

**BICOM Interview transcript****19 February 2016**

*On Sunday, 07 February 2016, BICOM CEO James Sorene was in conversation with Professor Asher Susser. Asher is the Stanley and Ilene Gold Senior Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Tel Aviv University. His most recent book is Israel, Jordan and Palestine: The Two-State Imperative. They discussed a range of issues relating to the Middle East today, the emergence of ISIS, the new and bolder Iran, what a future Syria may look like and the necessity to take action on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.*

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***James Sorene: Islamic State; ISIS; a non-state actor is taking and holding territory over a period of time and causing the disintegration of two established states in the Middle East, Syria and Iraq. How did we get to this point?***

**Asher Susser:** I will try and explain the more immediate background to the emergence of an organisation like ISIS. It isn't all because of the American invasion of Iraq. It has a lot to do with the manner in which the Arab states were formed in the aftermath of the First World War. It does have something important to do with the consequences of the war in Iraq as a function of the way in which the US did not understand how the Middle East really operates. There is a term that the Americans used in the aftermath of the occupation of Iraq in 2003, and the term was "de-Ba'athification" that is, to take the Ba'ath party, the ruling party of Iraq, and to destroy it. The comparison they had in mind was the de-Nazification of Germany after the Second World War.

The problem with that comparison is that there is no comparison between Germany and Iraq. Iraq is not, and was not then, a highly industrialised modern nation like Germany was. Pre-Nazi Germany had a very robust democratic tradition which unfortunately didn't prove robust enough to stand up to the Nazis. Iraq was none of this. Germany after the Second World War wanted nothing more than to be part of the rising Western alliance. Iraq didn't want that either. But most critically, the Ba'ath party in Iraq was not the Nazi party in the sense of leading a racist ideology – the Ba'ath party was the instrument for the political control of Iraq by the country's Sunni Muslim minority. The Sunni Muslim minority ruled over the Shiite Muslim majority of Iraq for decades. De-Ba'athification meant the dethroning of the Sunnis and the empowering of the Shiite majority – Iraq became overnight the first Shiite majority Arab state.

Iraq is the neighbour of Shiite Iran. Once Iraq became a Shiite dominated state, it became the lynchpin of Iranian regional domination with the creation of what King Abdullah of Jordan called 'the Shiite crescent'; from Iran to Iraq, to the Alawites in Syria, to Hezbollah, the Shiites in Lebanon, creating this arc of Iranian influence from Iran to the Mediterranean, the likes of which had never

existed at any time in the modern era. The Sunnis in Iraq retaliated by creating Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to fight the revival of Shiite Iranian domination. When the civil war in Syria began in 2011, Al-AQI became the Islamic state in Iraq and Syria: ISIS. That's where it comes from. It is the desire of the defeated Sunnis to try and push back Iranian Shiite strategic advance.

I'm not blaming the Americans entirely, because the decline of the Sunni Arab states began long before this. ISIS is a representation of an attempt to set back or arrest this decline of the Sunni Arabs; it's not solely a result of 2003. But the Americans in Iraq did like the bull in the China shop – upset things in a radical fashion in a very rapid way and enhanced this effort by the Sunnis to retrieve some of their lost ground.

So what you find is also a variety of contradictions that the Americans are finding difficult to handle. They're against ISIS, but Iran is also against ISIS because ISIS is against Iran. So the Americans, by fighting ISIS are fighting with Iran and you will see in many operations against ISIS, it's actually the US, Iran and Shiite militias in Iraq are all collaborating. So the Americans are against ISIS, they're also against Iran, but in waging their campaign against ISIS they're essentially supporting Iran. By bombing ISIS in Syria, they are supporting Assad, who Obama said must step down. So the Americans have to ask themselves what comes first; values or interests? And this inconsistency in between what choice to make – do we settle for our values or do we follow our interests – creates this inconsistency in American policy which is very disturbing to America's allies in the region. It could be Saudi Arabia or Jordan or Israel.

***JS: A lot of people have found it quite striking when we saw the Iranian president going on a shopping spree in Rome and Paris buying up jets and other things; we had the Iranian Foreign Minister here speaking in Parliament and speaking at a very well respected think tank. Something has changed where you have the Iranian Foreign Minister addressing peers and MPs in the Houses of Parliament, and they're saying that they want to grow the relationship with Britain, but they will continue to support what they call non-state actors in the region. So how has the nuclear deal and what's going on in Syria changed things? People talk about a Middle East that has shifted in Iran's favour, and now it can succeed in its push for hegemony in the region, and that the only person standing in the way is Saudi Arabia and they're not up to the job. What are your thoughts on that?***

AS: The agreement with Iran has various sides to it. One side is the enhancement of Iran's capacity to pursue its regional ambition because it has improving relations with the West, including the United States. Looking at Arab weakness, it seems as if the Americans have come to the conclusion that, considering this weakness, perhaps Iran is a player and a partner in organising the Middle East rather than the problem: that maybe Iran is part of the solution rather than the problem – as the Israelis and the Saudis would see it. There is a certain gap here between the present US administration and some of its allies in the Middle East. The windfall of sanctions relief – if this is \$100 billion or \$150 billion, however much it may be – makes the Iranians very, very attractive buyers of all the goodies that Western industrialised nations can sell them, and that the Iranians are desperate to buy after so many years of inability to buy such weaponry. That does make Iran's pursuit of regional hegemony more of a possibility.

But the agreement had its good sides also. There is a certain discrepancy between the way Netanyahu presented the Iranian agreement and the way the Israeli military talks about it. There is a

10 to 15 year hiatus, at least according to the agreement, in the development of Iran's nuclear weaponry capability. No military campaign by Israel, or anybody else for that matter, could have secured a 10 to 15 year postponement of the programme. There is a more complex way of looking at this agreement – it doesn't only have a downside. In theory, if one wants to be really very optimistic about it – I myself wouldn't go that far, but there are those who do think this way – that if relations with Iran and the United States continue to improve, eventually maybe relations between Israel and Iran would shift.

In the meantime, some things are changing in a way that is a cause for Israeli concern, and this is the civil war in Syria. Iran has huge interests in Syria. The Syrian Civil War is the arena of the Sunni-Shiite strategic struggle. Whoever wins in Syria will win a major battle in the historic struggle between Sunnis and Shiites. The Saudis and the Iranians are pitted against each other in the civil war in Syria. And in Israel for quite some time there was a question: who do we want to win in Syria? Do we want Assad to win, or do we want the rebels to win? For a long time in Israel people were saying, 'it's six of one and half a dozen of the other, a plague on both of their houses'. But now I think the penny has dropped so to speak and people in Israel would prefer to see Assad lose. There was a time when people were saying: 'Assad is the devil we know. For all his faults, he has kept the peace with Israel since May 1974.' Quite honestly, that's how Israel tends to judge its neighbours. Do they keep the quiet, or don't they? Whether they're democratic or not we do not feel is our business and we don't involve ourselves in that question. Do they keep the peace with Israel, or don't they? And we said 'Assad may not be a democrat, but 40 years or more of peace with Israel he has kept. Therefore Assad for us is the devil we know, and not a bad one.' But I think our minds on that have changed. However, it has become increasingly clear in the last few years that Iran sees Syria as a lynchpin of its hegemonic designs. There is no Shiite crescent without Syria. There is no connection between Iran and Hezbollah without Syria. An Iranian, a while back, I saw quoted as saying 'Syria, for us, is our Stalingrad', just to suggest the importance they attach to the struggle over Syria. If Iran loses in Syria it is a huge setback for Iran strategically and for Hezbollah in particular. If the Iranians have their way in Syria, the situation will emerge where Hezbollah, after the war in Syria, if victorious, they are victorious – Hezbollah is fighting for Assad in Syria, paying a heavy price, losing a lot of men – but if Hezbollah returns after victory to Lebanon with more battle-hardened soldiers, with more military experience and a victory in Syria in their belt, we may face a Hezbollah-Iranian front which will include Lebanon and the Golan front with Syria. That we don't want. That, for us, is dangerous.

***JS: Do you think that anyone is actually going to win in Syria? It's been written that nobody can afford to lose, but no-one has got the strength to win.***

AS: It may be that no-one has the strength to win, but what has happened in the last few months is a change. Assad seemed to be losing and the Russians, Iranians and Hezbollah interfered on his behalf, and they've changed the run of battle. They are presently winning Aleppo. If they win Aleppo, which seems likely, then Assad will have control of the four main cities of Syria – Aleppo, Homs, Hama and Damascus – and Western Syria, the Alawite territory of his minority community. Assad will have control over the great majority of the people of Syria, while ISIS will have the desert. Most people in the room have never heard of Deir ez-Zor or Raqqa before this civil war – it's the periphery.

I don't think the old Syria is going to be reconstructed; nobody can put the scrambled eggs back together again, but Assad can secure Western Syria for himself with Iranian and Russian cooperation

– an end result which could be problematic for Israel if Iran and Hezbollah come out of it the way I mentioned.

But there is one other factor to bear in mind here: Russia. The old Soviet Union was very hostile to Israel; Russia is not. There has been a very mixed relationship between Israel and Russia over the last 20 years or so. It's not just because of the end of the Soviet Union; there are a million Russians in Israel. It's meaningful that a lot of people in Israel have a sympathetic relationship with Russia; cultural, linguistic, even political to a certain degree. There is, as a result, an attitude towards Israel in Russia that is a little bit more sympathetic than it used to be. We have common cause in the eastern Mediterranean. We have just signed an agreement with Greece and Cyprus. Greece and Cyprus are allies of the Russians. If you want to talk about gas in the eastern Mediterranean and any competition that has to do between Turkey and Israel, the Greeks and the Cypriots are on our side and the Greeks and the Cypriots are on the Russian side.

There is a new kind of reality in which Russia doesn't necessarily mean hostility. The Russians are operating in Syria; we have some talk with them not to engage in activities in Syria that we would find difficult to swallow, caution not to meet in the air. A Russian aircraft crossed into Israeli airspace a while ago; we didn't do what the Turks did and shoot it down. We just asked them kindly to leave and they left – they don't want a scrap with us and nor do we want one with them. If at the end of the day the Russians say to Iran and to Hezbollah 'we have common cause in Syria but we do not want to be part, and do not want see you be part of, a hostile attitude towards Israel' (and the Russians have a restraining influence on Iran and Hezbollah) that would be very positive. I don't know that that is on the cards, but I wouldn't exclude that as a possibility.

We have common enemies – Islamic radicalism. I would say one of the major reasons the Russians are in Syria in the first place has to do with their hostility, or fear of, Islamic radicalisation in Syria pushing towards the Caucuses, Chechnya, and Russian domestic security issues. It's something to watch as an instance of where there may be some sort of aligning and not necessarily all darkness in our relationship with Syria and Russia.

***JS: I wanted to ask you a question about Syria: if you had to predict what will happen with Syria – say there are peace talks and they actually invite all the different opposition groups to join them – how do you see Syria being carved up? Or is it just going to be a perpetual conflict? Could we have an Alawite coastal strip and then going towards Damascus, Hezbollah goes back to Lebanon, and then you have IS out in the desert like you talked about and a Kurdish autonomous area? What do you think is going to happen?***

AS: I would be extremely surprised if the Syrian problem is solved by negotiations in Geneva. I would be stunned by that. In fact as the negotiations go on, the Syrians are doing what they're doing with the Russians in Aleppo. They're actually changing the face of the battle as the negotiations continue, putting the rebels in a more or less impossible position. I cannot see how the negotiations will create a peaceful resolution. However, the war will eventually create some kind of draw, some kind of point where the parties find the continuation of fighting too costly; rather rest with what you've got than continue to fight.

We may well be approaching that point. What if Assad has the coastal area and has control of the cities? And the area along the Golan is held by rebels who are not ISIS, or by forces that are not

engaged in any hostility towards Israel? And Israel, and whoever controls southern Syria, and Jordan prevent the Iranians and Hezbollah from establishing a front along the Golan? Then you have a de facto carving up of Syria into Assad's region, the cities and the Alawite area; the Kurdish area along the border with Turkey; ISIS has the desert and the Eastern part; and the southern part is controlled by forces that are not hostile either to Jordan or to Israel. We can live with that and I can imagine that others would too.

ISIS threatens the integrity of the old colonial state order in two ways. It provokes these sectarian identities which lead to the breakup of states. But ISIS also represents the Caliphate, uniting different parts of the Sunni world. The border between Iraq and Syria doesn't exist anymore and they're breaking up Syria and Iraq but also uniting different parts. On the one hand it's super-national, and on the other hand it's sub-national.

In both ways they're breaking up the old state order. I don't see the old state order being recreated, but something which is a combination of the Ottoman Empire – recognising sectarian identities – and the new nation states; where the Fertile Crescent, the area from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean, will look more like Lebanon. If you look at what has happened over the last few years, Lebanon, which was supposed to have disintegrated a long time ago, didn't, while Syria and Iraq that were supposedly stable states have disintegrated.

So why didn't Lebanon fall apart as it was supposed to? The reason is that Lebanon was never created as an Arab state. Lebanon from the very beginning was created as a confederation of minorities, French style. The state had a very weak central government from the very beginning, and political power was divided between the sectarian communities on the basis of their relative sizes; what they called Confessionalism, in Arabic. This is what they should do in Iraq. This is what they should do in Syria. It's not pluralism, Western style, based on individuals and politics, but pluralism based on groups. The people of the Middle East traditionally are not societies of individuals but societies of groups. People belong to groups, and their membership in their group is of greater importance than their individuality. For example, it's very well known, and many people in the West find this quite abhorrent, but it's a custom nevertheless what are called honour killings, where men in families can kill their sisters if they are seen to behave in a manner which is offensive to the family. The family values are superior to her individual rights.

People in the region, and this is how Ottoman politics was organised, all belong according to sects, tribes, families and extended families. The idea that people's collective identity was defined by the language they spoke or the territory they inhabited is Western and foreign. People in the Middle East for centuries upon centuries have defined themselves by their religious belief. You're either a Muslim or something else, and therefore Middle Eastern people have tended to be far more loyal to their sectarian, traditional identities; and as the state has weakened, so these sectarian identities have been reinforced.

Lebanon was ahead of the game, and this has to do with the different ways in which the French and the British understood the Middle East. The British regarded the Middle East as the Arab world and were great believers in Arab nationalism. The French never were, and therefore they established Lebanon as this mosaic of minorities. Whereas, the British established Iraq as an Arab state where the Shiites, the majority in Iraq, never regarded themselves as Arab nationalists. The Shiites always suspected that Arab nationalism was a Sunni game used to suppress the Shiites – which it was. The

British saw the Arab nationalists as their potential allies, so the British went along with Arab nationalism, which essentially in the long run failed and what has re-emerged is these sectarian identities which I would argue are much more historically real than Arab nationalism ever was.

***JS: The last few years have definitely exposed the myth that people used to say, 'it's all about the Arab-Israeli conflict'. But we still have a problem. The states established by the UN in 1947 – a Jewish state, an Arab state – never came into being in that way. You said a wonderful line recently, that 'the Palestinian state has been established but they've already split up into two separate entities: Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank.' What do you think is the path that we should be pursuing with the Palestinians?***

AS: It is as clear as daylight now – although some people still haven't caught on – that the Palestinian issue is not the pivot of everything in the Middle East. The problems of the Middle East, ISIS and Syria and everything we've spoken about, have absolutely nothing to do with the Palestinian issue. However, the Palestinian issue has a lot to do with Israel and Israel has a lot to do with the Palestinian issue, whether we like it or not.

It doesn't matter what else happens in the Middle East, and I don't think we should take on any particular Palestinian policy because the world thinks that this is going to straighten out the Middle East, or because we think we'll fix the Middle East by doing so. But we have to think about what is good for Israel, and here we have to think about basics.

The most basic question which I think we don't ask ourselves frequently enough is why are we there in the first place? What are we trying to do there, why are we there? Jews live pretty well in many places, why do we need Israel? The *raison d'être* of Israel is as the nation state of the Jewish people, and I would add to that, the democratic nation state of the Jewish people. We cannot remain the democratic nation state of the Jewish people unless we do something on Palestine.

We cannot maintain the status quo, which means hanging onto the West Bank, sliding down the slippery slope towards what will eventually become a one state reality. In a one state reality the Jews, will be the losers, not the winners. Are the Palestinians ready to make peace with us? I don't think so, and to be quite honest I don't think that if we withdraw from the West Bank peace will follow. But that doesn't allow us to do nothing at all. We have to look at the region around us: it is not only fraught with danger, there are also opportunities.

The deal with Iran that gives us this 10 or 15 years break is an opportunity for Israel and the United States to come to an agreement, to an understanding, on how to relate to Iran if they cheat, which they might very well do. To come to an understanding with the United States on what do we do about regional Iranian hegemonic design. Not only to fight – we've given up the fight at long last – but Israel should never have engaged in this fight with the United States over the agreement with Iran in the way we did it. And to use the 10 or 15 years to prepare for two possibilities: one where there may be an opening to Iran, and the other is to make the military preparations to deal with the Iranian problem if and when it turns out to be the pessimistic forecast.

The breakup of the Arab states gives Israel possibilities of regional connections and alliances the likes of which we never had before. We are not alone any more. We are not alone versus all the Arabs. The Sunnis and us are on the same side versus Iran and the Shiites. There are non-Arab players in the

region with whom Israel can cooperate; Greece and Cyprus are good examples. Maybe one day things with the Turks will work out again; I'm not very optimistic about that. There are minorities in the region who would like to reach out to us and we should reach out to them: the Maronites in Lebanon, the Druze in Lebanon and Syria, the Kurds in Syria and Iraq. We have common cause with them on many issues and we should reach out to them – maybe not publically, but we should make it a policy.

On the Palestinian question, considering the weakness of the neighbourhood, we have the capacity to organise our neighbourhood more or less as we see fit. We have not fought a war with any Arab state for 43 years. Israel has peace with Egypt and with Jordan. Syria had a very big army which we were terribly concerned about; it's gone.

There is no Syrian army any more. This is an opportunity and I think that we are overstating the possible threats that can emerge from the West Bank. Not that it's peace in our time, and if we were to withdraw from parts of the West Bank Hamas could take over, – it could be problematic like Gaza. But I would say we should look at Gaza and look at two models: the Gaza model and the model of the West Bank and Jerusalem. Which is better for Israel? We withdrew from Gaza and we are managing our problem with Gaza from without, not through occupation. Through deterrence against a very hostile force which rules Gaza, we, Israel, have come round to the position that we support the Hamas government in Gaza. We want them there. We think that if Hamas is replaced only worse will come. So we now have an interest in the preservation of Hamas in Gaza.

The West Bank and Jerusalem is what the one state reality of the future is going to look like – the picture we've had for the last four months. It will cross increasingly into Israel, where the Arabs in Israel will eventually join in this game, as one did just a few weeks ago in Tel-Aviv. We must think of a way for effectively disengaging from Palestine with or without peace. We have to think of taking gradual actions. Not anything really dramatic, but gradually over the next seven to 10 years to create the basis for an eventual two state reality, rather than doing what we are doing, which is gradually shutting the door to a two state solution; and that one day in five or seven or 10 years time when we want one, there won't be one; and in the area between the river and the sea we will become the minority. I'd rather be a minority in Golders Green, if I have to choose.

By the way, I'll tell you a real story about Golders Green and we'll end on that. In 1947 the Irgun hanged two sergeants from the British army in an orange grove just outside Netanya in revenge for the hanging of an Irgun person by the British, and the Irgun said, 'if you hang him, we'll hang your people', which we did. There was graffiti on the Golders Green tube station on the following day: 'you give us back Golders Green and you can have Palestine'. But I would rather have a democratic Jewish state in part of Palestine, and I will say one more thing on that. Israel's legitimacy is intimately linked to the idea of partition. We were born out of partition; it is out of partition that the international community recognised Israel –we are losing with the International community now because we are deemed to be those who are abandoning partition. This labelling by the European Union of goods from the West Bank is not about Israel; they are not condemning Israel. They are condemning the occupation. They're very clear in making this distinction, which the BDS movement does not make. The BDS movement is out for Israel, but we must not play into the hands of the BDS movement by giving them unnecessary ammunition by abandoning the principle of partition because our legitimacy.