

The Role of Political Islam in Post-Assad Syria

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Welcome/Moderator:

Nathan J. Brown,

American Scholar of Middle Eastern Law and Politics,
George Washington University.

Speakers:

Sheikh Muhammad al-Yacoubi,
Syrian Islamic Scholar and Murshid

Bassma Kodmani,
Syrian Academic and Former Spokesperson,
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Aron Lund,

Swedish Writer and Journalist Specializing in Middle Eastern Affairs

Transcript by Federal News Service

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[00:00:00]

(Note: Sheikh Muhammad al-Yacoubi participates via teleconference.)

NATHAN J. BROWN: We're going to get started right away. Our third panelist will be joining us.

Let me begin first by welcoming you back and by saying that our original conception for this panel was to have representatives of various movements be able to speak, debate among themselves. The panel has to be reconfigured because of some last-minute cancellations, but we've got one that I think will be extremely rich and extremely strong.

We've got, because we in – as a last-minute gift, we have somebody from – not from Syria but I think from a country that must sit next to Syria in the General Assembly – that is Sweden – or very near it – Aron Lund, who's probably well-known by name to many people in this room because of his strong research on Syrian jihadist movements.

We've got Bassma Kodmani, who's again probably known to many people in this room even before today and then was here participating earlier.

And our third participant is right now not with us but is about to join us, Sheikh Mahmoud Abel Hoda al-Husseini (ph), who is a Syrian religious leader who's currently in Morocco. And so he will be joining us from – by teleconference.

So what I thought we could do would be to – let me just ask you – I mean, the topic of this session will have to do with Islam and Islamist politics in the uprising but also in post-uprising Syria.

I'm going to try and focus first on the long term and then come back to focus on some short-term and immediate issues.

Good afternoon. Can you hear us?

SHEIKH MUHAMMAD AL-YACOUBI: Yes, I can hear you. Good afternoon to all of you.

MR. BROWN: OK. Thank you very much. This is Sheikh Mahmoud Abel Hoda al-Husseini (ph). My name is Nathan Brown, and I just introduced our other panelists, who are Aron Lund, from Sweden, and Bassma Kodmani.

[00:01:59]

The – as I was saying, what we will be focusing on is Islamists and Islamist politics in post-uprising Syria but also in the uprising itself. And what I thought I would do would be to first begin by posing a question to our three panelists about, in a sense, a possibility of politics in post-uprising Syria.

We have seen uprisings in other countries in the Arab world in which Islamists have played a very prominent role in post-uprising politics. In those countries, in places like Egypt and Tunisia

most particularly, there was a fairly clear set of actors and a very clear agenda of those actors. Anybody who's watching Egyptian politics today or Tunisian politics today could have identified even a year ago the sorts of issues that would have arisen, the kinds of constitutional language and structures that people would be pushing for. There are certainly some surprises. But you're dealing with known actors and known agendas.

So my opening question would be for the panelists just to – if they could give us some idea of what they would think to be – imagine that there were an immediate transition to a post-Baathist Syria immediately, what would be the most difficult issue for – what would be the most difficult issues for the – or the most contentious issues for Syrians to grapple with in this period?

[00:03:32]

Before I pose the question to the participants, I have an apology to issue to our guest who's sitting in Morocco. I misidentified his name. He is Sheikh Muhammad al-Yacoubi. So I'm off to a very bad start and therefore promptly turn the microphone over to other people.

So why don't I first perhaps call on Aron Lund, because he's sitting right next to me, who's a specialist in jihadist groups, if he can give us some idea of what issues he thinks will be arising.

ARON LUND: Well, I mean – (can you hear me?) – (inaudible) – it's difficult to say anything about what issues will arise until we know what kind of – what kind of transition it will be. If there's a transition right now, Syria will be – it's currently in a state of civil war, and the major issues will of course be related to disarming armed groups and to sharing power among them. And I think the immediate – I mean, of course we're looking at things as minority rights, of course, and the rights of Christians and Alawites and so on. But the – at this stage it's difficult to see anything beyond, you know, trying to just get some sort of stability back to the country. I have a hard time imagining beyond that.

(Technical adjustments.)

BASSMA KODMANI: I guess what we have been fighting in this uprising was first the regime and second the sectarianism that it has deliberately cultivated or incited inside Syrian society.

I would call for a more nuanced or more precise definition of what is needed for the difference in communities to preserve the social fabric and the unity, integrity and harmony and coexistence among Syrians. It's not only about rights. It is about security, in some cases. It's the well-being of certain communities. It is – so if we – if we – first of all, I think we should distinguish between these communities and not just say "minorities." There are so – the needs and the history and the relationships inside society are different in one case or another, and what is needed is different from one case and – to another.

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And what we have now in the Syrian society is fear across the board, perhaps except within the group that is fighting. The groups that are fighting are the ones who have lost the fear and are fighting it out and believe that whatever it takes, it will – the consequences for the society might be very heavy, but the priority is to get rid of the regime.

There is a daily – a sort of a diary written by a very simple woman in Syria – I think she’s in Damascus – and she every day tells the story of what is going on in her life. And she referred to – when she was asked, look, you’ve lost a son, you’ve lost a brother-in-law, your family is – you’re without home, without – et cetera, well, this person, she said, is this all worth it? And the answer is, look, it’s like having – needing chemotherapy. We have to go through this. The side effects are huge, but we have to go through it.

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But I think this kind of determination is present among a lot of people. The fear is there across the board. And when we say “the fear,” we have to say also that even among those who are fighting on the side of the regime, the fear is considerable.

So I would say we need security for all, the safety for every community to change sides, to reach out, to seek protection. All of this is legitimate.

This is a traumatized society, and everything is legitimate. Calling for outside protection has become legitimate. Calling for anti-aircraft weapons is legitimate.

[00:08:30]

One leader of a local committee on the ground was in the Friends of Syria meeting about a month ago, and his message was anti-aircraft weapons are the kind of humanitarian assistance that we need at this moment.

So everything is legitimate. And the fears of those who are even – those who are killing at the moment out of fear because if they do not obey orders, they might die – all of this excuses so many people within society. And I think that’s what we need to look at. The Kurds need something very different from what the Alawites need. The Christians don’t need the same kinds of reassurances – assurances that the Alawites might need. And we have to really go into those more detailed definition of the needs of each community and without judging whether this is legitimate or not. Fears are fears, and if we do not have the answer to those fears, from all groups – and this is where my concern is that some groups on the ground do not realize that this is what is needed and that we need to go out of our way to reassure, because we will not recover this society back from this regime, and we will not save it if we do not address all of these fears in a – in a responsible way.

So one day we have a message that says we will – this will be – this is a revolution about Muslim values and so on. No, it’s not about Muslim values. It’s about a society that is diverse, but it’s not only diverse in its composition. And as I was saying this morning, and at the risk of repeating myself, there are interests, there are social discrepancies, differences between social strata in this society, not only sectarian concerns. There is the rural and the urban. There is the business-dominant interests versus the rural and agricultural groups that have lost their livelihoods because of bad management. There’s all of these aspects suddenly become just looking at our sectarian belongings or affiliations or identities.

I think any Syrian will want to overcome and sideline his or her sectarian identity because it is the future of this country that is at risk. And the message is, if there is no guaranteed secure future for all the communities, there is no secure future for the majority either.

[00:11:42]

Thank you.

MR. BROWN: Thank you very much. I want to come back to the issue of guarantees later on in the panel discussion.

What I hear so far, I mean, in a sense are two very different answers but two answers that are in another sense almost identical: that this is a society right now that is fragmented, and fears and insecurities and very short-term and immediate concerns are driving things. The distinction was – Aron's answer was very quick, and so I'm going to come back and put you on the hook again in a minute to hear a little bit more about these jihadist groups – what their agenda is, how they're organized, who they are and so on, because they're obviously very unfamiliar to an external audience.

But before I do so, I'd like to again apologize to my misnamed colleague who's sitting in Morocco and ask Sheikh Muhammad al-Yacoubi if he could identify what he would see – let me turn to addressing you in the second person – if you could identify what you would see would be the major issues involving religion and politics that may arise in a post-uprising Syria.

SHEIKH MUHAMMAD AL-YACOUBI: (Inaudible.)

MR. BROWN: I'm sorry, we cannot hear you.

SHEIKH AL-YACOUBI: All right. Can you hear me now?

MR. BROWN: Yes. Thank you.

[00:13:00]

SHEIKH AL YACOUBI: All right. Ladies and gentlemen, good evening to all of you. Good afternoon, for Washington people. And allow me first of all to thank Carnegie Institute for giving me this opportunity and to express some ideas, to exchange some thoughts and to benefit from your research and your ideas.

I believe the most important fears – we have many fears after the collapse of the regime, and I agree with what the panelists said, that it depends on the form of change, whether it happens now or later, whether it's through military action or through a peaceful deal. But the top and, I believe, the worst fear would be anarchy, in terms of finding jobs for these fighters on both sides, with the regime and against the regime.

In some of my writings, I warned people, the rebels, I mean people in the uprising, I said revolution is not a profession; it is a need, it is a necessity now that people join the uprising. So

these people must find jobs after the uprising. Their jobs shouldn't be carrying arms and continue to fight. This is one important, I believe, problem we're going to face.

The same, and worse, probably, is with the fighters with the regime, those who are committing these crimes. Where will they find themselves? Will they adapt themselves in a new profession? The regime helped creating these squads of people who seek only to kill others, to take revenge from society.

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As for minorities and the fragmented society, I don't have such fears or big fears, because I believe in the healing power which the Syrian people have. I believe in the harmony in the social tissues between all people in Syria, including Muslims, Sunni Muslims and Alawites, and of course not to speak about the relationship between Muslims and Christians. I don't have any fear of revenge or any fear of, let's say, discrimination against minorities. There are on both sides, wise people, especially in the Alawite minority, and we listen to them and we respect the siding with the opposition now, denouncing the atrocities that the regime is committing. And these voices will be heard and will be the leading voices in the future after the collapse of the regime.

So what we need is a way to establish law. We fear lawlessness and anarchy after the regime, which would probably reflect in gangs going around robbing homes, banks. There will be less security or no security. And we need – in this regard we need the government to have really good police system, good – let's say the free Syrian army or the Syrian army. I don't like the "free" word. You know, we have one army, and it is all for Syria, it is all national, which will unite after the collapse of the regime to establish law in the country. The victims of such gangs or such anarchy will be Muslims, Christians, Sunnis, Alawites, Druze, all victims of lawlessness.

Thank you.

MR. BROWN: Thank you very much.

Let me note there's a couple statements that you made that I will want to come back to, about the idea of the revolution not being a profession, that may – I'm wondering if it will pose some problems for Syria in the future. But I will want to come back to that later.

Let me now, if I can, turn to Aron and ask him just to map out a little bit about – it's clear from what everybody has said that the current fighting right now is posing real threats, you know, to Syrian society across the board. But who are these jihadist groups that are now participating and seem to be coming so forcefully to the fore? Who are they? What do they represent? What is their agenda? What is their role? Can you just take a couple minutes now and give us some background?

[00:17:22]

MR. LUND: Sure. Well, to start with, the Syrian revolution was not primarily a sectarian conflict from the beginning, but I believe that over time, it has transformed into what is now – with the armed opposition in Syria, what is a sectarian conflict, more or less. Because if you look at the original uprising in March 2011 and the opposition which led the uprising at that time, and

opposition leaders still today, such as those two on the panel right now, we have a diverse movement with secularists and various religions and from people all over Syria.

But if you look at the armed movement inside Syria today, the armed anti-regime movement, the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian Liberation Front and other groups, these groups are almost exclusively Sunni, and exclusively Sunni Arab, to be specific. And that, to me, is a sectarian conflict.

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That does not mean that all of these groups are Islamist or that they are all driven by religion, of course. For example, you had a sectarian conflict in Lebanon for a long while where both sides represented themselves as secular movements but in reality represented Christian interests and Muslim interests and so on.

So I think the jihadi groups in Syria, they're still small. They're not dominant on the opposition side, and they're far from dominant, but they do – as Sheikh Yacoubi said, they thrive in an environment where there is no law, no rule of law, where there is sectarian conflict and chaos, and different nations, different groups (founding ?) different sides. That is what these groups had in, for example, Afghanistan, what they had in Iraq and what they are finding now in Syria.

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And there were jihadi movements in Syria before the conflict erupted, small ones, such as Fatah Islam and the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, but these are more or less irrelevant to the current conflict. What you have now instead are groups that have formed during the conflict, out of the uprising itself. And the most prominent one is – I'm sure you've heard of it – is Jabhat al-Nusra, which is a group believed to be connected to the Iraqi wing of al-Qaida. It is well known. It was formed in January of 2012, or announced its existence in 2012. And it has gained a very prominent place in the uprising through spectacular attacks by – you know, media-friendly terrorist-style attacks in urban centers, close to where the media is, attacking – for example, recently there was a big bombing in Aleppo, the Sadallah al Jabri Square, and you had an attack on the Syrian army chief of staff headquarters in Damascus, at the Umayyad Square.

And Jabhat al-Nusra has profited from the uprising, and tries to portray itself as the – since this is a sectarian conflict, there will – there will always be people on the rebel side who look for someone to defend their community – and their community is the Sunni community, so to speak – and there will always be people who seek someone who can effectively represent and who can – who tries to be the most Sunni of all the fighters, you know? So the Jabhat al-Nusra tries to – it carries out these spectacular attacks, draws attention and has a very strong sectarian agenda, Salafi jihadi message, and it tries to, so to speak, out-Sunni the rest of the opposition, to be more extreme than everyone else. And most Syrians, of course – most in the opposition are repelled by this, they're disgusted by this. But there will be a fringe in the opposition which is interested in this, which is attracted to this message. And for Jabhat al-Nusra, they're not seeking to win a popularity contest; they're seeking to gain popularity within the hardcore Salafi element within the opposition. They're doing that, right now, very effectively.

Another side of this, you have other groups, perhaps larger in numbers, such as the Ahrar al-Sham brigades, which are a collection of different brigades spread throughout Syria but most

concentrated in Idlib and Aleppo and northern – northwestern Syria – and there are other groups, for example the Liwa al-Haq, who are in Homs, and you have various local groups everywhere. And for the jihadists, just as for the rest of the uprising politics in Syria, they're in – it's local, you know? These groups are all grown out of local communities who have felt that they are under attack from the regime, and they've come together. And they are only now, in 2012, starting to ally with each other and creating national alliances.

And what we're seeing right now, for example, in Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham and these groups, and even the Free Syrian Army, they're still very unstable alliances. And so I think this, what we're looking at right now, may have changed completely in 2013.

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MR. BROWN: OK. Thank you very much. I mean, I – again, I think we're hearing a consensus in the panel about the – it's – the long-term ideological issues that I tried to place on the agenda are not what are on people's minds right now.

What I want to do is now turn back to Sheikh Yacoubi and to Bassma Kodmani and ask them a little bit about, kind of, the vision that they are talking about for the uprising itself, one which addresses these – these fears and visions, and ask – and – how a – how that kind of vision of how things should proceed can actually take place?

Sheikh Yacoubi, you said two things that I thought were very interesting. Number one, you said a revolution is not a profession – but in a sense, what we're hearing from Aron is, is that there are some groups that have now emerged and become very deeply entrenched, and flourished in the fighting. So in a sense, maybe it is not a profession, but it could be becoming one. And second, you said there are – wise people are on all sides.

How is it, then, that you – that in the midst of a(n) uprising that entails all sorts of bitter and cruel violence, you ensure that the wise people rather than the professional revolutionaries are the ones who are actually steering events?

MR. YACOUBI: Well – hello, can you hear me? (Off mic.) All right.

There is always a marginal minority which could go to an extreme. I agree with what was said: The jihadist, or the rebels who build their struggle on a theological ideology, are marginal. The uprising of the Syrian people is not a religious one, and we made sure, as religious people, from the beginning, that the uprising is against oppression, not against a sect. In all of our statements or fatwas, we didn't encourage people to rise against the Alawites or against a certain ideology or a certain, let's say, a sect. We based our uprising on oppression. This is the reason.

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And we support all. I believe the Alawites, especially the poor class in the Alawite villages, suffered a lot. They were marginalized by the Assad gang. The same, also, for the Druze, who suffered a lot, especially in the army, and were sacked off from the army. The Christians, in a – (inaudible) – suffer. Many of them fled out of the country, Scandinavia and other countries. So

there is a suffering between all of the Syrian people, shared, common. Of course, Sunnis suffered most, and we agree on this. I don't think anyone would argue against this.

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But the groups which base their jihad or their struggle on jihad, Islamic jihad, I believe will not be accepted by the local communities. I have actual examples that say from Douma, for example, there have been some people who tried to force a religious battle in Douma and try to take some actions into sectarian conflict.

But people complained. They complained to us. For example, they kidnapped – three months ago kidnapped an Alawite lieutenant general, and they wanted to kill him. And there was an opposition in the revolution council of Douma, and they sought my fatwa in that regard and said killing a captive is forbidden in Islam and in all religions. And I struggled with them through discussions to convince them, and they set him free at that time. So this is an example.

I don't think the extremist ideologies will be welcomed by the local community in Syria. Syrian people's religion, religiosity is very moderate, is very known in the Arab world. The Sufi background is – (inaudible) – people believe in Sufi orders, in the Sufi saints. And the Salafi, let's say, ideology is (salient ?), is becoming now more now and now probably popular through the (funds ?) which are – (inaudible).

I can give some examples to squads and military groups around Damascus. I have 12 military groups around Damascus with Sufi backgrounds, but they are not – they are not receiving any help. I tried to put them in contact with the Free Syrian Army, and they are in contact, but they have received no help nor arms. Their role in fighting is very marginal because the (limited ?) arms they have is mostly like individual weapons. And they haven't received, like, support from a state like Qatar or Saudi Arabia. And we all know where these funds are going and which group are being, let's say, armed. I believe the – it's few countries try to help the Syrian people. But they helped creating more fractions, and they helped instead strengthening these groups which base their struggle on theological ideologies.

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This is going to reflect very badly after the collapse of the regime on the Syrian people themselves. The Syrian people are going to suffer first, and Sunnis are going to suffer first. I mean, we heard now threatens like – threats like these groups – some of these groups are going to burn shrines like – (inaudible) – shrine, for example. I heard statement that I am probably the first one to be targeted by these Salafi jihadist groups. We heard these statements; our people in Damascus heard such statements.

Now, we should have probably – we should be the people who have the worst fears of this, but be honest, we don't have any fears, because we trust the Syrian people are moderate, and they stick to the middle way of Islam, and they don't like – they are close to be – to being secular in terms of understanding secularity of not atheism but rather separation between temporal power and religious power.

And here I should remind our audience that Syria is not a new democracy, and Bassma is here to speak about this very well. Syria is not a new democracy. We established a political democratic system after the independence from France, late '40s and '50s that was a great model, and we had Faris al-Khoury, a Christian prime minister at the time. And it was that system and that democratic – democracy which allowed Alawites and others to join the army and reach the top level in the government. But they seized power through a military coup d'état, unfortunately, not through the democratic process which allowed them to take part and participate in the political process.

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So from that angle I believe that we need a lot of struggle to re-establish balance. And although these people who would be described as extremists are marginal – 5 percent, 7 percent, 10 percent – I believe we can avoid any future conflicts, intraconflicts between Sunnis – Salafis, Sunnis, Wahhabis, Tahrir and so on. We can avoid such intraconflict by re-establishing some balance in choosing which groups we support. The Free Syrian Army complained a lot that it is not receiving the proper help they needed. Not giving the Free Syrian Army enough help contributed to the fact that – to the growth of our religious groups.

Thank you.

MR. BROWN: Thank you.

Bassma, would you like to reflect on this?

MS. KODMANI: Well, just to say, really, that I am in full agreement with Sheikh Muhammad al-Yacoubi. I think he has – in reference to what was – what Aron was saying, the financial component is key here. So the emergence of this or that group is brought by money into the country. We know that the networks that supported jihadis in Iraq and before that in Afghanistan and perhaps in Bosnia, sitting in some countries of the Gulf were activated, and people were sent to Syria. So I think, yes, this component is there. It's because of the money.

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And some of the groups of the ground know that the money comes from these sources, and so they sometimes claim to be or pretend to be Muslim or – and very attached to whatever fundamentalist discourse, and they grow beards, and they read the piece of Quran and go on YouTube and secure funding for themselves. A year later they call up and say – and I've been a party to this discussion. This was a group that received a lot of money from groups that were politically – that had the political agenda – Muslim Brothers, Salafis and so on. And then at some point, he says, I am not a Muslim Brother, and I'm not Salafi; I don't want to be any of that, and I've been receiving money from these sources, and this is why I was carrying this message, but the truth is I am breaking away now, and I'm going to establish my own militia, my own unit, and why don't you people for the national background, not – non-ideological, or non-Islamist, support us, provide us with the support so we can look elsewhere,= and look the other way, and not have to – so it is a fight about what financial means can be guaranteed.

At the moment – Sheikh Mohammad was referring to this – this is extremely important. The Free Syrian Army, the military people – and these are a minority compared to the civilians who

are carrying arms – nevertheless, they represent about 15 (percent) to 20 percent. Those who have not agreed to go by a political agenda, who say, we are military people and we will remain military, non-political, non-ideological – they have been starved. They have not received support. And the blame goes to those groups that have asked for loyalty to provide the money. Unfortunately, money never comes without a color. And this has – and this has been the situation.

Now, at the moment the interesting process is you want to unify those groups on the ground, and that's a process that is being started. I think some of the Islamic groups on the ground have realized that they overdid it, that they are causing some resentment on the ground, and they have reassessed their own strategy. They realized that maybe they should be more part of a unifying process and so contributing to that is what they should be doing. And they call in those groups from the Free Syrian Army who are non-Islamist or actually against any ideological affiliation, and they are trying to bring them in.

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So that is happening both at the level of organizing the military groups as well as at level of local councils. Sheikh Mohammad was referring also to a very strategic city, which is Douma, in the Damascus area. And it really is a microcosm of what is going on across the country. Typically, Douma is one of the places where groups are coming together to form one local council. They actually are happy to work together, and some of these Salafi groups are part of the local council. They cooperate on the ground to fight the regime's forces, of course, and they also cooperate to secure law and order at the local level and provide services and humanitarian aid to the population. The fight is about money. Those groups who are non-Salafi, non-Muslim Brothers – if they have the financial means, they come and cooperate on an equal footing. If they are starved and left without financial support, they are at the mercy of those groups that receive the money. It's – the balance of forces is set by money.

And my belief – I think what Sheikh Muhammad says is perhaps a bit strange and difficult to believe, but this is the reality of Syrian – the Syrian population. It is – we have never seen, really, extremist Islamic movements on the ground, unlike Egypt, which have – has those groups. We don't have them in Syria. So it's a completely opportunistic attitude at the moment. Money is coming from there, OK, we'll promise whatever they want so we can get it. And it's a survival strategy, of course.

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So I – if we can just always put this issue of where the support comes from, I think we change the map of Syria every time we change the sources of funding. Thank you.

MR. BROWN: All right. I'm going to post this, now, as a question to you, because you've heard both Sheikh Muhammad and Bassma both agree that – in a sense, it sounds to me like the groups that you're talking about, the groups that you're focusing on, they're strength is primarily a function of the amount of external financial support that they get. Do you think that's true?

MR. LUND: For the most extreme groups, yeah, but the Nusra and the Ahrar al-Sham brigades, for example, I don't think that's true. I think it's true that the so-to-speak Islamization of the uprising is – the money is a very important driving factor in that. The money is coming in from

Qatar, from Saudi Arabia and from various, you know, donation networks in the Gulf. And that's true – there are groups that pretend to be more Islamic than they are, and there are others who are receiving money along with – you know, they have to go along with a certain agenda, and as the war goes on they adopt this. So that's true.

But for the most extreme groups, these are ideological movements who, in – for example, in the case of Jabhat al-Nusra, are allied with al-Qaida, not with Saudi Arabia, not with Qatar. And these are groups which are ideologically driven and they – I mean, I'm sure they have access to funding to some extent, but not like the larger Free Syrian Army groups. They are supported primarily by motivated, ideological people. And that's something that helps the Islamist groups, that a lot of the Syrian uprising is – as I said before, it's local. People organize in their own village in sort of self-defense units, and they say, we're part of the Free Syrian Army, for example. And they're still in their village, they drive out the government. If the government passes by with a convoy or something, they shoot at it.

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But the Islamists, or the jihadi groups, are committed ideological fighters. They don't stay in one village, to defend that. They have nothing to defend in Syria. They go to Damascus; they go to Aleppo where the fighting is. And these are committed groups who are – they're full-time fighters. They're not, you know, farmers by day and fighters by night. And that gives them an ability to punch above their weight. And you also have, for example, their tactics – suicide bombings and various techniques brought in from Iraq on how to do roadside bombings and stuff like that.

So the jihadi groups are – they gain influence, not, I think, primarily because of the money, but because of the kind of struggle they engage in. They bomb – we've recently seen bombings in Alawite areas in Damascus. I wouldn't be surprised if it turns out it's Jabhat al-Nusra is behind that as well. And they engage in these types of attacks and they gain influence and media attention through that, not primarily by money.

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But I agree that in the case of the Free Syrian Army and the groups on the fringe of the Free Syrian Army, money is an important driving force. And you've seen, for example, how money comes in from – there was a brigade called the Saddam Hussein Brigade, which is – I mean, obviously not an Islamist name, but it's a Sunni, sectarian thing that you proclaim yourself to be the Saddam Hussein brigade. And they received money from Kuwait and they said, OK, we're changing the name. The Kuwaitis didn't like Saddam Hussein. (Laughter.) (Inaudible.)

But at the same time, it's not only money because the whole – the sectarian element of the war is a self-sustaining factor. It's a vicious circle. And for example, when you see – the Free Syrian Army recently announced something called the joint command. And they had a conference inside Syria with all of the major commanders of the military councils inside Syria. And they came together and formed a joint command. And they brought in one person to be, you know, a keynote speaker at this conference. And that was Sheik Adnan Al-Arouf, who is a Salafi sheik from Saudi Arabia. He's a Syrian, but he's living in Saudi Arabia.

And so they elected him as their, you know – he would provide the political flavor to their gathering. And that was the Free Syrian Army. That was the most secular element in the armed opposition. So that's where we are right now. And that doesn't mean the Syrian uprising is a jihadi uprising – it's not – but the longer this war progresses and the more bitter conflict becomes, the more people will start to define themselves in opposition to other religious groups, and that's a process which will be very difficult to – to reverse.

MR. BROWN: OK, let me just pose a couple more questions myself, and then we can open it up to more general questions and discussion. And I want to actually pick up from that last – sort of – that pessimistic note on which you ended, and turn to a different disagreement that I heard among the panelists. Sheikh Muhammad, when you were speaking about, sort of, the Syrian people, you essentially said: Trust in their moderation, trust in their centralism; there are wise people on all sides. And so you should essentially listen to the good voices within the population.

Last night, I heard almost exact opposite from you: You've got to listen to the fears; whether those fears are rational or not, that's where you've got to start from, taking those fears very seriously.

[00:41:24]

Let me tie this to the issue of guarantees. You have right now a conflict that, whether or not it was originally sectarian, has become so. You've got all kinds of groups, shadowy groups, uncertain groups – perhaps almost mercenary groups, as they're being described by some of the panelists, out there. What kind – in this kind of context, is it possible to – what kind of guarantees can people ask for? What kind of guarantees can various groups give that their defeat in the – of one side or the other in the uprising isn't going to be simply a recipe for a permanent depression or even a blood bath?

Why don't I start, Bassma, with you, because you were the one who wants to focus on fear? So let's start with you and then hear from the other panelists.

MS. KODMANI: Look, I think the sectarian aspects of the conflict should really be constantly brought back to where it comes from. No group is fighting another. No sectarian group is fighting another sectarian group in Syria until today. I challenge anyone to show us that there is a sectarian confrontation between one group and another. This is about the regime deploying its militias, its forces, its security groups, its – all of its strength and power against the society.

[00:42:54]

Now, whenever there is confrontation, so far, it's confrontation between regime forces and groups on the ground. So when you say – if one sectarian group takes – overpowers the other or wins against the other, this is whether the regime is able to regain control of the territory and the society or not. This is what it's about.

Now, the wounds that will be left by what the regime is doing, and has – I mean, the regime's strategy has been two things. One, use force and suppress. Second, divide the society. So these two strategies, after a year and a half – and has been certainly latent strategy in the past – it becomes an active one over a year and a half; obviously leaves those scars on society. But I think

what we are saying here is we need to deal with those wounds as a result. But again, not – this is not going to be fought between one community against another.

[00:44:11]

Now, you can – we have so far avoided any retaliation when there are massacres. There is no retaliation. There are individual events. There are, just, single events that happen here or there because it's a family, because it's one angry person, because it's – it does – but no group has decided that it was going for retaliation. And I think this has been remarkable, has been really remarkable in face of what the regime does.

What we will need, yes, is guarantees. It should come from a transitional justice framework that is clearly defined as of now. People should be told from the first day, and perhaps before the fall of the regime. You will find justice. Don't go and get it for yourself. Don't go and seek justice on your own.

[00:45:09]

The Libyan experiment is – experience is one that tells us that this was a failure, in fact, in Libya. And Libyans have been advising Syrians: Have your transitional justice plan ready before the fall of the regime, because we didn't have it and we paid the heavy price. There were massacres. There were tens of thousands of people killed because people sought justice on their own, between one city and another, between one area and another. So have it ready, because it will prevent some massacres. And it's true that in the case of Syria, if those happen, it might lead to something much more serious than in the case of Libya, where the country is not threatened for – so far – of partition. In the case of Syria, we cannot afford that. So transitional justice is going to be important. Will it be enough? Probably not.

[00:45:58]

I – and at the risk of saying that Syria will not be a sovereign country the day the regime falls, I think we have lost our sovereignty because of the regime's behavior towards its own population. We might need outside help and we might need the international community. We might need a peacekeeping force to prevent massacres, to prevent chaos, to prevent the return of the regime's forces trying to regain control, to prevent warlords, to prevent any of what is – and to prevent, of course, partition and the temptation to say, well, it's chaos. We are breaking up – we're breaking away from this chaos. Could be Kurdistan. It could be Alawites in area of the coast, and so on. To prevent all of this.

My fear is that a government, however well-organized, will always be too weak to face and to counter such threats, and that we will need this kind of outside support, maybe a U.N. peacekeeping force with broad mandate for a certain period of time that will oversee – that will be – to protect regions, sensitive regions, where communities are living close to each other and where there have been some atrocities, that they will be able to oversee a process of disarmament, a reorganization of security sector, maybe the election process.

[00:47:44]

And all of this is not going to be easy to organize for the Syrians themselves, who will have to deal with a huge humanitarian issue with huge vital needs, with huge destruction. It probably is too much for any government to handle on its own.

MR. BROWN: Let me turn next to Sheikh Muhammad. Could you address the issue of guarantees? Earlier, you suggested that they may not be necessary. Could you expand on this a little bit?

MR. YACOUBI: Yes, indeed. Let me – first of all, I agree with what Bassma said. All of it is true. I don't think that there will be any sectarian conflict – or there's no civil war – any talks or description of the Syrian uprising revolution in that direction I believe is misleading. It is the Syrian people defending themselves against the regime. And the regime's components are of various sects – and we know that Sunnis are in the army, Sunnis are in the government. We don't believe or put any sect or any religious group responsible for what's happening. This is very important to start with.

[00:48:47]

Now, as to guarantees, let me tell you that as religious leaders, we can give any guarantees needed. And I believe the people should understand. The Syrian people listen to their religious leaders, to their ulema, to the sheikhs. Syrian people are not, let's say – let's say, politically inclined as Islamists. They do not follow political Islam. They follow the religious leaders. And the religious leaders, especially in the mid-1900, especially in 1866, religious leaders and great muftis such as Abdul Qadir al-Jazairi, Prince Abdul Qader (ph), Mufti Mahmud Hamzawi (ph), for example, played very important role in the protection of the Christian minority in Damascus itself at the time. And they will be ready to play a similar role if, God forbid, anything's going to happen.

[00:49:47]

I believe that the best guarantee that anyone could get – Christian or Alawite, or from the Druze, the Druze community – is joining the uprising. Now, we all witnessed, last year, in April, when people in Homs carried the cross in their demonstration. They carried the cross in honor of the Christians. And just – I know you are aware all, but for the audience to make them aware of what's going on – we have many young Christians who are joining the uprising, sometimes praying in mosques, attending Friday sermons and joining the uprising. Several of them have been martyrs. And I should point out a letter written by a group of Christian youth to the Vatican, threatening that if the Vatican does not exert enough pressure on their clergymen, they would convert to Islam. Imagine.

So I would say here that why not some Western government exert some pressure on the Christian clergymen? I understand if the Orthodox Church, which is affiliated to Russia, if it is willing to go to the end in support of the regime, but I do not understand why the Catholic Church, for example, and its clergymen are supporting the regime, with their ties with the Vatican, for example.

So here, we need to actually have some pressure on these people, maybe give them some courage. Maybe they don't have some – enough courage. Maybe they need guarantees from Western government. Maybe they need safety in order to speak freely against the regime, because

the moment you get the Christian clergymen speaking against the regime, you'll see people in the streets, Sunni Muslims, carrying a priest on their shoulders and shouting, live Christianity and live priests. And they carry the cross and they honor Christianity.

[00:51:44]

So this is very important to notice, also, that their participation in the uprising is very detrimental (sic) to their future. Sometimes, we cannot stop the masses and we don't claim that we control the masses. We have seen it in the uprisings. The masses are not controlled by the opposition leaders outside Syria. They are leading themselves. They are making time, to make their own future. But as religious leaders, we can give any guarantees needed.

I suggested recently in a dialogue conference in Denmark, suggesting inviting some religious leaders from all groups – Christian, Alawite, Druze and some Sunni religious leaders – to have a dialogue and issue a historical statement which guarantees the future of mutual understanding and equal rights and respect between all religious groups in Syria. Thank you.

[00:52:32]

MR. BROWN: Let me then – well, I'm tempted just to press you for a little bit. I'm not going to let you get off the hook quite so easy, and let me explain why. I'm hearing actually, in a sense, a very optimistic picture from both Bassma and Sheikh Muhammad that essentially says, this is not – this is to sectarian, no; in a sense, the best kind of guarantee would be to make this regime go immediately. But I'm also hearing a little bit of a nervous undertone about – about current foreign funding as intervention, and I'm hearing a little nervous undertone about the future. If this regime does go, what will be afterwards? And Bassma even goes so far to call for international involvement in a robust peacekeeping force.

[00:53:24]

So there's clear worry about what could happen. Where do you think things stand right now? Not – you've been clear at the beginning that you didn't think it started as a sectarian conflict. Are you worried now that the sort of future that the – that those negative little tones in – or fears that were being expressed have already been realized, or do you think it is still time that this is primarily the conflict that both Sheikh Muhammad and Bassma portrayed as one of a regime against its people?

MR. LUND: I don't think these things are mutually exclusive, necessarily. You have – on the one hand, you have a conflict between the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad and people who want democratization, and on the other you have people who want economic reform and economic restructuring and so on. And the regime refuses this. That was the original demand of the demonstrators, to change these things.

But at the same time, you also have now in Syria a – what can only be described as a proxy war between different states in the region: Iran, Russia, USA, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and others. And overlying all of this – or underlying it, rather – you have the sectarian element, I think, because it's impossible to honestly view the Syrian conflict right now and say that there is no sectarian element to this.

[00:54:45]

If you look at, for example, the two most – southern-most provinces in Syria, Daraa and Suwayda, Daraa is a Sunni Arab province. Suwayda is a Druze province. If you look at Daraa, it's – I think 2,000-2,500 people have died in Daraa in the fighting and in government shelling and army attacks and so on. In Suwayda, the neighboring province, I think the casualty rate stands at 30 or something. So I mean, there's a huge discrepancy between the different religious areas in Syria.

It's very clear the minorities are not – they're not, in general, fighting the regime. There are always exceptions. There are some very, very brave, for example Alawite and Christian opposition figure and that they've been in jail before the uprising and they're still fighting the regime. And they should be commended for that. But to view the conflict now and say that this is not a sectarian conflict, I think that, then, you're misleading people about it, because at this stage, there is a sectarian conflict going on in Syria. And not in, perhaps, in all areas of Syria, but where you have religiously mixed areas.

[00:55:50]

Homs, for example, Homs is the most – the clearest example. You have the Homs plain, where you have Alawite, Christian, and Sunni villages crisscrossing the whole region there. And you have – and you have Homs itself, where you have neighborhoods with different religious affiliations. And if you look at photographs or films, newsreels from Homs today, you see that the Alawite neighborhoods look more or less like they did before the war. And if you look at the Sunni neighborhoods, Baba Amr and these places, they look like Stalingrad. There's a huge difference. And if you want to be able to tackle and solve the Syrian conflict, you need to take this reality into account, I think.

[00:56:29]

MR. BROWN: There is – yeah, I was just about to say, I would –

MR. YACOUBI: But allow me to – would you allow me to disagree with this, please? I differ – beg to differ on that, because mentioning the example of Baba Amr and the other Alawite neighborhoods in Homs bring, for example, the example of Aleppo. You have Halab al-Jadida and many other quarters in Aleppo which have not been harmed, and there was no bomb and no explosion at all. So it's not actually sectarian. It is the regime just behind the – its people.

Now, it's very natural that the areas supporting the regime that would flourish, whether they are Sunnis or Alawites or whatever they are – because they have not joined the revolution, because they have not supported the uprising, because of various reasons. I don't think there's a sectarian conflict, because sectarian conflict involves two parties.

[00:57:24]

Now, what you're looking at is, you're looking at the regime's atrocities against Sunnis and considering it a sectarian war. Now, a sectarian war involves both sides, revenge from both sides. Sunnis are not after Alawites. I think we should highlight this fact. Sunnis, in the uprising, the Free

Syrian Army, and all of these military groups, Syrians are not after the Alawites, whether in the army or outside the army. They are after the people who are oppressing, whether they are Alawites or Sunnis. Thank you.

MR. BROWN: I was going to throw it open to the audience, but in addition to your intervention, I saw Bassma's itchy finger going towards the microphone. So she has to respond to you.

MS. KODMANI: I mean, I think I – we really need an urgent redefinition of what sectarian conflict is.

You know, one region that is suffering, 2,500 dead – and Suwayda, because it's Druze, is suffering little death, does not – it's not – these have not killed those. I mean, it's not – it's not Sunnis against Druze.

[00:58:27]

So the regime – same thing in Homs. The people of Baba Amr were targeted by the regime, were fighting; this is where it was a stronghold of the revolt. And the regime had decided that it would break that uprising in Baba Amr whatever the cost was – and we know what the cost was – and deliberately demarcated those areas that it was going to target, and left the Alawites neighborhoods clear. Did that cause the people of Baba Amr to retaliate against any of the Alawite neighborhoods? The answer is no; 100 percent no.

So there's no sectarian issue there. It's a regime that is targeting certain areas where the uprising is happening.

[00:59:17]

Now, when minorities do not themselves actively fight the regime – and Sheikh Muhammad is referring to some – but we know that this is not the majority of the Christians, the majority of the – the Druze are actually split 50-50, exactly; 50-50. They don't know where to go exactly. The regime tries to arm one group, and then there's a militia that develops that is pro-revolution, the other against the revolution. They're lost. They don't know which way to go. And they obviously are uncomfortable carrying arms, because it's violence and violence for minorities is more dangerous than for majorities. I think this is – across the world would be a reality that any community would admit. So I really think we should be very careful in defining what a sectarian conflict is. Thank you.

[01:00:09]

MR. BROWN: OK. The – to be fair, I should give you a chance to respond, but instead – and I should say, as an academic, discussion that goes into – immediately goes to definitions and methodology is one that really wins my heart, but I think that we'd lose the audience. So let me, instead, turn to the audience at this point and ask you to – if you could, first, identify yourself. Second, ensure that your question is brief. And remember that all questions have question marks. And that we will – I would actually ask the panelists, also, to keep their answers as brief as possible,

as well, so we can fit in as many as possible. And if it's OK, I'll take two or three at a time. So let me start in the very, very back. (Inaudible.)

Q: Omar Asino (ph). I have a few questions, actually. First, I wanted to ask Aron specifically about the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. Which armed movements are they funding in particular? Are they funding movements? Why are they funding movements? And you know, specifically to identify those.

And then I want to ask Sheikh Muhammad two questions. He spoke about the Sufi influence within Syria. I know we saw in both Damascus and Aleppo, although the uprising did – you know, the first protest was in Damascus, but we saw, you know, the major protests in those two areas delayed a little bit from the rest of the country, from the more rural elements in more rural areas.

[01:01:38]

And the groups that are very strong Sufi orders within both cities, within Damascus and within Aleppo, you know, there has been – you know, Sheikh Muhammad has been great, but there has been a lot of Sufi leaders and orders who haven't really actively participated in the regime, nor have they really, you know, supported Assad explicitly.

And I wanted to ask you about, you know, Aleppo – with the brigade outside of Aleppo, Tawhid Brigade – the leader of Tawhid Brigade on Al Jazeera, when giving an interview, praised Jabhat al-Nusra that Aron Lund speaks about. And a lot of the Sufis within Aleppo, while not liking the regime at all, are afraid that some of these – not all the rebels, but some of these elements of rebels that are entering might later go and destroy Sufi shrines, as Sheikh Muhammad noted. You know, Libya, we see a lot of explosions of different Sufi shrines going on.

[01:02:31]

So I wanted to ask Sheikh Muhammad – is that, what are his fears of that – of different Salafi radical elements, fringe elements doing that; and then secondly, I want to ask him what his major political disagreements are, or the Sunni scholars are, with the Muslim Brotherhood in particular. So –

MR. BROWN: Very good questions. If I can ask other people to use slightly fewer words, that would be great. (Laughter.) But great questions. Marina, why don't –

Q: Thank you. Marina Ottaway. I don't – with the Carnegie Endowment. I don't want to reopen the issue of whether or not this is sectarian – you know, definitions of a sectarian conflict and so on, but it seems to me that it's quite clear at this point that on this basic uprising for – that you described this morning, Bassma, essentially this – you know, the fight for change, the fight for dignity, the fight for a more democratic system, there are other elements that have stratified. And I think there are definite elements of a sectarian conflict, if not in the reality now, certainly in the fear of what may happen in the future. I think that it's there very strongly. There is a fear – there is a conflict between secularism and the – and the sort of – and fundamentalism and Islamism, if you want, and there is a conflict between the – you know, between jihadi groups and more – and other armed groups that are not necessarily jihadis.

[00:64:03]

I think, essentially, these perceptions, we have a very poor picture, I think, on the outside of what is the balance between all these groups. For example, we know a whole lot more about the Jihadi groups that we know about other armed groups in part because of the very good studies that have taken – you know, that you have carried out and other people have.

And I – and this perception, essentially, that – you know, the overwhelming importance of the jihadists is in fact coloring then the policies, certainly, of the United States. One of the reasons why the United States is not providing arms, one of the reasons why the United States not only is not providing arms, but it's also trying to control the kind of arms that other countries might provide is really the fear that they will fall into the hands of these jihadi groups.

[01:05:00]

No shoulder-fired missiles, because the next thing, jihadists would be shooting down civilian airliners around and so on. I mean, this is the fear that – (inaudible).

So my question really is – since Nathan wants a question mark – what can you all collectively tell us to redress this perception that exists in the West at this point of the fact that the Syrian opposition is dominated by these radical groups and by sectarian groups?

MR. BROWN: OK, thank you. Let's take one last question this round, over here.

[01:05:37]

Q: Thank you. Tamara Al Rifai from Human Rights Watch. And since we're talking so much about guarantees, can I have your opinion about whether a referral of the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court, for example, could be a guarantee, even if you might be skeptical about changing things on the ground in the immediate, like now, but could it be kept in mind for the future, for the intermediary transitional period? Thank you.

MR. BROWN: OK. I'm going to do something devious here. I'm going to turn to Aron first, because he's the most concise in his answers, hoping that he will set a pattern.

MR. LUND: Thank you. OK, first, the Muslim Brotherhood. That is one of the big question marks, isn't it? The Muslim Brotherhood has – it used – is often portrayed as the strongest opposition movement in Syria and the truth of the matter is, I think, that it's the strongest opposition movement outside of Syria. Because the Muslim Brotherhood was driven into exile in the 1980 by the armed conflict then and it's been punishable by death to a member of the Muslim Brotherhood since 1980 in Syria and still is.

[01:06:42]

So the Muslim brotherhood is very strong in exile. They have a strong position in the Syrian National Council and from what I hear from Doha right now, they – they're having a stronger and

stronger position as we speak. But they do not have or they didn't have before the uprising a strong organized presence inside Syria.

They've been trying to do something about this since the uprising started by channeling funds into groups inside Syria, including the armed movement, when that started to take off, in the summer of 2011. And for example, they've set up something called the Commission to Protect Civilians, which is a group which is formally not at all affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, but in fact it is a Muslim Brotherhood front group. And it funds various groups inside Syria. They have a list of groups they are funding on their website, where you can find that they are funding groups with names such as the Hasan al-Banna Brigade. And he was the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, as you know.

[01:07:35]

And on the side of this, they also – they send money through family networks. There're a lot of people in the Muslim Brotherhood who are in exile who have families still in Syria that could be tribal in some areas and stuff like this.

And then, the Muslim Brotherhood also has a strong position within the Syrian National Council, as I said. And specifically, I think Bassma could perhaps tell us more about this, they – I think they lead both the aid – the (organ ?) to provide aid into Syria and the military bureau of the Syrian National Council.

[01:08:10]

So I don't know to what extent they're using that to favor their own groups, but perhaps – it's been alleged.

So – and how to, you know, refute the perception that the radical Islamist jihadi groups are dominating the opposition in Syria? I'm not sure that there is such a perception in the West – among some, perhaps. And of course, these radical jihadi groups, they are on the fringe of the uprising. And I think the best way to look at this and to understand the role they play is to see that since this is, I believe, a sectarian conflict to some extent and since it takes place mostly in rural Sunni areas, these are conservative areas. And most Syrians of all religions are religious. They're believers. They're practicing Muslims or Christians or Alawites, or whatever. And it follows that the uprising will also be colored by religion.

So when you look to Syrian groups who proclaim that they are fighting a jihad against the government, there're dead. There are martyrs and so on. This doesn't mean that they are jihad. So you have to distinguish within this whole spectrum from secular to Sunni religious to Islamists, to jihadi. There's a whole spectrum there. And many groups are moving along the spectrum, depending on who funds them, on what experiences they have in the revolution and so on.

[01:09:43]

So there's a lot of nuances there and it might be difficult to portray this accurately in news reporting. If you have to write an article, you – it's – these are simplified, but the uprising is extremely complex and the jihadi groups are one element of this and they're – they and the Syrian

regime share an interest in embellishing their role, in trying to portray them as more important than they are. And they are doing it pretty well on this.

MR. BROWN: Sheikh Muhammad, let's turn to you next.

MR. YACOUBI: Yes, please. I would like to answer the first question on the Sufi contribution to the uprising. I would say that most Sufi leaders and Sufi orders are against the regime and many of them joined the uprising. I should highlight the fact that 600 imams, many of them Sufis – I'm not talking here about Muslim Brotherhood or Salafis – have been – 600 imams have been arrested. Over 20 imams and Sufi leaders from the Qadiri Rifai, Naqshbandi, and Shadhili orders have been killed, martyred by the regime. And several imams and Sufi leaders are in prison now.

[01:10:53]

I've received several requests from top Sufi sheikhs in Damascus and other cities, few other cities, to help them escape outside Syria and they're already, but apart from these big figures, the second level leaders and most of the sheikhs with the age of 40 and 30 in these Sufi groups have joined the uprising. This is number one.

Number two, to speak about the Muslim Brotherhood, I believe, it takes almost another panel or a lecture on the differences between us. I would say we represent the way of the ulema which represents Islam and Sunni Islam. Muslim Brotherhood represent a political ideology within Islam, which uses Sufism or Salafism or whatever it finds suitable to reach its goal.

[01:11:48]

We represent Islam as a religion. We represent its legacy, its civilization, its harmony as religious leaders known as the ulema. We represent this way of the ulema. The ulema, in the past, played very important role and most of these ulemas have been – were Sufi leaders. I should highlight here the role of the league of the ulema in the '50s and '60s of the past century and the contribution to the democratic process in Syria. The leader was – the founder was Sheikh Abu Her al-Maidani (ph). The second leader was Sheikh al-Makki al-Kettani. They were all Sufis.

Now, there is a challenge in front of us now in Syria. I believe all Syrians – and here I stress what Bassma said – all Syrians put aside their differences – ideological, political, or religious – in order to reach one goal. And after reaching this goal, which is the collapse of the regime, some marginal percentage of the Syrians would probably turn into an intra-conflict, but the majority will continue to reach the goal of establishing Syrian again, building the country, and healing the wounds. Thank you.

[01:13:07]

MS. KODMANI: Look, I think we need to perhaps say one – an obvious thing. Syrian is largely a Muslim society. It organizes around the networks, the values, the figures, the leaders it has as part of its traditional organization of society. If there is antipathy towards a Muslim society, this is maybe the main reason, but this – if they fight with the thought that they are carrying values which are being violated or aggressed and oppressed by the regime, they don't have to apologize for being

who they are. We – I think we're facing here – whatever reference to Islam becomes suspect, becomes problematic, that is something we have to really look at – look at in the face and say, we are not going to build a Western secular society in Syria.

I have a Muslim background, educated in a Muslim family, with a family that believes and practices Islam. Outside my home, I am a – intellectually a Westernized person, and therefore my thinking can relate to what comes from the West, but that bridge, we can bridge and there're many people who can bridge the gap or misunderstanding, but we cannot deal with these misperceptions forever because this is a Muslim society that will go back to its roots to find the strength to fight such an awful and criminal regime.

[01:15:06]

We really have to – I think the more we have suspicion from outside, the more people will say we seek strength and courage in our deep values and hold on to those because they are the ones that will allow us to resist and face all the hardships of this uprising.

A difference between Islamists and secularists, this is a political battle. It is a political battle. Some of us think this is not the right time to fight it. This is not the time to argue about it. Let's leave it for afterwards. And when the regime is gone, we will fight all of this on the ground in Syria.

Some say – some are pushing their agenda now, because they think it's a good time and that they might be able to build on the strength they acquire now thanks to arms and money and developing their own constituencies on the ground.

[01:16:06]

This is, I would say, a non – not a very fair attitude and not a very legitimate attitude. Fighting the regime is what needs to happen. But this – we're not an ideal society. We're not suddenly going to behave perfectly in exile or groups agreeing, loving each other, not arguing about the strategy we need to have. Of course we argue. But – and the problem is we argue in all parts of the world under the cameras of all the media and it becomes the unprecedented divisions between the Syrians.

There's nothing that divides us so much. It's just that everybody is looking at this context. It's a very complex context, yes. But I think if one looks really at the explanations to all of this – it's just because it's complex that people – people want simple answers. There are no simple answers to the situation. And if we were to look for a solution today, what are they – what is a solution for the Syrian situation.

I don't see that a full military – driving the regime out militarily completely is the safest way of reaching the collapse of the regime.

[01:17:22]

I think that might breed more violence afterwards. But it might be a necessity and we will have to go for it. And for the moment, there's no – any – there is no indication that the regime will agree to something else.

Does it need to be first a change of balance on the ground, therefore more fighting? And to address the issue of should they be given all these dangerous weapons to fight aircrafts, and therefore, we will then find them carrying these arms and, you know, the Afghanistan syndrome and all the – we have to put up with all the suspicions that weighed in all of the conflicts of the world.

Sheikh Qaradawi says something in Qatar. We are suddenly responsible for what Sheikh Qaradawi says. We're not responsible for what everybody has done somewhere else. The truth is these people will find the arms they need. They will eventually buy them on some black market. They will manage to get them. If they don't get them from the West, they'll get them from somewhere else, maybe from a more dangerous source.

[01:18:26]

And that will make those weapons more dangerous than if we have them organized in distribution and people committing to returning them once the fight is over.

All of these choices are risky, but if those choices are not made today, they will be riskier choices and worse choices to make a month from now.

I just wanted to address maybe a question I ignored earlier, Tamara's question about – this one is about the ICC. I would say, it is very useful – I think the ICC issue has not been used properly. Again, saying, oh, but in Libya, we decided to go for the ICC and this is what brought the – never left Gaddafi a way to escape or a way out. But I think the international community has enough – has documented crimes enough to prosecute the top leadership in Syria and could say now it's – you either leave now or ICC and the prosecution will start a month from now. Use it in some strategy.

[01:19:44]

If that's a pressure – a way of pressuring the Assad family to leave, if military balance of forces on the ground is changed, maybe we will get a change of attitude by those countries that support the regime. And at that point, perhaps, we can have a negotiated settlement. Negotiation is not with the regime. Negotiation is about organizing a peaceful transition. If they willingly step down, the rest comes afterwards. But this – this is a scenario that is still the ideal scenario that we would like to see. And using the ICC in this context has not been done so far and I think could be part of a strategy that is political, legal, but also militarily, combining the three. Thank you.

MR. BROWN: Let's go to a second round. First here in the front. Again, we don't have much time left. We're supposed to wrap up by 3:30, so we can keep the questions as brief as possible.

Q: You know, we keep asking for –

[01:20:56]

MR. BROWN: I'm sorry. Could you identify yourself please?

Q: Yes. My name is Taoufik Sadat. I am with the Syrian American Council. We keep asking the oppressor – for the oppressed to actually provide some guarantees for the minorities. But again, have we thought about actually also a guarantee of the majority now? If the regime should collapse or near collapsed, I fear that there will actually have – I mean, carry on massacres in Damascus, in other cities, urban areas. Should we not have any contingent, I mean, to actually help these people?

We saw what they did in Daraa, for example. They could do that on mass kill in Mezzeh. They can do it on mass kill in Kafr Susah, as they are actually – as the regime is collapsing.

We really need to actually think about what's happening now before we think about what's happening – what might happen in the future. I do want to remind you that –

MR. BROWN: Could I ask you – I'm sorry. We're almost out of time. If I could –

[01:22:00]

Q: Should we not think about this rather than think about what the future is going to carry to us?

In 1918, when the Ottoman Empire –

MR. BROWN: I'm sorry. I'm going to ask you to finish the question, please.

Q: OK. They have –

MR. BROWN: Over here.

[01:22:18]

Q: In 1990s, President Clinton – (laughter) – President Clinton said that most thing that he regrets in his presidency is he delayed his interaction with Bosnia so long. Are we running too late here? Is it two years of violence and killing and brutality and crimes is too long or where are we now? The fear that we are here, we should try to really do about the people that are being killed now, every day. Today, there is 80 to 90 people killed and every day the same number killed. Where is our concern about – or fear about these people?

MR. BROWN: OK, thank you. I'm going to give the last question to Geneve Abdul (ph).

Q: Thank you, quick question. Geneve Abdul (ph), Stimson Center. I wanted to ask Aron, can you please give us briefly some idea as to the different strands among the Salafists in Syria and more in the context of the region? I mean, we're seeing that the Syrian conflict is being used by Salafists in many countries, particularly Lebanon, to sort of escalate the sectarian conflict, but is this the intent of the Salafists in Syria or are people just sort of speaking on their behalf? Thank you.

[01:23:33]

MR. BROWN: OK, thank you. Why don't we start first with Bassma.

MS. KODMANI: Should I speak more? I think I've said – (inaudible).

MR. BROWN: (Laughs.) OK, Sheikh Muhammad. This will be your last chance, so please use it well.

MR. YACOUBI: Well, let me thank all the panelists, Aron and Bassma, and thank you personally for giving me this opportunity, and the audience especially for the good questions.

I think I will just hold it to go back to Tamara's question.

[01:24:01]

I think she didn't – she wasn't concerned about the ICC going after the criminals in the – against the regime now. I think the question relates to after the collapse of the regime, where these people will be prosecuted, in Syria or in ICC.

I think she was pointing out to the fact that would the Syrian interim government give up sovereignty to allow the ICC to prosecute these people outside Syria, to guarantee the interim justice, I think that's the question. It's been discussed. I don't think it is up to us to answer this question.

[01:24:44]

We will do anything to establish interim justice and help establishing it, especially through our legal system in Syria, but when criminals are caught outside Syria, it is different from when they are caught inside Syria.

But we should stress and I agree with what was said that we should stress on interim justice being established and all people being equal before the law.

Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity. I hope that we can join again in another discussion after Syria is free and Damascus itself.

MR. BROWN: Thank you. Thank you very much. Last word to Aron.

MR. LUND: All right. I'd also like to thank the audience and the panel and Nathan.

[01:25:23]

About the Salafi stance of the opposition, this is a huge question. I won't be able to answer it, but yes, there of course – there're different varieties of Salafism at play in Syria and in the region. But I – and for example, I think that most of the groups that are characterized as Salafi in Syria, some of them are truly extreme Salafi jihadi like the Jabhat al-Nusra, which speak of Alawites as something – they speak of them as insects. They want to annihilate them.

Other Salafi groups – you have, for example, the Suqur al-Sham group in Idlib, which is strongly – it's Salafi. It carries out suicide bombings and so on, but at the same time, they say, we

have no – no problem with Alawites; if they want to rule themselves and we rule our area, that's fine.

So there's a whole lot of nuances there. And I think – in general, I think the Syrian groups are much more aware of the minority situation and the need for some sort of accommodation than are foreign Salafis, who basically view this only a religious war.

MR. BROWN: OK. First, a personal note from me to the audience, a note of gratitude. I've never seen a Washington audience stay so long on a Friday afternoon. It's perhaps the best way possible to thank our panelists.

[01:26:47]

Let me extend warm thanks to Sheikh Muhammad, who joined us by teleconference, Aron, who's come all the way from Sweden to join us, and Bassma, who's a very old friend of the Carnegie Endowment. Thank you for visiting us to talk about this very important topic.

I would like the audience to thank me in – to join me in thanking the panelists before turning it over to Katherine.

(Applause.)

MR. YACOUBI: Thank you very much. (Inaudible.)

[01:27:19]

KATHERINE WILKENS: OK. I just want to thank all of you for joining us. I mean, this is one in a series of events that we'll be doing here at Carnegie on this very difficult and painful issue. And I think we've covered a lot of territory today and there's a lot more to cover. But we thank everyone who made it to join us and we thank our moderators and we hope to see you again.

(Applause.)

One word of administrative – everyone has to leave their headsets.

(END)