreigners. So that's what I'd add.

MR. BERGER: Yeah, and really, you know, the shift in al-Qaeda over the last five years -- ten years, really, but it's accelerated in the last five years, is one that al-Qaeda was the mother ship in the beginning and it was the place you went for resources, they had money, they had trained operatives, they could get things done, they had logistics, and what we've seen happen is that a lot of that functionality has really devolved to what we call the al-Qaeda affiliates, the organizations that are based outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan that have loyalty, have stated loyalty, sworn loyalty to al-Qaeda, but they have their own financing streams now, they have their own fighters, most of them are more robust than al-Qaeda itself in terms of membership and in terms of foreign fighter flow.

MR. McCANTS: So, listening to you both talk, it sounds to me as if you attribute a lot of the political success that the Islamic State has had recently to the political environment in Syria and Iraq. I mean, if you contrast it with the earlier incarnation of the Islamic State, it sounds to me like you saw the big difference being the U.S. presence on the ground and an ability to mobilize the tribes -- the Sunni tribes against the Islamic state. Am I hearing you correctly? Are there things the Islamic State itself did to capitalize on the situation that, say, some of the other rebel groups didn't? Or is it just purely a function of an absence of the United States and Sunnis who are really angry at those two governments?

MR. BERGER: Well, the thing that ISIS and its predecessor groups have done pretty successfully is set off chain reactions. So, they would bomb a Shiite mosque and there would be a response because the environment in Iraq includes Shia militias, volunteer militias and Iranian-supported militias, and so when al-Qaeda in Iraq or ISIS carried out a large strike, there would be a chain of retaliation that would end up with thousands dead on both sides, and that just fuels the environment in which extremists can thrive because you turn to your identity group for protection against chaos that's happening around you.

MR. McCANTS: Reading the book, to me it's one of the clearest descriptions of how the Islamic State has marketed itself to the broader world, and listening to the media, you would get the sense that these guys are really geniuses at using social media. And your book doesn't call them geniuses. I mean, it's very -- you're both very careful to put everything in its proper context, but the reader can't help but also feel that, wow, these guys are skilled at doing this kind of stuff and they've been honing these skills for quite some time. It isn't as if they just found the Internet in 2014, right?

MR. BERGER: Yeah. They are very skilled. You know, I stay away from the word geniuses in part because a lot of what they do is just the hard work and patience and stick-to-it-iveness. You know, what they accomplish in social media in terms of their distribution is really a function of having -- devoting enough resources to the problem and having people who are willing to go online every day, all day, and work on it. And that has a cascading affect on a social network that can elevate a message and make it look bigger than what it is.

Where they're stronger and where, you know, you have to reluctantly give them some credit is the content of their media was evolving at the same time as their distribution network and you could watch it progress from -- there was sort of a traditional

old jihadist media in the '80s and '90s and early 2000s, which funnily enough, it's like -- I mean, when you look at the news coverage it's all the same, 2003, we were doing stories about the slick al-Qaeda recruiting videos, which were, in retrospect, not so slick. And so they took some of that old material is what they started with, but during the al-Qaeda in Iraq days, during the hard part of the insurgency, they also hit on a model of extreme violence, and these were, at first, very simplistic, these were really snuff films, they would just put out videos with a short statement and a gruesome execution and increasingly gruesome executions over the course of a couple of years.

Where ISIS has changed the model is that they really have come to focus on storytelling, and you can watch -- if you watch their videos, and I don't recommend really doing this -- but if you watch their videos over the course of some years, you can see the evolution from this sort of standard old jihadist model, which was really all extremist model, outline grievances, talk about how weak we are, and then this is why we have to do terrorism and bad stuff in order to fight back against our vulnerabilities.

And ISIS has transformed that model and they've taken it, both on a technical level in terms of like the production values, but also in terms of the story telling and the content, they've dropped the grievances, they've dropped the discussion of how weak we are, and now it's a story about winners, it's much more sort of mythic story telling that has proven to be much more popular than --

MS. STERN: And it's not an old man droning on. It looks like a war game and its touting their successes and showing atrocities and filmed with a couple of cameras and it's quite different.

MR. BERGER: Yeah, and that plays into the competition with al-Qaeda too, because al-Qaeda did do pretty sophisticated productions when it had the

capabilities to do that and under pressure from us in Afghanistan, they really -- their capacity to make a highly produced video with a story line was declining at the same time as ISIS' was rising. So, you know, at the last few al-Qaeda videos from al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, and even al-Qaeda in Yemen, have been really very modest affairs that are often just one person staring at a camera giving a speech for 45 minutes, and it's hard --

MR. McCANTS: You don't think that's just because they're out of touch with the young'uns it's because --

MR. BERGER: It's a little of both. I mean, you can see, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula now in particular is trying to catch up. They're trying to revamp some of their media, some of the other affiliates are trying to do that. And al-Qaeda central put out its first English language magazine last year, which was just breathtakingly dull, 100 pages of dull, and they like promo'ed it, I think, in March and didn't really send it until November. So, you know, some of that may be being out of touch and not understanding how important it is to turn this stuff around quickly and turn around in volume, but some of it is also probably resources.

MR. McCANTS: Jessica, one of the things that I think strikes anybody when they watch Islamic State propaganda is how insanely violent it is. I mean, as J.M. is saying, you know, I think a lot of us remember back in the 2000s you would see clips from Al-Jazeera or elsewhere with bin Laden or Zawahiri wagging his finger at the screen and maybe you would see some folks on monkey bars -- everybody's seen the monkey bar clip, right, but the Islamic State videos, I mean, we've seen just a parade of horrors -- beheadings, crucifixions, elaborately produced snuff films, and I guess my question for you has to do with this extreme display of violence. What do they hope to achieve? Because I'm sure many of us think that -- why would you put this kind of stuff on display? What could you possibly hope to gain? Why would we even need to message against

this when they're just putting their worst foot forward?

I mean, even Zawahiri himself had asked them to cool it. So, certainly this isn't just bloodlust, although perhaps that's part of it. I mean, is there deeper thinking behind the use and the display of this sort of extreme violence?

MS. STERN: Yeah, well, you know, I was not able to talk to any ISIS members about how they're thinking about their messaging, but I will hazard a guess. Clearly, they think it works and it would seem that part of what they're aiming to do is terrify the enemies into submission and that that may be one of the reasons they were so successful so quickly, but it also does seem to be a marketing strategy. They seem to want to erode empathy, they want to create a new human being. They're starting with very young kids. They are having these kids practice beheading on blonde dolls.

They have a whole mechanism for -- it seems to me -- eroding empathy so that a person is capable of killing at close range, something that is actually very hard for human beings to do. And it would seem not only that they're trying to recruit people who are already attracted to violence, but create human beings capable of carrying out horrific violence, and then, of course, there's the apocalyptic narrative that our host here is one of the world's leading experts on, and has a book coming out very soon on exactly this topic but I'd studied apocalyptic groups in different -- Christian apocalyptic groups mostly, and note being Will McCants, I must say that that was one of the biggest surprises to me, the extent to which they seem to actually buy in to an apocalyptic narrative.

Now, of course, again, not having asked them, that could be partly marketing, but it seems as if they really believe that they are moving in the direction of carrying out the minor signs and the major signs of the coming end times and that there is this brutality that's part of the lead up to the final battle and was also covered in a book

you translated, "The Management of Savagery", which, you know, everybody who's studied terrorism has benefitted from your efforts in that regard. So, thank you for that.

MR. McCANTS: I'm all discombobulated. But the apocalyptic stuff, you know, I think when people see it they think, oh, this must be particular to one religion, but can you talk a little bit about apocalypticism and terrorism, because it's not always the case but it's often the case that the two go hand-in-hand, and why is it that belief about the end times can lead to extreme violence?

MS. STERN: Well, when -- (inaudible) is another example, not a Christian group but a group that took an apocalyptic narrative -- whose whole religious approach was based on many different religions, and the identity Christians also believe that they can actually influence the timing of the return of the messiah. So, for them, carrying out extreme acts of violence is a way to change the time of the end of the world. For these groups, it doesn't seem that they believe they will change the time, but to quote Will McCants, it pretty much amounts to the same thing because they see themselves as fulfilling the prophesy of these minor signs and major signs, which do involve sectarian battles, but also a fight against Rome, which many people interpret as a fight with the West.

They really want to goad us into coming to meet them on their terms, on their territory, and fight it out, including Indabac, the town in Syria where some believe -- and they seem to believe -- the final battle will take place.

MR. McCANTS: J.M., I remember like a week after Graham Woods *Atlantic* article came out about what does ISIS want, I remember you wrote an article saying that this wasn't so much about Islam as it was about cultic behavior and apocalypticism. Can you talk about that a little bit more? And how is it easy to tease apart those things from religion?

MR. BERGER: Yeah, well, it's not easy. In fact, it's one of the big challenges that we have as a field. I think there's, you know, Graham Woods' article really touched off such a firestorm of reaction because everybody has their own take on it.

My take comes from looking at a variety of extremist groups and it seems to me, when you're trying to frame ISIS and you want to understand what it is in a useful way so that you can deal with it, it has more commonalities with other extremist groups than it does with other Muslim groups. You know, I don't think anybody's disputing that they are very intensely invested in religion and there is a dispute about the legitimacy of their religious beliefs and the texts that they site, but that's kind of an internal argument in Islam, really, I think. Legitimacy is something that changes over time and space and depending on who's talking and what context you're talking about and it's a very subjective thing.

What I see in ISIS is a group dynamic and characteristics that seem to carry across from one identity group to another, so a group like Christian Identity where white nationalism, white race is their focus, and you see similar kinds of narratives and propaganda, you see apocalyptic beliefs that go across these groups. Where groups don't have apocalyptic beliefs, they often have dystopian myths, dystopian novels that sketch out the disastrous future that's coming ahead, because, you know, apocalypse and dystopia, if you want people to sign up for an extreme movement, they need an extreme impetus to do that and the end of the world is just one of those possible impetus.

So, I think, you know, to me, it's like -- to talk about it in terms of being Islamic, and I think, you know, a lot of the controversy around Woods' piece was really about the tone in which it laid that out -- the case for ISIS' religious credentials, you know, Islam is a 1.6 billion frame and if you -- you know, if you think that the widest possible

frame is the most useful way to approach this, then what we should really do is widen it to religion because then you have a 6 billion frame, and, you know, you can make the case that peoples' willingness to believe what other people tell them is fundamentally at the heart of what extremist groups --

MR. McCANTS: But then it becomes so analytically vague because most adherents of those religions don't want to have anything to do with this stuff, so how far does it get you?

MR. BERGER: Yeah, well, that's exactly it. I mean, the case is for the narrower definition. I mean, that's the case that I would make --

MS. STERN: I always ask religious terrorists for a reading list when I talk to them and they can always point to passages in religious texts. They are genuine passages from religious texts. It's a matter of taking careful hermeneutics, it's a matter of selective reading such that a group of "scholars" are able to justify sexual enslavement of nine-year-old girls. I mean, obviously, that is not the way Islam is practiced by the vast majority of Muslims.

King Abdullah of Jordan calls them "outlaws". I think that's a good way -- yes, they base their crimes, the pedophilia on very selective reading requiring arguments among scholars, yes, it's based on Islamic texts, but that doesn't mean it's Islam.

MR. BERGER: I think you can make -- draw parallel to other political activities. I mean, if you're arguing for more or less taxes, you want to have a Milton Friedman or a Keynes to justify what you do, but the people who are voting and who are getting out the vote and running for office don't necessarily read that stuff or understand it, they just want lower taxes.

So, you know, there's a simplification -- there's a legitimacy kind of debate that happens at the very high levels of these organizations and then for many of

the people who join them, it's about other things.

MR. McCANTS: Yeah, and I want to get back in a second to the recruits that join up and why they're joining, but J.M., I want to go back to something you said earlier about the message and one particular part of the Islamic State message that is different, I think, in some way than what we've seen from al-Qaeda and you both really draw it out in your book and I wanted to get you to talk about it here, and that is, the rejection of the notion that the people fighting in the global jihad are weak.

There's a rejection of the idea that they are too weak to throw off the yoke of the West, that they are too weak to establish an Islamic State -- this is a big change. If you're familiar at all with al-Qaeda propaganda or other jihadist propaganda or even the usual terrorist propaganda, regardless of confessional identity, it's almost predicated on weakness. I mean, terrorism is a tool of the weak, so it is striking to me that strength is a key part of the Islamic State message. I'd like you both to elaborate on it.

MR. BERGER: Yeah, I mean, for me that was really something that, you know, the process of writing the book helped crystallize that in my mind. I had kind of seen it happening, you watch it happen sort of incrementally over time. You know, the monkey bars video that everybody knows of al-Qaeda is based on a -- it's about a 90-minute propaganda piece that al-Qaeda did prior to 9/11 and it is -- basically the first two-thirds of that video are about the weakness of Muslims, the identity group that they want to encircle themselves with, and it's about, here's all the terrible things that are happening, here are all the places that terrible things are happening, here are the people responsible for the terrible things that happen, and then the last 20 minutes is -- and here's the solution -- and literally -- like, there's a banner that comes up that says "the solution" and then it's a lot of al-Qaeda training videos, it's the monkey bars, it's the

running, it's summersaults, and so even the strong part of that video is hypothetical. It's not action sequences, it's here's the guys we're training who are someday going to take part in this war that we're planning.

And you could see that ISIS did -- ISIS and al-Qaeda in Iraq certainly did take that narrative and in the early phases of the group reconstituting as ISIS is the Islamic State first in Iraq and then as ISIS, you could see that a lot of their propaganda was still following that model, it was about the Shia mostly, the horrible things that Shia were doing to people in Iraq.

And there's a sort of a turning point in this second installment of the clanging of the swords series of videos, that was their most popular series of videos, and you can sort of see it happen. The first video was like standard jihadist propaganda, it's got talking heads, it's got the list of grievances, and then the second one just drops that and it just says, okay, here's us going to war, and it shows them carrying out a campaign -- insurgent style campaign, and then as the group grew, these videos became more and more about the campaigns and the grievances are almost an afterthought. And if you look at the speeches that Baghdadi and Adnani, his deputy, give, the word victory is just repeated like a mantra throughout them.

So, I mean, I think that that -- we're seeing a really kind of fundamental change in the approach to extremism that, you know, probably has its origins in the change in communications technologies --

MR. McCANTS: Also the change of their political fortunes, right? I mean, they're able to give some credence to the idea that they can establish a state?

MS. STERN: Well, they're not just a terrorist group, they're also an insurgent army and they -- Baghdadi went into the jails and broke out terrorists, former Ba'athists, he populated his leadership council with very skilled former military personnel,

intelligence personnel, and they have U.S. weapons that they were able to acquire, they're fabulously wealthy, hopefully getting less so, but they are not the typical terrorist group, the weapon of the weak. They are really also a hybrid, as you say, organization between a terrorist group and an insurgent army.

MR. BERGER: And I think you can see also, you know, that hybrid nature in the state-like -- the proto state qualities that it has make it, in some ways, more similar to a nationalist movement, to a Nazi party or to Golden Dawn, where -- which are also very much about projecting strength, if you look at their propaganda, it's about the marching and the armies and, you know, so I think that they're shifting away from that original -- the original conception of jihadist extremism and moving more into the role of a political actor.

MS. STERN: And we see this in their recruitment videos where they say, if you don't want to fight in the army, we also need doctors, we also need people to run our social media campaign, and if you're a woman, we need wives. They really are trying to set up a state that does provide wives to the fighters, among other things.

MR. McCANTS: So, let's get to the appeal of the message and why people go -- I mean, I'm sure you've had this experience, I have it quite often, someone will ask, you know, why are people going, particularly -- and usually what they mean is, why are Europeans going to join this thing, and it's said almost in disbelief. These folks have everything you could want and a good life in Europe or the United States, why would you go and join this organization? Is there anything you can say about the motives? And I sort of mumble an answer and say, oh, we can't know much, but it's all the idiosyncrasies and individual hopes and desires. Is there anything big picture you can say about why people go to join? Or is the mumbley mealy mouth answer kind of the right one in this case?

MR. BERGER: I know the right one.

MS. STERN: I guess what we do know from why Europeans join jihadi groups in general, nobody's done the large end study that would enable us to answer your question directly about ISIS, but among Europeans who joined jihadi groups or are closely associated with jihadi groups according to a leaked MI5 study, they are very unhappy with their governments' foreign policy, they tend to be alienated, and they tend to be more ignorant about Islam, and indeed there's a surprising number of converts.

So, in some ways, a knowledge about Islam is seen by many people fighting terrorism in Europe as an antidote to recruitment because people are then less susceptible. I mean, if I had to say one word, why do people join, I think it would be, they want to reinvent themselves and they may be attracted to having a very clear identity, which certainly comes with joining a group like ISIS. They may be attracted, it may be a humanitarian impulse, they may actually believe that they are going to be able to help aggrieved Sunni Muslims, and we know there are cases of people who joined thinking that they are going to be helping people and then leave when they realize how brutal the organization is. Some of them don't manage to leave, they get killed when they try to leave, but there are cases like that.

Today, it is hard to imagine anyone joining and not from the West and not knowing about the brutality, but it seems that it still happens.

MR. BERGER: Yeah, I think, you know, for groups -- extremist groups generally, and ISIS, certainly, in particular, are so rigid, it's hard to think of them as something that's also malleable, you know, they're overtly rigid, but one reason we don't see a profile -- there's no profile, like, we've spent years and years trying to figure out who becomes a terrorist and who doesn't and nobody's been able to crack the code. I think part of that is that the groups can function as a sort of screen on which you project

your own anxieties and problems and find a solution in the group, and so what you'll see are clusters -- there are clusters of causality, so there will be a group, for instance, in the UK, a lot of what we're talking about here is coming out of one social network, a fairly tight knit social network. You'll see a cluster in Durna, in Libya where there's a town where the whole town is just like completely engaged with this.

MR. McCANTS: It has been for a long time.

MR. BERGER: Yes, and so -- but what we don't see is like something that you can go longitudinally across the whole spectrum of the group's activities and say, why does a teenage girl in Colorado try and go to Syria to join this group and can that be the same thing as why a Tunisian guy is going, and it's frustrating and particularly frustrating for reporters, who I talk to and try and get me to say something.

MR. McCANTS: How does the recruitment work? I mean, is this all happening overtly on social media? Is it happening covertly on social media? Is it mainly face-to-face contact? Is it former fighters that are going or groups of friends? How is it working?

MR. BERGER: Yes.

MR. McCANTS: Which is driving most of it?

MR. BERGER: It's different. I mean, I think that if you're looking at sheer numbers, the local -- you know, the Tunisian and Saudi networks and Libyan networks, which are more on the ground, old school kind of recruitment are probably driving the biggest numbers, but the social media piece of it lets them extend their geographic reach, and because ISIS is large, I mean, because of the number of people they have supporting them now, they can go in all different directions, they don't have to confine themselves to just a couple kinds of approaches like al-Qaeda did.

Al-Qaeda did that partly out of resources and partly because it was a

covert organization, it was designed to be --

MR. McCANTS: It had to be selective.

MR. BERGER: -- to be spies, yeah. So, now with ISIS, any time they seen an opening to a cluster of people, even if it's just a dozen people or two or one, they have enough people and they have enough resources and practice to just go reach out and grab them.

MS. STERN: But also I think it's worth pointing out that even on their social media, there's selective recruitment, so we have women who are recruiting young women, those three young women a month ago who joined from the United Kingdom, one of them had been in touch with Um Laith, who's probably the most famous female recruiter and she seems to be good at somehow getting to people like her. She was originally secular and became an extremist over time starting from being secular.

MR. McCANTS: The Islamic State is facing some military setbacks. I don't expect you to have an answer to the question but I'm going to ask it anyway. You know, given that so much of its legitimacy and attractiveness is tied to the fact that it controls territory and is projecting strength, does its loosening hold, particularly in Iraq, does that damage recruitment or has it not mattered? Because from where I sit, they seem to be able to replenish themselves pretty well and they took huge losses in Kobani, in northern Syria, but I don't get the sense that they've really had a major lessening of their numbers.

Is that right or would you expect to see recruitment dip over time as they lose hold?

MR. BERGER: I think that they would need to suffer a big, visible loss before it would start to have a negative impact on recruitment. The losses they've had so far are significant to regional strategists, to some extent, but they don't dent the image. I

think if they lost Mosul, that would be a different story, but we've also seen that they have a strategy for dealing with losses, which is that at any time they take a hit in one place, they crop up in another place and their international expansion is part of that.

MS. STERN: So, in Nigeria and Libya and Tunisia.

MR. McCANTS: I want to ask about the Western reaction to the Islamic State. I think for those of us who study terrorism and have studied it historically across different groups, different time and place, it's almost -- I mean, you study the groups but it's almost a study of how countries overreact to terrorist attacks.

And so, I think for us, you know, there tends to be a little bit of, ah, I wish people would stop overreacting and why is the government overreacting, this kind of thing, but what I thought was really helpful in your book and a good reminder to me was how terrorism works and how it gets in the psyche and prompts these kinds of attacks -- these kinds of freak outs, even if our rational mind is saying, wait, wait, slow down, it's not as bad as you think. Could you talk through some of the effects of these kind of attacks? And particularly the way that the Islamic State has been able to get into the American psyche even though there have been no ISIS attacks that I know of on our own soil, it's all been over there.

MS. STERN: I think risk analysts have been very good at explaining why we might react to terrorism the way we do, and it is something that's very visual and visceral and if you watch even the beginning of any -- of the beheading videos, it makes you want to go and stop these people right now. I mean, they are very good at goading us into an overreaction or any reaction, and when we look at how we went to war in Iraq, with General Powell warning, if we're going in, we need to be prepared to be there for 30 years, and if we look at how we left, not only removing our troops, but also our diplomats -- I mean, I think Ambassador Crocker really puts it exactly right when he says, after all

these years being in the Middle East I know two things, be careful what you get into, and be careful what you get out of and how you get out.

I think we didn't do a very good job either the way we went in, imagining we'd be met by flowers, not recognizing that it would massively increase the threat of terrorism, but also leaving Iraq in the hands of a sectarian government that ISIS just took advantage of and so that -- I think, again, if we're not prepared to ensure that there are governments in Syria and Iraq that will be for all the people, not just the majority, I can't see how we're going to be effective given that we -- it's very useful for them to mobilize this notion of the West versus the Islamic world. That doesn't mean that anybody should be there, I think we need Special Forces. I'd like to see especially Jordanian Special Forces, I think air strikes are very important, I think helping the Kurds is very important. I hope you have -- maybe we can have an argument. Or an addition or an argument.

MR. BERGER: Well, what I was going to say, actually, is just suggests something that you brought to the book that I thought was a really valuable addition was talking about dreaded risk and how we evaluate fear of terrorism.

MS. STERN: Well, there are certain risks that we -- that are particularly dreaded. Psychometric models show that when something is unpredictable, when it affects people at random, that we have a tendency also to fall prey to something called action bias, where we want to take action and especially politicians want to take action when there's a visible problem and they want to take visible action when, in fact, I think this problem really requires less visible action.

MR. McCANTS: J.M., it seems to me that, you know, the American public has, at least according to poll data -- the American public has been responding as Jessica says, you know, there's this rising anxiety about the Islamic State even though our intelligence community tells us that the threat of an attack by ISIS on the homeland is

pretty remote. But, J.M., it also seems that, you know, from the Obama Administration, that there is an admirable amount of restraint. I mean, you would expect that they would be more sensitive to the polls, but there has been a reluctance for a number of years after leaving Iraq to really get involved again.

Do you think the Administration is striking just about the right military balance? Should it be doing more or less?

MR. BERGER: Well, I mean, I think that from my perspective, there's kind of some built in contradictions in how we're dealing with this problem. I mean, you know, I wouldn't say that the chances of an ISIS terrorist attack in the United States are remote.

MS. STEIN: Neither would I.

MR. BERGER: I would say that their ability to significantly damage the government or shut down this country is low, that, you know, it's commensurate with what we've seen from al-Qaeda over the years. I mean, al-Qaeda took their best shot at us on 9/11 and it did not close the country down, we did not have riots, we did not have -- it had effects, but it was not a KO punch, and, you know, it's unlikely that we're going to see that.

MR. McCANTS: DO you see it as somebody coming across from abroad or --

MR. BERGER: It's possible. They have people in this country who are doing recruiting and doing fundraising, so if they can move those people here, they can probably move terrorist operatives here, but, you know, there's a lot of obstacles to that playing out in a terrorist attack.

The question is whether -- what is our response going to be to terrorist attacks, because the changes in technology, the changes in communication really mean

that we're probably going to see more of this kind of activity from all quarters over the course of the next 20, 30, 50 years and, you know, that's where we sort of got into trouble with this, and I think the Administration's policy has been very reactive. They're not totally reactive to the polls, they're not like jumping on the bandwagon of fear mongering and let's keep our country safe, my god, but what they do is -- and this may be, you know, sort of you can see a difference between Republican and Democratic approaches to this and Republican approaches kind of get out ahead and say, we're going to crush these guys right away, the Democratic approach is to wait until the headlines hit a certain pitch and then do something all of the sudden.

And so, that's what happened in Bosnia, I think, and that's what happened in Syria is we sort of, you know, we stood out, we're not going to get into this, we're not going to get into this, and then all of the sudden it's like, oh, my god, everything is terrible. All right, we're going to do limited airstrikes. We were going to do like one day of airstrikes and then all of the sudden that's like several days of airstrikes and then all of the sudden it's like, and some special forces guys on the ground, but, you know, that's it, we're done.

And so, I mean, when we do these kind of limited actions -- we took a stand pretty much that, you know, we would have rather -- I mean, by the time we wrote the book, it was too late, we were already in, but we would rather that we had not gone into the ISIS arena in the first place.

If we were going to go --

MR. McCANTS: Even with just air power?

MR. BERGER: Yeah, I mean, I think that their -- I think it's in their interest to draw us into this conflict and, honestly, you know, the regional powers have some obligation to clean up their own messes.

MS. STERN: Okay, now, I would disagree with you there. We could have had a long fight about this.

MR. BERGER: But we did -- we did, for a variety of reasons between us, we, in sum, agreed that we didn't think that an intervention on our part was a good idea.

MS. STERN: Not ground forces, yeah. We certainly agree on that.

MR. BERGER: But once we got in, now the question is, what are we going to do? So, we're in now. So, we're getting all the down side of being in in that they're executing Americans on television and they're trying to move external operations - external terrorism to a much higher tempo, so we're getting all the down side of an intervention and we're not getting any of the upside, so I guess my question is, can we be more effective? Is there a reason that there's a road from one town to another in ISIS territory that's passable? Is there a reason that they still have Internet access? Can't we use our air power in a very targeted way to take away their most important tools and get finished with this as much as we can be ever finished with it in a more prompt way? Because the longer we kind of drag this out, for ISIS, stalemate is a win. They don't need to be expanding across Iraq and Syria, they can open up new branches around the world. Basically as long as they're holding roughly the same territory, from their perspective, they're winning.

MS. STERN: I think the one thing we definitely agree on, and we very rarely had arguments, which is amazing, writing a book that fast together and the arguments we did have were, in retrospect, incredibly silly, but when it comes to the policy responses, I think we both really agree that all the options are bad and it's a matter of choosing among really, really bad options and that will change over time.

I think we also -- you know, we can't predict how things will change as ISIS evolves and as the region evolves in response to it, but we do -- we have to select

among unattractive options.

MR. McCANTS: Fair enough. So, I'm going to ask one more question and then I'll throw it open to the audience, and my question is, you know, you have documented I think really well in your book the evolution of ISIS and the ways that it has been innovative. And it has done this on the world stage in front of a great deal of media. We know from the history of terrorist organizations that they learn from one another regardless of their religious identity or otherwise. What are other terrorist organizations going to learn from ISIS and what are you really worried about other terrorist organizations learning from ISIS?

MR. BERGER: Extreme violence is a powerful marketing tool.

MR. McCANTS: What do you mean? Because generally terrorists are already using the violence. So, what do you mean by extreme violence?

MR. BERGER: Theatrical -- extreme theatrical violence. I mean, what we've seen --

MR. McCANTS: You mean like the beheadings and --

MR. BERGER: Right, I mean, there have been many more violent groups than ISIS in the past who have killed many more people in an arguably crueler and more industrial scales, but we have not seen examples in modern history of groups that flout it, that celebrate the actual violence, and that is a way to generate media coverage in this environment, that's a powerful tool, and I think, you know, for me, and then I'll hand it off to you, but I think also the victory narrative, I think, is something that can be accomplished by some other extremist groups.

MR. McCANTS: And what practical impact does that have, I mean, if they talk about victory but they get their butt kicked, then who cares?

MR. BERGER: Well, you have to set your own bar for victory, right? So,

you define victory in a very narrow way and then you accomplish what you set off to do and then you say, hey, we're victorious.

The thing is is that because of mass communication and because of the Internet, social networks, people of very diverse interests can find each other in ways that they never could before, so you can cluster a group of 500 radical druids in one place if you want to, and, you know, you can -- and then once they're together, the question is, you know, like, okay, so if we're 500 guys, what can we do -- what can we do that's going to be a victory for us? And we define the victory and then we go out and do something very dramatic and spectacle oriented and then suddenly there are 5,000 radical druids.

MS. STERN: Yeah, you know, Margaret Thatcher famously said that media attention is the oxygen of terrorism and this group has figured out how to draw the world's attention, and in order to get a lot of attention, terrorists often up the ante, and this group has clearly upped the ante and so unfortunately I have to agree, that's one of the big changes.

MR. McCANTS: The theatrical violence? Okay. I'm going to go around the room and take questions. Gentleman in the blue first.

MR. HURWITZ: Thank you. I'm Elliot Hurwitz, I'm a retired economist. The Western democracies have had a lot of experience in -- against terrorist organizations, in Algeria, in Indochina, David Galula, David Petraeus wrote the Army Marine Corps -- a book about the subject. What have we learned from this? What have we learned from all this experience that we can apply to ISIS?

MR. McCANTS: All right. Let me take a few more and then we'll go to the panel here.

SPEAKER: I'm Jim (inaudible). I'm a long time journalist here in town. There's (inaudible) organizations that were founded, one in '07 and then one last year, of

scholars, Islamic scholars, who are trying to answer the interpretation that people like ISIS are putting on -- actually are accurate quotes from the Quran, but putting a medieval twist on them, and I'm wondering if these people are having any affect? I mean, there's a whole bunch of these people out there. Are they getting anywhere?

MR. MITCHELL: Thank very much. I'm Garret Mitchell and I write the Mitchell Report and in combing through the biographies, the thing that interested me most in both biographies of our speakers is Dr. Stern's involvement in a psychoanalytic program at MIT. And as I listen to the conversation, I was fascinated by the notion that Dr. Stern introduces about reinvention, if she had to pick a word it would be reinvention, and I've been also fascinated by the learning just in this session this afternoon on the recruitment and the recruitment strategies and the linkage between recruitment strategies and reinvention and vice versa.

And I was thinking about it in totally different kinds of organizations ranging from the Peace Corps to Teach For America to the Marine Corps. And so I thought, given your psychoanalytic training, I want to ask the question this way: in this realm, are we dealing more with Freudian, Jungian perspectives? And is this also sort of the territory of Joseph Campbell?

MR. McCANTS: Okay, so we'll answer those and we'll go back for the questions. So, just to remind you, the first one has to do with all the American experience in fighting against insurgencies and terrorist organizations, what have we learned --

SPEAKER: And the British.

MR. McCANTS: And the Brits, right.

SPEAKER: (Inaudible) and the French.

MR. McCANTS: Yep. Right, so there are a lot of people with a lot of

experience fighting against terrorist organizations. How can we use that experience to fight against ISIS? So, that's the first question.

MS. STERN: Can we go one by one?

MR. McCANTS: Okay. Anyone want to take that one?

MS. STERN: I thought you might? I guess, I think General Petraeus himself would say that the surge was temporarily effective but that because of what happened politically after we left, because we didn't ensure that the sectarian tendencies of Malaki were held in check, because we didn't do that, the surge only had a temporary effect.

I mean, I think I'm -- I think he has said that. And I think he's pretty good authority on that issue.

MR. McCANTS: J.M., do you want to speak to that one?

MR. BERGER: I think in a lot of the examples that we're talking about of past engagements with terrorist groups in this way, we're talking about full on wars that lasted for years and I think that Americans are extremely wary of this and it would -- we're not close to a point where anybody is willing to make that investment in fighting a group on those terms. In addition to which, I mean, on top of which, the fact is that a lot of what we've been doing in the Middle East has not been very --ultimately been very productive for us, it has not really made things better there.

There is a -- there are regional politics that need to work themselves out. If we wanted to really go in with the full force of American military might and occupy the Middle East for 50 years, maybe we could make things better, but maybe we wouldn't, and I don't think anybody wants to do that, so we're looking for new approaches rather than to try and recreate the historical approach, I think, which is a product of a different time and a different political environment.

MR. McCANTS: Right. And then there was the question about Muslim scholars who have spoken out against the Islamic State and the questioner rightly noted that there have been a number of these scholars who have written statements, they don't often get a lot of press attention, but nevertheless, they are doing their level best to try and discredit the Islamic State and to put it on the margins or outside of the Muslim community and for either one of you, I mean, do you think they've had any impact?

I mean, my sense is no, but I ask it to you and if you think they have not had an impact, why is that? Why haven't they gotten any traction? And who's the audience for the things that they're writing?

MS. STEIN: It's boring. I mean, the people who are adjoining from the region, it's about protecting -- it's protection, it's not really about ISIS' ideology for the people they've managed to seduce internally in Iraq and Syria and for the kids in the West who are joining, it's so boring, you know, it's a serious exegesis about Islam.

What I think we need is a hip-hop artist who joined and returned. I mean, I think that we need to fight ISIS' narrative, in a way, on its terms addressing the audience that's being recruited, to addressing scholars or old people.

MR. McCANTS: J.M.?

MR. BERGER: So, I think, yeah. I mean, I think defending the status quo is always less interesting than defying the status quo. That said, for 1,599,900,000ish Muslims in the world, that moderate message is working. You know, I think what we're seeing now is it's much easier for people to flock to an extreme kind of fringe group than it ever has been before and ISIS particularly has made that an attractive proposition with its carefully staged images of what a beautiful, prosperous caliphate they have and why don't you come and join us?

And so I mean I think ultimately, you know, making the case for

moderation is really kind of the easy part because that is the status quo, that is the majority view, and where we need to look at is really where can we undermine the message that they're putting out, because it has some obvious flaws in terms of its truthfulness, in terms of its -- the agendas behind it.

We haven't seen -- you know, this isn't like a -- this isn't a viral sensation, it's not like what color is the dress where a million people are like, I'm going for ISIS. You know, it's more of a slough and it will have ups and downs and hopefully we'll start seeing some downs soon.

MR. McCANTS: Okay, and then, Jessica --

MS. STERN: Yes, I remember the third question. The first thing I need to clarify is that MIT, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, does not have a psychoanalytic program yet. It's Massachusetts Institute of Psychoanalysis, not MIT. And it is true, though I don't often admit it, that I am studying psychoanalysis. As for what this means for ISIS, I think this is a hero narrative, it's a narrative about being able to change the world, to create what they believe is a utopia, to serve ones' people and in some cases in a humanitarian sense, but it's also a narrative about extreme violence.

So, you know, I don't know whether I can say clearly both are Jungian and Freudian, but there is an aspect of heroism that I think is appealing.

MR. McCANTS: All right, we'll take a few more questions. Gentleman in the red tie, I think it is.

SPEAKER: Hi, thanks for coming to speak to us.

MR. McCANTS: There were two there with red ties. Okay, we're going to do both the red tied gentlemen.

SPEAKER: Thanks for speaking with us today. I'm hoping you can speak in greater detail about the ISIS Twitter campaign, specifically the trade craft and if

there are any protocols, and what the best response is to the Twitter campaign.

SPEAKER: My company is (inaudible) called Managing Uncertainty. To what extent do the three of you know or think that ISIS is using its vast amounts of cash to hire malevolent technology geniuses from around the world to help them create and participate in massive acts of global terrorism?

MR. McCANTS: Thank you. And there's one more gentleman with a red tie just two rows up. That's where my eye is going, I'm sorry.

SPEAKER: Hi. Mike Craft counterterrorism writer and former State Department Counterterrorism Office.

I wonder what you all think of the theory some writers have been floating that perhaps ISIS might burn itself out? I think the *Washington Post* has an article about some of the backlash including among the tribal people. And also I want to deal with Jessica's comments about dealing with hip-hop and that. What do you think of the Countering Violent Extremist program both the U.S. and the British programs?

MR. McCANTS: Okay. All right. We'll go with those. So the first question is about the ISIS Twitter campaign. All right, J.M., let her rip.

MR. BERGER: Another ISIS Twitter question. So, we did a -- two weeks ago, you could build a time machine and go back two weeks or you could just watch it on the Internet, but we did a really exhaustive conversation about this in this very room. You know, the short answer is, they have good trade craft, they understand the mechanics of how social networks function, they have dedicated people, that's the most important asset they have is a core group of people who are very active and show up every day to push their message out.

You know --

MR. McCANTS: Are they getting a lot of recruits from it or are they just

getting a lot of media attention?

MR. BERGER: They're getting a lot of Western recruits plus a lot of media attention.

MR. McCANTS: Okay.

MR. BERGER: You know, the underground networks often work with social networks also, so we'll see a lot of cases where there are recruiters in a community who area also following people in the community on social media and using both channels to kind of get their message out.

MR. McCANTS: And do you get the sense that they're hiring hackers or anything -- criminal networks to do their bidding? Oh yeah?

MR. BERGER: Yeah. Hackers, yes.

MR. McCANTS: Outside of the ISIS family?

MR. BERGER: Well, you mean like nonbeliever?

MR. McCANTS: Yeah.

MR. BERGER: So, what they're doing is they are recruiting hackers. They're looking for hackers who are also believers, although the hackers tend to be a little less homogeneous than their typical ISIS recruit. So, you get a lot of people who are sort of hangers on and kind of interested and may not be -- may not have the same intensity or ideological commitment that a regular ISIS recruit would, but there are definitely -- some of them definitely do, and they are very aggressively recruiting hackers there and some of them they're moving to Syria, others they have working abroad remotely.

MR. McCANTS: To do what, though? I mean, is it -- does it pose that much of a threat?

MR. BERGER: Not so far. I mean, it kind of depends on what your

cyber terrorism evaluation threat is. So, I went to a conference some weeks ago on cyber terrorism and I heard a lot of scenarios ranging from, yeah, whatever, it's a nuisance to, oh, my god, they're going to shut down the power plant and kill thousands of people.

So, I think the latter scenario is less likely and it requires a much higher level of expertise. They're not comparable to Russian and Chinese hacker networks. They are comparable to Syrian and Iranian hacker networks. They have those kinds of capabilities, so they're doing a lot -- right now they're doing a lot of spoofing and pranks and doxing, kind of exposing peoples' private information. They have -- I would guess from the investment that I see happening on this that they're developing higher level capabilities to do something more intense, whether that would ultimately involve loss of life, whether they could stage a WikiLeaks kind of exposure of content or something like that, I don't think they're probably able to do that, but I wouldn't totally rule it out.

MR. McCANTS: And the question about whether the Islamic State is going to burn itself out, we just -- just let them rot and don't really mess with it, they have so many ideological contradictions, they're so extreme that they're just going to sort of -- they're going to hoist themselves on their own petard and why should really we step in and intervene? What do you think?

MS. STERN: I think they will, you know, at the same time they just -- Boko Haram has just pledged -- so, it's a matter of can we bear it. You know, I think eventually they will burn themselves out, but it could be a long time and they'll hurt a lot of people in the interim.

MR. BERGER: Yeah, I mean, can we bear it is the question. There's a huge human cost in almost any scenario for getting rid of ISIS and one scenario is, yes, let them rot, that Clint Watts articulated very nicely in a piece not too long ago.

You know, if you look at the stories, if you look at Liz (inaudible)'s coverage of what's happening inside ISIS' territories in Mosul and Raka, you know, you see descriptions of conditions that are ripe for things like bubonic plague and that, you know, would probably put a -- some kind of disaster or humanitarian disaster on that scale would significantly undermine the group's claim to divine mandate, but at a terrible, terrible cost and, you know, in almost every scenario that -- for dealing with these guys is going to come at a terrible cost and the question is ultimately who is going to bear the cost and, you know, how are we going to do it? Are we going to do it -- it feels better to act -- to be the ones who act out at them, but it's not necessarily the smartest move.

MR. McCANTS: And what about the government's efforts to counter violent extremism? I mean, is any of that working or is this another instance where it's just better to use traditional tools of counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and not really worry so much about stopping recruits?

MS. STERN: I think the Think Again Turn Away effort on the part of the State Department is getting better. But a big part of the problem is that it is the government, the U.S. government is just not a very credible source on this issue and I think it is very important that private companies and individuals be creative about how to respond in a way that appeals to the potential recruits. It can't be State Department -- you know, 65-year-old State Department employees, it cannot be Madison Avenue, I think it ought to be young people and I think we need to mobilize the kind of people that ISIS recruits find interesting and appealing to react.

MR. BERGER: I think, you know, the existing -- the problem with CV right now is that it's a cash cow and so everybody who has any kind of project that they want to do in government, if they call it CV, they'll get money for it, and there's no real coherent approach to the problem. I think we have not found the (inaudible), I think stuff

like what you're talking about, really, we need to go out there and experiment and try some things because right now all we've really tried is parental warning, you know? Sit down, young man, and stop watching those videos.

MS. STERN: It doesn't work.

MR. McCANTS: All right, we'll take some more questions. Yeah, gentleman right here and then, let's see, right here in the glasses.

SPEAKER: Thank you very much. I look forward to reading the book. One question that I have -- (inaudible) with SAIS Johns Hopkins, by the way -- did you work on this question of the relation between ISIS, that is the foreign fighters, if you will, card carrying members of ISIS, and the incubating environments, the local population when they enter in small number you see all of those thousands of people cheering them and then some would probably carry their flags and join temporarily until another force comes in and then they will also cheer the new force, whether it is the (inaudible) or the Iraqi forces or Syrian -- whatever?

So, the relation here between these two and the role of the locals in giving or granting strength to ISIS that might not be ISIS strength, per se, but it is the strength of the joiners, which is a fake strength because once they are stranded, then these people will leave them and then they will be exposed, as we've seen in many Iraqi cities that were taken fairly easily, also this comparison between their offensive strength, which is not much to speak of, versus their defensive strength, which is mainly stronger because they manage to put a lot of hurdles before the advancing forces such as making certain IEDs, rigging houses and streets and side roads and et cetera, whatever is landmarks there, which made them really hard to go and to defeat.

These are the questions, basically, that might be interpreted or misinterpreted as ISIS force. Thank you very much again.

SPEAKER: Hi. My name is (inaudible) and I'm curious to know, what would you think if in case of non-Western intervention in the region, what would be the role of the North African and the Middle East countries? What alliance would you see would like defeat this Islamic State? Of maybe you think that the countries around are weak to fight the Islamic State, because so far we only saw that Jordan, the King Abdullah of Jordan, he spoke and after what happened to the (inaudible), like some of the Muslim countries, they just canceled their airstrike and it seems that they are just giving up on this matter.

MR. McCANTS: We'll take one more question. Anybody in the way, way back? The gentleman right there.

MR. SHANE: I'm Scott Shane from *The New York Times*. Question about the fact is that the U.S. strategy against counterterrorism for quite a few years now has been killing leaders, when Zarqawi was killed, that was portrayed as a major blow and a great victory and maybe for a while it seemed to be. Now people are talking about killing el-Baghdadi. I just wonder if you could talk about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of decapitation, of trying to kill leaders?

MR. McCANTS: Thank you very much. So, the first question is about local support, how strong is it, how weak, a lot of the folks that join up, I mean, are they really motivated by religion or is it more local concerns? If the Islamic State starts losing its hold, are they going to fade away? I mean, how committed are its members? And also, to the extent that you know the basis of the tribal support, because, you know, I think the tribes in Iraq turned, you know, pretty quickly with U.S. support. But absent that and the anger at the central governments they seem to be -- at least some of them seem to be tolerating the presence of ISIS.

MS. STERN: I think that the implication of your question is clear that it

is, in many cases, people who feel the need for protection and that the commitment is not at all strong, as you say, and I think part of the problem with attacking -- for example, we know that some people who work for the bank in Mosul are -- they're still getting their salaries, but parts are taken as taxes by ISIS. We worry about the people who are forced to live inside the Islamic State.

So, they're not people who necessarily feel remotely committed to the Islamic State and yet there they are. So, I think you're correct and also it makes the countering ISIS more difficult.

MR. McCANTS: And then the second question has to do with the alliance against ISIS, the particular question was about North African countries, but you could broaden it out to talk about the alliance in general. How coherent is it? Who's pulling their weight? Who isn't? I don't know if it's -- you know, it's another part of the story that's tough to keep tabs on because it's -- what's going on is not always in public. But if you have anything to say about it.

MS. STERN: I know the Emirates, for example, after the Jordanian pilot was burned, they felt that their pilots would be unsafe and they were -- eventually came back into the coalition when they were reassured that there was a way or there might be a way, anyway, to rescue pilots who were shot down.

A Sunni-Muslim coalition would be the best way to fight this problem and, again, I think King Abdullah is a leader in this regard. I think he's been a real hero. The problem is pushing this forward, as you point out.

MR. BERGER: I mean, speaking for myself personally, I'm pretty pessimistic about prospects for the region for the next 10 or 20 years. You know, a lot of people that I've spoken with, and I think I've ultimately probably shared this view, is -- you know, I mean, I've heard people talking about -- ultimately, we're looking at probably a

wider regional war because one reason that the regional partners are reluctant to get involved is because there are so many conflicts -- simmering conflicts between different parties, especially Sunni-Shia in the region, rivalries between countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, and ultimately, you know, ISIS has found a way to push almost everybody's buttons. Its objective is to drag people into the conflict and it seems to be succeeding at that.

If they don't collapse under their own steam, you know, due to a health crisis or just a political -- internal political failure in a fairly short amount of time, it's hard to see how the region doesn't become embroiled.

MR. McCANTS: The last question is about decapitation strikes and specifically about Baghdadi, but also we could ask it more generally because in some measure, the death of bin Laden has had an effect on his successors, Zawahiri, his relationship with ISIS, you could look at the effect of Zarqawi and what it had on the organization. I would add one little bit before you answer and that is, the current guy who's running the organization is extremely effective at doing so. Don't know if he's charismatic, he doesn't appear in public much, but he has religious credentials, which his predecessors never had. He has an actual doctorate in theology. He has been able to rebuild that organization from the ground up. It was on its last legs in 2009-2010 when he took over.

Decapitation or killing him looks like an attractive option. What could go wrong, though? What happens when an effective leader of an organization like that, who is not a moderate, right, it's not as if you're making space for the extremist -- why not take him out?

MR. BERGER: You know, the decapitation strategy has been pretty mixed over the course of the global war on terrorism. I mean, in the old days, you fought

a war; you killed as many soldiers as you could until the other side had to surrender. With a terrorist organization, it's a different kind of dynamic because they're so small to begin with and often a charismatic leader can be very important.

But at the same time, we've taken out bin Laden, we've taken out Zawahiri, it hasn't slowed --

MS. STERN: Zaraqawi.

MR. BERGER: I'm sorry, Zaraqawi -- I was actually thinking Awlaki, but, you know, that hasn't slowed radicalization very much. The jihadist movement is still -- really is thriving in the face of this. So, I think there's a legitimate question -- I mean, Baghdadi does seem to be uniquely capable, bin Laden was a figurehead, Awlaki was a figurehead. Baghdadi seems to have real capabilities to run the organization that might be irreplaceable or might not.

MS. STERN: And also, we know that bin Laden seemed to be quite charismatic and, as you say, we don't know about Baghdadi. But one of the things that General Stone has said, the person who ran Camp Buka, where Baghdadi was incarcerated, the U.S. detention facility in Iraq, he said that they were organizing while they were in Camp Buka and the other detention facilities, that they have this leadership council that is so effective and the thing that impresses him the most is that he has -- Baghdadi has someone in charge of detention operations, which for General Stone is so telling about his management skills, but he's created this infrastructure that it would seem would survive. So --

MR. McCANTS: Were he removed it would --

MS. STERN: Were Baghdadi himself removed. Yeah.

MR. BERGER: I think the big question about decapitation now is not ISIS, but al-Qaeda. So, if we hit Zawahiri tomorrow and killed him, all of the al-Qaeda

affiliates would be free to pledge to ISIS if they wanted to.

MR. McCANTS: Because their oath is tied directly to the person of
Zawahiri, not the organization?

MR. BERGER: Right. And each of the leadership -- the oaths are from
leader to leader, so taking out the head of an affiliate would have the same effect. If we
took out Nasir al-Wuhayshi in AQAP, the new leader of AQAP could throw in with ISIS if
he wanted to. There's not a guaranty that they would want to, but clearly we're seeing
that a lot of these groups are splitting over the ISIS question. And if we took out Zawahiri
and they all went into play at once, we would see a lot of movement toward ISIS that
would not necessarily be in our best interest.

MR. McCANTS: All right. Everyone please join me in thanking Jessica
and J.M. for a great discussion.

(Applause)

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