



ISIS without the Caliphate: What Happens Now? (10/29/19)

- 00:00:26 Harmony Barker: Good evening and welcome. My name is Harmony Barker, and I am the assistant manager of public programs here at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. It's my pleasure to welcome you to tonight's program, "ISIS Without the Caliphate: What Happens Now?" As always, I'd like to... I'd like to welcome our museum members, and extend a special welcome to our... those turning in to our live web broadcast at 911memorial.org/live. We'd also like to extend a special welcome to 9/11 Memorial & Museum board member Andrew Senchak.
- 00:00:58 Tonight's program will explore the unresolved questions surrounding ISIS that experts and policymakers have struggled with since the collapse of the so-called caliphate in 2017. ISIS remains active and its influence is global, but without its territory-- and, more recently, without its leader-- how has the, the threat changed?
- 00:01:19 In addition, the end of the caliphate spurred debates within the international community about responsibility for the detention, prosecution, and/or repatriation of ISIS fighters and non-combatant spouses and children. Following the recent withdrawal of U.S. troops from Northern Syria, the spotlight returned to the ISIS women-- some victims, others perpetrators-- and children being held in the Kurdish-run detainee camps, and revived the debate concerning responsibility for their immediate safety and eventual prosecution.
- 00:01:50 We are joined by Devorah Margolin and Graeme Wood, who will discuss these and other issues. Devorah Margolin is a research... a senior research fellow at George Washington University's Program on Extremism, where she is also the project manager for the ISIS Files

Project. Her research primarily focuses on violent Islamist groups in the Levant, terrorism governance, and the role of women in violent Islamist groups.

Her work has been published in peer-reviewed journals, "Newsweek," and "Foreign Policy." She is a contributor to the BBC, and her co-edited volume "Jihadist Terror: New Threats, New Responses" was published earlier this year.

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Graeme Wood is a staff writer for "The Atlantic" and the author of "The Way of the Strangers: Encounters With the Islamic State," which was named a "Foreign Affairs" Best Book of the Year and won the Canadian Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction.

Wood has also written for "The American Scholar," "Foreign Policy," "The New York Times," "The New Yorker," and "The Wall Street Journal." Wood is a non-resident fellow at George Washington University's Program on Extremism and King's College London's International Centre for the Study of Radicalization.

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We'd like to thank both of our speakers for sharing their time and insights with us. Without further ado, please join me in welcoming Deborah Margolin and Graeme Wood in conversation with executive vice president and deputy director for museum programs Clifford Chanin.

(applause)

Clifford Chanin: Thank you, Harmony. Um, I would really like to claim vast insight and the ability to forecast events...

(laughter)

00:03:28 Clifford Chanin: We were very innocent when we were planning this program. In fact, if you go back a couple of weeks, we did this program-- again, what could be a more moderate, bland topic than diplomacy in the current era? And that was just before the news broke about all the Ukrainian stuff, and now this. So I think, I think we just understand where things are going, and you have to come back for more programs to really get a sense of how this is all going to evolve.

00:03:51 With that, though, I'm sort of stymied about where we begin, because this situation involving ISIS and Syria and the Middle East, the Kurds-- we'll talk about all of this-- but it has been turned upside down several times within the past couple of weeks. Of course, the raid-- and, you know, no doubt, the extraordinary work that was done by the military and intelligence folks to get there.

Uh, it has to be the starting point, because I'd ask each of you what your impressions were as the news broke, and the impact of Baghdadi's death... removal as the leader of the Islamic State-- ISIS-- what that would mean for the future of the organization. Let me start with Devorah.

00:04:39 Devorah Margolin: Yeah, I was slightly surprised. I think, after the withdrawal of the U.S. from Syria and the announcement of the withdrawal from Syria, there was questions about, could such an operation even take place, with the communication? Who would be involved?

You know, turning their backs or leaving and feeling the feelings of abandonment among the Kurdish community, um, how could there be cooperation on this attack? And it's actually quite impressive it was able to happen even after the announcement of the withdrawal.

00:05:07 The death of Baghdadi is significant, and it should be seen as significant, but it's not the end of the organization. We've seen leadership decapitation before, and it can perhaps create some struggles for the organization. But a group like the Islamic State that has such a extensive

bureaucracy has other mechanisms in place to deal with this decapitation.

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Even before his death, there was issues and strife within the group and the ideology. I think we'll see a bit more of that come out. We might also see affiliates try to flex a bit of power. Um, you know, we were speaking before, but there's just so many similarities to when we saw Al-Qaeda, the decapitation of the organization through the killing of bin Laden, how the group reacted to this.

And I think we're gonna see some similar patterns where, you know, affiliates in Yemen or Nigeria might try to flex power, focus more locally, ignore the central organization. And I think we're also gonna see kind of a struggle for power within the group.

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Clifford Chanin: Graeme, you had written also about the impact of the loss of this figurehead and leading symbolic caliph of the Islamic State. Where do you see the impact of this?

Graeme Wood: Yeah. When the news came out, I was in flight. So I landed and I got an email from an editor who was asking-- using a word you just used-- asked, "Is this just symbolic? How important is this that Baghdadi seems to be dead?" And I responded, "Just symbolic?"

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I mean, it's, the symbolism is what is important about this individual. He was someone who was putting himself forward as the continuer of a kind of fantastic version of what classical Islam was, and the very fact of his being a symbol of that was able to get 40,000-plus people to immigrate to Syria.

So I think, even if we, if we kind of diminish the importance of his death by saying it's symbolic, we need to understand exactly how important that symbolism was. Hugely significant. And I think it's, it's a great turn of events that he is no longer breathing.

00:07:31 Now, operationally, I think it is true that he was a figurehead. He was not calling the shots in any way that we can discern from the outside. In fact, there were these murmurs from within the group and from defectors from ISIS saying, "What happened to this guy? "He was our leader. We came to him because he was supposed to be leading us not just from on high, not just in a virtual way, not just in a way that, you know, we are saluting you from way behind the front lines. He's supposed to be fighting with us."

00:08:09 And these defectors would say, "He's just been absent for months, perhaps even years at a time." So he was very far divorced from the day-to-day operations of the group, and that was taking its, its toll on the confidence that people had on his leadership. So the importance of his, of his death is, first of all, there's no longer a Baghdadi to, to give your allegiance to. And then operationally, it probably has much less significance. But still, very interesting to see where he was, and to, to see what effect this has on his ability as a symbolic figure to inspire people more broadly.

00:08:51 Clifford Chanin: Question also is, of course, having lost the caliphate-- which he was instrumental in urging and establishing, and people moved to participate in-- what was the impact of that before his death on his stature within the organization? The promises had been made, they had, at least partially, been kept, and then they had been broken. So was he already in decline in some sense because of what had been lost through the end of the physical caliphate?

00:09:19 Graeme Wood: I think so. I mean, when I spoke to supporters of ISIS in its highest moments-- 2014, 2015-- they would describe the obligations that they had to ISIS as followers of the group. But they would also describe what ISIS was giving them in return.

They'd say, "If you give allegiance to ISIS, then it's quite literally a contract where you give general obedience to the caliph, and then he gives you in return what? He gives you an Islamic state." And that means

he will be giving you a space in which Islamic law, as he has promised it, is being implemented.

00:09:58 And he has not been able to do that for quite some time now. So it... the promises were grandiose, they were huge, and the fact that they were no longer being delivered means already, we were seeing some disintegration of confidence of, of rank-and-file members for Baghdadi.

Clifford Chanin: Devorah, do you think, um, there's just now going to be a succession, that someone moving into the leadership role can automatically claim to be the new caliph? Or is that a step too far?

00:10:31 Devorah Margolin: I mean, it's, his unique thing about who Baghdadi was is, he didn't just claim emir, like we saw previously of someone who declared authority over a physical territory. He claimed to be the caliph, and not just the caliph. He chose the name Abu Bakr, who is significant because he was the first caliph after the death of the Prophet Mohammed.

So he was really trying to, to signal the return to this... status. And he claimed descentance from this dynasty and to replace him will be quite difficult. And it'll be fascinating to see if the replacement will be called an emir or caliph himself.

00:11:09 I'd be impressed if they find another very qualified candidate, because you have to be from a specific family, from a specific place. And to find an individual who hit all those qualifications would be very difficult. So I imagine that the organization will be reluctant to name another caliph immediately.

00:11:28 Clifford Chanin: I wonder if each of you could just-- and in various ways, you have already penetrated the thinking, the writing of these groups. What is going through the minds of the followers today, the day after? Is this panic? Is this, "Well, we'll just move on"? How do you think the rank-

and-file-- if we could characterize a general reaction on their behalf-- how are they reacting, do you think? Devorah.

00:11:53 Devorah Margolin: Yeah, I mean, so, social media, there's been a few questions, but mostly there's been no public statements by the organization. So there's been no admit that Baghdadi has been killed. And so most people are in denial. There's been a number of interviews in Al-Hawl, for example, where women just deny it. They think it's a conspiracy theory cooked up by the United States, that he's not dead. And so until there's an official announcement by the group, they're of the theory that all is fine.

00:12:22 Graeme Wood: Beyond that, the group was preparing for this. They were preparing their members for this, and even back in 2014, there is this eccentric German journalist who went to Mosul, Jürgen Todenhöfer, who, he would ask people, you know, "Can I speak to Baghdadi? I'd love to get an interview with Baghdadi." And the people who are hosting him on an official visit, they would say, "Well, why would you want to? He said everything that he needs to say. Everything else you can learn by learning the Koran and the early history of Islam. He's just a guy. He's gonna die someday, and then we'll have another one."

00:13:03 So I think that they were... they really think that... They really thought that the existence of the state was much greater than this one individual. And by doing that, they were, by the way, learning from the mistakes of predecessor movements, such as the true apocalyptic movement that seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979, where they made the mistake of saying, "Not only do we have a caliph, but he is the one who is prophesied to lead us to, to total domination."

00:13:34 And then he thought, therefore, that he was impervious to bullets, to grenades. And so when forces came in to, to get them out of the Grand Mosque, he would pick up grenades that were thrown and just toss them back, thinking that he would survive. One of them blew up in his face, and so this caliph turned out not to be as impervious as, as they thought.

00:13:54 And so every movement since then, with memory of this-- and ISIS did descend almost directly from that apocalyptic group-- has been more cautious to say, "We're not an 'apocalypse now' movement, but an 'apocalypse pretty soon' movement." And so they were ready for Baghdadi to turn out to be mortal, which he has, in fact.

Clifford Chanin: Sounds like a bad movie title, but never mind that.

(laughter)

00:14:19 Clifford Chanin: Of course, this raid comes in the context of-- what shall we call them, recent events in the region? Where, very quickly, very suddenly, President Trump announced that a small number of U.S. troops, who were essentially there keeping just the stability of the various forces in place, were going to be removed. And the area, bordering Turkey in particular, was now up for grabs.

The Kurds who had been the front-line fighters against ISIS in the very successful military campaign that ended the caliphate, and the Kurds having lost tens of thousands, perhaps, of their own fighters, were now going to be left to their own devices, or to make new alliances, or whatever would turn out. United States was washing its hands of the affair.

00:15:06 So the context now for all of this-- and we'll come to the prospects for ISIS after the cards are reshuffled-- but what is happening on the ground as this raid is going on? The Russians, the Syrians, the Turks, the Iranians are now in a much more fluid situation. They don't have to really consider what the United States might want out of this. And they're meeting among themselves and cooking up whatever they're cooking up for the future of this area. So talk first about the impact of the American withdrawal and the emerging situation with the others who have great interest in what goes on there.

Devorah Margolin: I'll let you go first and then I'll move into...

00:15:48 Graeme Wood: Okay, so, um... what... I believe "The New York Times" quoted someone today as saying, "We outsourced our dying to the Kurds." That's how ISIS was destroyed on the ground, was, there were probably about 11,000 Kurds associated with the Syrian Democratic Forces, the SDF, who were the front-line forces. And we said, "Sorry, this is just not your decade. And we're going to abandon you to the mercies of the Republic of Turkey," which considers them a terrorist group that is as menacing, if not more so, than ISIS.

00:16:29 So this has not been a great few weeks for that group, having apparently had been abandoned by the United States. And now worried that it will be ethnically cleansed out of... out of Northern Syria. The thing that I think we need to remember about this is, is that yes, this was a betrayal, one that I think, as Americans, we should not be very comfortable with.

00:16:55 It's also a betrayal that I think we could have sort of seen coming. I used to go to-- before ISIS was a, was a thing-- to report on the camps of, of the kind of predecessor group of the SDF-- the Kurds, the PKK camps in Northern Iraq. And this was a... this was a group that, that... did not naturally align, shall we say, with the values of United States. It was a Maoist group that was actively pursuing an insurgency against Iran, yes, but also against Turkey, which at that time was a firmer, but still a NATO ally, as it is today.

00:17:37 So I think we did... we do need to acknowledge, though, that although we've betrayed this group, we probably needed to see coming at some point a reckoning between United States and this group that we've allied ourselves with opportunistically, but that at some point we were not gonna... we were gonna discover that we were not entirely congruent with, interest-wise.

00:17:59 Devorah Margolin: They've had real ramifications. You know, we've already seen almost 800 women who were in IDP camps—not prison, IDP camps, very important to emphasize that-- escape from Ein Issa. We've

seen a number of prison breaks, as well. The Kurds are worried about the ramifications of Turkey and the incursion, and it's forcing them to re-shift their forces. And it means there's going to be a humanitarian and national security issues that are going to evolve out of this as they start to move back in order to not come into direct contact with Turkey.

00:18:34 Clifford Chanin: So the issue of these people who are in prisons or camps now being let loose, the question, of course, has multiple dimensions of, where do they go? But I suppose the first question would be whether or not there was a prospect for some reorganization or reunifying of these folks into, if not a caliphate, but some area where they can live and begin their work again.

00:19:02 Devorah Margolin: Yeah. I mean, absolutely. So the IDP camps are mostly made up of women and children. So Al-Hawl is the biggest camp, it currently holds an estimated 68,000 individuals, 95% of them are women and children. Of that, I believe 55% of the children are under the age of 12. There's also 11,000 foreigners in that camp, so the majority of the individuals are Syrian and Iraqi.

00:19:30 Of the 11,000, 7,000 are children, 4,000 are adults. So the camp is divided into two parts, has the Syrian part-- Syrian and Iraqi part-- and the foreigner part. And there's been a lot of reports from academics, journalists, international bodies that are there, as well as the SDF, about what is happening in this camp.

It should be emphasized that there are both victims and perpetrators in the Islamic State, specifically when we talk about women. There is agency, a decision to go over and join these groups, that many women had. Some of them were naive and some of them were coerced. And so to paint every individual with the same paintbrush would be doing more harm than good.

00:20:14 So either if you're painting them all as victims or all as perpetrators, they really need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. That being said, in the camp, there are still very much women who are ardent supporters of

the group, who still believe in the caliphate, who still believe in the cause. And the group knows this, and Baghdadi, in his last known speech, I believe, made a call to break these women out so they could restart the caliphate, because women hold a special role in the group.

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They... some of them were in, you know, Islamic police and regulating other women. But they're really seen as the carriers and the torchbearers of this ideology, and they're there to educate the next generation. And jihadi groups don't see themselves as diminishing these women's roles. They see themselves as empowering them. And so the women who are still ardent supporters of the group believe that that's their job, to keep that ideology going. And they've carried out violence on other women in the camps to adhere.

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So there was rumors, or reports at the beginning, that women were coming into these camps and taking off more modest dress. As time's gone on, there's been reports of women being murdered or children being murdered for not adhering to certain modest dress or rules following Sharia law. There's been reports that women who take their children to see humanitarian bodies-- doctors-- are being threatened with murder if they take their children to see somebody who is not a Muslim.

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And so there's a lot of woman-on-woman crime, but also crimes against the SDF, which are guarding these camps. So I just would like to emphasize that again, that women can be both victims and perpetrators in these camps. And they're not all ISIS supporters. You know, some women got swept up and put into these camps who were also victims.

A number of the Yazidis were found in these camps that were taken as sex slaves and were taken in by the group, especially young women who didn't necessarily remember where they came from. They'd gone through a lot of trauma. They kind of started to believe that they were part of the group. And this could have a lot of implications of kind of sweeping everyone in the same paintbrush.

00:22:20 Clifford Chanin: Yeah. Graeme, do you think the opportunity is there for some reconstitution, or is the situation just too much between the Turks and the Russians and Iranians and everybody else, the Syrians, that there really is no ground for them to really, as a central force, reconstitute a political body or a military body?

Graeme Wood: You know, there's some ways in which the... the ground there is very fertile for a reconstitution of ISIS. If you were to compare what Iraq, in particular, looks like right now to what it looked like for ISIS in, say, 2010-- the predecessor movements of ISIS in 2010-- you'd say it looks much more favorable right now.

00:23:08 In 2010, ISIS had been decimated and destroyed by the Awakening movement, by the very focused attentions of the United States. And now those attentions are not focused. The number of people who are, have been networked together by ISIS-- whether or not ISIS no longer controls territory-- they're still networked together, and there is still the same discontent, if not more so, in Sunni areas of Iraq.

00:23:37 So I think the conditions for a rise of ISIS, in that regard, are, unfortunately, very, very favorable to ISIS. There's one way, though, in which they are very unfavorable to ISIS relative to how they were in the early 2010s. And that is, back then, the policy of the United States and others was that if you want to create a little Al-Qaeda state in Syria, then be our guest.

00:24:06 That place is awful, and you're just gonna be suffering while you do it. We'd rather you be there than here. We kind of thought that, that they would stay over there, and they would be in Raqqa, in this miserable place that was... that we'd kind of keep an eye on, but where they could do whatever they wanted to do. And I think we have learned since then that that's not a great strategy for handling international terrorism, to just give them a place that's far away from us and let them do what they want to do.

00:24:35 That turned out to be a magnet for jihadists from all over the world. We, I do not think, will allow that to happen again. And when I say, "We," I don't mean the United States, but I mean the world has decided that that was a bad idea. How we will actually go about making sure that it doesn't happen again? Unfortunately, those mechanisms don't exist in a, in a predictable way.

00:24:59 But we at least realized the urgency of not allowing that to happen. And I don't see ISIS as being able to become anything like the incredible force of, of attraction and focus that it was in 2013, 2014, in the absence of actually controlling territory like that, and being pretty sure that they could keep it for a while.

00:25:25 Clifford Chanin: Now, the president speaks about essentially withdrawing everybody from there, in terms of American troops, but in fact doesn't do that. And so the movement away from the Syrian border is one thing. But some force now around these oil fields, still Americans, perhaps in larger numbers in Iraq, increases in Saudi Arabia.

00:25:44 So there is... there are mixed signals here. You speak about the world not wanting ISIS to reconvene and coalesce again. I mean, do you see any way to judge what the American policy under these circumstances would be, and what resources might be available to do that? In spite of the president saying, "We have to be out of there," there are still clearly, based on the events of this past weekend, some forces available to do some things.

How do you define, if it's possible at this moment, what the American role is and what the American power availability might be to prevent the kind of things that may inevitably, under other circumstances, begin to recur?

Devorah Margolin (chuckling): I'll let you take that.

00:26:30 Graeme Wood: Well, I would say first, controlling the oil. The way the president described it was that ISIS got most of its money from oil. That's how it was able to run its state. And as far as I know, that, that's that's not actually the case. ISIS was getting most of its, of its finances through confiscation, through taxation, through doing the things that states do generally to get revenue from... If you're selling some oranges, ISIS gets its cut.

00:27:00 So taking over the oilfields seems more like a Trumpian flourish, saying, "We're gonna keep that oil because we deserve some of it," rather than a mechanism for actually keeping ISIS from, from coming back into power. The neglect that we... that we had toward ISIS when it was growing in 2013 and 2012, though, really can't be overstated. We weren't doing anything to stop ISIS back then.

When they were in Raqqa in 2013, say. So even just having targeted raids, any military action that keeps them from turning into a functioning administrative state would be a good start. We're certainly capable of doing that with or without an on-the-ground presence in Syria at a few oil fields.

00:27:49 Devorah Margolin: I mean, and also to add to that, I mean, it's almost as if we as a society forgot the lessons of Afghanistan in the 1970s. That if you just kind of leave a group to itself, have its ideology-- and denounce violence against yourselves-- that doesn't mean the ideology is gonna go away or they're not gonna turn against you.

I mean, I think, when looking at the situation, one of the greatest fears is that Turkey will take the individuals in these camps and prisons and say, "Promise not to attack us? Fine, okay, go." And the same thing with Syria. So it's not just a humanitarian and moral obligation, but there's a national security implication for this. But these individuals who could escape or be let free could go and create the next version of ISIS, or future generation.

00:28:32 And those children, and, could come to the U.S., and, you know... 9/11 happened based on the ideologies of this group in Afghanistan in the

1970s, and that's almost three decades later. So the ideology doesn't go away just because you take away the caliphate, or just because you stop fighting that group. The ideology is still there. So how do you... the real question is, how do you fight the ideology and make sure that partners in the region, such as Turkey, don't create a situation where they just let individuals go free?

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Clifford Chanin: No, the U.S. changed its policies in relation to the Kurds in the '70s, as well. So this is at least the second abandonment of the Kurds by the Americans, and in Afghanistan, as well, after the Soviet-Afghan War. But if it is the case that this is a lingering problem that could become a much bigger one-- and if the issue is the ideology-- do either of you see a weakening of the ideology, either because of the circumstances that we're now in or simply because this set of beliefs has played out its time?

Or is there still a fundamental appeal here that may take a different form at some future point, but which will remain the threat that it has been, whether we were paying attention at any given moment or not?

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Devorah Margolin: I think the threat still remains. I think if you look at the fact that, you know, Syria and Iraq and the caliphate have failed, but affiliate groups have kind of sprung up all over the world, from the Philippines to Yemen, to, to Libya, to Nigeria. You have affiliate groups associated with this ideology. The ideology is not going anywhere. And I think even if you look at the group itself, and the attacks carried out by the group, most of the attacks, when you're talking about Europe, were inspired by this ideology, so, people who were never even in contact with the group.

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So it's not as if the organization gave orders and money, and individuals then executed those orders. These are people who are inspired by this ideology. And I don't think that fighting a group, you know, in hand-to-hand combat is going to be the way to conquer that ideology. I think radicalization comes from a mixture of both personal and political motivations, and a lot of the political motivations come from senses of grievances.

- 00:30:44 And so how do you address grievances in your own society, as well? You know, if somebody's radicalized here in the United States, what grievance do they have, and how can you address that grievance in society? It's important, and a hard conversation for us to have.
- 00:31:00 Graeme Wood: I think, ideologically, ISIS can count itself, unfortunately, victorious. The ideology, as Devorah says, it still is out there. And I would... I would say, take it a bit further. When ISIS thinks about how well things worked out, how well did it work out to declare a caliphate and to be extremely intolerant of even other Muslims, they will be able to say, correctly, that it worked out way better than anything that Al-Qaeda tried before.
- 00:31:38 What were the deliver—the deliverables that, that Al-Qaeda had? Well, killed thousands of Americans in a single day? Say, "Well, we liked that. But then we lost our... the only state that was, that was openly sheltering us. Rapidly." Whereas ISIS will say, "We created a state. We created a paradise, and it actually felt like a paradise to people while, while we had it."
- 00:32:08 They'll say, "We got closer than we've ever gotten before by doing this." So I'm... I'm sorry to say that although we're in this maybe brief, triumphant moment of, of being able to say that Baghdadi was killed, he was killed... without a loss of American, American life, he was killed while hiding in a tunnel. That's great. But unfortunately, his, his followers will remember him as a visionary, and they'll think about ways to revive the ISIS project rather than ways to replace it with something else.
- 00:32:52 Clifford Chanin: Given his death and the shaky circumstance of ISIS currently, given that he was hiding in Idlib Province, which was not where the ISIS base was, um, is there the possibility, do you both think, that there might be some reshuffling of the deck among these jihadi groups? Is there a way in which they could come together and reinforce one another instead of, as they have in previous circumstances, fought one another? Or are those differences, however small they may seem to the

outsider, are those differences such that it really does define a red line in these intergroup relationships?

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Graeme Wood: I, I think on the leadership level, the differences are profound. These groups were yelling at each other. They were engaging in a food fight across Syria that resulted in some direct hits that will not be forgotten soon. So, I, I don't imagine that ISIS and the various flavors of Al-Qaeda will suddenly reconcile and, and become something bigger.

That said, there are realities on the ground right now. One of those realities is that Idlib is one of the few places where there's just no way that there's going to be a conquering army that absolutely wipes out all, all of the jihadist groups there.

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And the many people from ISIS who have fled from the destruction of the caliphate, many of them will have gone, I'm sure, to, to that, that territory and will have sought refuge, and some of them will have received it. So, on the rank-and-file level, there, there might be a bit of a shuffling of the deck, but I, I don't think it's going to reach some new equilibrium with a monster twin-jihadist movement.

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Devorah Margolin: I think, also, when you look at the Al-Qaeda-versus-ISIS kind of struggle for power that's been happening, for a long time, Al-Qaeda was just forgotten by the policy and international community. And I think that Al-Qaeda has been slowly working on its affiliates and building up its persistence, and saying, "Look, you know, ISIS sees it as a success," but Al-Qaeda is saying, "What happened to ISIS is actually a failure, and our long-term goals of waiting are actually the right way."

And so there is going to be a struggle for power. But I think Graeme's absolutely right. Idlib's the great example of this, is... If you look at the history of these groups, and who fought with who in the beginning, against whom, there was a lot of, I would say, swinging happening at the beginning

Clifford Chanin: Fluidity, yeah.

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Devorah Margolin: Fluidity, yeah. In which, you know, the realities on the ground shape, you know, what happens, and also personal relationships and tribal issues that were at play, as well. And so, Idlib has become not necessarily a hotbed, but a safe haven for a lot of different individuals. And relationships that were built over the last decade are coming into play.

You know, there, there was rumors about who was hosting Baghdadi there, and he was a member of an offshoot of HTS. And why would he, as an offshoot of HTS, which is associated with Al-Qaeda, be hosting Baghdadi? And there's a lot of unanswered questions. And a colleague of mine has a forthcoming report on this, so keep an eye out for that.

00:36:01

Clifford Chanin (chuckles): You mentioned, Devorah, earlier that some of the subgroups in different parts of the world might feel more assertive at this point in time. Are there other places-- geographic locations, now, I'm talking about. I mean, it's... Syria, that area is going to be loose, and sort of the "Star Wars" bar scene for a while.

But, you know, are there other places which have vulnerabilities to the emergence of a more potent form of this kind of expression at this point? We've seen it in different parts of Africa and the Middle East and Southeast Asia, South Asia. So there's a whole wide map where this might be possible. But is there a particular place or places at this point in time where things are abrew that haven't really been getting the attention they might otherwise get?

00:36:47

Devorah Margolin: More than abrew. I think it's going to be interesting to see... So, I mean, again, I study groups and I study their evolution, and I can't always help but hark back to, to examples we've seen. But Al-Qaeda Central asking Al-Qaeda in Iraq to send them money, and that being seen as one of the triggers for while Al-Qaeda in Iraq decided to split off from Al-Qaeda Central and say, "Actually, no, we don't want to support you. You're a failing organization. We can do this better."

00:37:15 And so what I think might be happening is, affiliate groups-- if, if ISIS becomes desperate-- affiliate groups could say, "You know what?" Like, "we're going to focus more on our local territory right now. Maybe we'll be able to create a caliphate here in our local areas." And I think there's going to be perhaps a pushback between ISIS and its affiliates, especially if there becomes a vacuum and no leadership in place.

00:37:38 Graeme Wood: I had one ISIS, um, follower say to me, "The caliphate lives on as long as there is one street in one neighborhood where Islamic law is implemented with the properly constituted caliphate in charge." So, I, I think that you, you want to think about, where are the places where that might happen, where there are enough sympathizers where they might be able to, um, have that confidence that they can actually do this?

00:38:09 Um, the places that are like that are places where there is, uh, extraordinary misgovernment-- misgovernance, lack of governance. They're places where people do not trust the, the, um, the real government, the national government-- the government that you and I would recognize as a real government-- to look out for their interests. And what that is likely to mean, too, is places where there is de facto anarchy.

00:38:38 Um, so the places that I might look to: parts of Yemen are probably ones that we should keep an eye out. The Southern Philippines has already had some, some, um, pretty spectacular ISIS attempts to, to take control of, of territory, and then the Sahel. These are, are the usual suspects, to be honest, and maybe with the, maybe with the exception of Southern Philippines, which we haven't heard much of until recently.

00:39:10 Clifford Chanin: Let me ask about Iraq and the adjoining areas to Syria, where ISIS had spread, where the Sunni population is, uh, is, is the majority and dominant. Um, talk about misgovernment. So, uh, is, is there a possibility of a foothold there, or did the damage that they, that

they caused, will that weigh too heavily on people's thinking about a renewed appeal for this group?

00:39:38

Graeme Wood: I think that the ISIS brand is, is not dirt in Iraq right now, in Sunni areas of Iraq. Remember, ISIS took control there in part because they considered the government of Baghdad, uh, a sectarian, Shiite government. Um, I'm quite certain that they still consider it that, and they don't think that that government has their best interests, as Sunni Arabs, in mind.

00:40:05

So, I, I think it's, it's pretty likely that, that ISIS, with a combination of that discontent, that lack of confidence in the Baghdad government, and then, lastly, the capability of ISIS-- which as now, you know, demonstrated, still exists-- to have a threat advantage against that government, to rule the night, to, to be sure that anyone who was working directly with Baghdad would not be able to sleep well at night and would, would worry that the next motorcycle that passed him on the street had a gunman in the back and was going to pop him in the head, I, I think Iraq is, is looking pretty awful right now.

Clifford Chanin: Devorah?

00:40:44

Devorah Margolin: Yeah, I think it's interesting to notice that even those that have never been associated with ISIS are not showing confidence in the government. There's protests that are happening, you know, for the last, almost two weeks now, all over Iraq. Um, interesting enough, they're not really happening in Mosul, um, because a lot of people there have expressed fear that if they do take part in these protests, that they'll be seen as ISIS supporters. Um, so I think... I mean, so there's a... there's been a lot of talk about who stayed behind when you talk about Iraq, specifically in very Sunni areas.

00:41:18

Um, some people stayed behind because they were supporters, and some people stayed behind because they couldn't get out. Um, and there was also, you know, through the ISIS Files and the work we've done, we know that the... When ISIS took over bureaucratic bodies, they basically

fired and told... killed or fired individuals they deemed to be undesirable, and told others, "Stay or we kill your whole family. Show up to work tomorrow, or your whole family is going to be murdered." And so, it, it's not so black-and-white about who stayed and...

Clifford Chanin: Mm-hmm.

Devorah Margolin: Full ISIS supporters, but, I mean, I do think there probably is some sympathy still in certain areas for the group.

00:41:54 Clifford Chanin: And we mentioned it earlier, but I, I do want to come back to this idea of tens of thousands of women and children who are sort of at loose now, or will be if the camps and the prisons are not attended to, some of whom have a nationality claim to come back to Europe or the United States. Um, and there is, in some countries, resistance to the idea of allowing them to act on the basis of a national claim. This has humanitarian, legal, and geostrategic implications. Um, and yet it's completely up in the air at this point. There really is no way to point out a direction that this is going to resolve in.

00:42:35 Devorah Margolin: Yeah, I mean, the U.S. is also a very interesting case in this matter. We know that the FBI has estimated 300 individuals went over. At the Program on Extremism at GW, we were able to identify 82 of those individuals, um, 15 of whom were women. Um, so the, the numbers are quite small. Of those individuals, 17 have been returned-- 12 men, five women. Um, only two people have not either been prosecuted or had trials against them.

00:43:03 So the U.S. has kind of been very actually vocal in encouraging not only to bring their own citizens back, but to encourage other countries to do so, as well. Um, they've even taken custody recently of two British citizens who the British refused to take back. Um, and countries such as the U.K., France have not only taken citizenship from individuals, but refused to take many of their citizens back.

- 00:43:28 The U.K. had, um, approximately 900 individuals who went over. Um, I believe the number returning is about 150, 40 of whom have been... either had prosecuted or have some sort of charges against them. So, in the U.S., we have a legal system set up that allows us to deal with these individuals. Um, the U.K., France, Germany don't necessarily have the ability to prosecute these individuals, which leads to a huge backlash.
- 00:43:55 People don't necessarily want these individuals to come back if there's not going to be some sort of ramifications, which is understandable, because everyone should be looked at on a case-by-case basis. If they broke the law, if they, you know, killed people, took part in an organization that brought back human slavery, sanctioned rape, um, they should be prosecuted for their crimes.
- 00:44:20 And it's, it's really encouraging these countries to set up the infrastructure to address these crimes, bringing them back, and rehabilitation. And for adults, that means putting them on trial. And for children, it means making sure that you have the infrastructure in place to deal with children who have seen and perhaps perpetrated violence not by their own agency, but because they were born or brought to this organization, had no agency in it, because they are children, um, and we do know how to deal with child soldiers. There's, there's a lot of infrastructure out there about how to deal with people who were forced to be child soldiers, and we need to use that infrastructure.
- 00:44:54 Graeme Wood: I, I would say, I would like to add, though, that the infrastructure that we have to deal with adults who have been in ISIS territory is not entirely satisfactory, and we shouldn't expect too much from it.
- Devorah Margolin: Yeah.
- Clifford Chanin: Mm-hmm.

Graeme Wood: I think that we... I think every country has a moral obligation to account for its citizens who went abroad to terrorize people, and that includes prosecuting to them to the fullest extent of, of the law.

00:45:24 You, you may recall, one of the Americans who went to ISIS was a dual Saudi-American national. He was found in ISIS territory, arrested. He had on his person \$4,000, a cell phone, and, for some reason, a snorkel. And as soon as it was discovered that we had an American on our hands, we wanted to find out, what can we prosecute him for?

00:45:49 It turns out, though, that it's not illegal to be in Syria with a snorkel and \$4,000. So the A.C.L.U. quite rightly took up his case and said, "This is an American. You can't just hold him forever without prosecuting him. Let him go or charge him." And we couldn't charge him. So we let him go. We're going to have cases like that, and it's because we respect the rights, the civil liberties, of our citizens that we'll have them. So we're not always going to be satisfied with the outcome.

00:46:20 Um, the nice thing, though, is, as Devorah mentioned, the number of people who came to... who went to ISIS from the United States, if it's 300, then that means we have, uh, one of the more easily managed numbers of, of foreign fighters who, who we have, sadly, contributed.

00:46:37 Consider other countries. Russia, we're not even sure how many that went over, but it's somewhere in the 5,000 to 10,000 range. Um, do you think Russia has the ability to digest back people who have gone to Syria and who have acquired skills, skills of battle, um, and have become habituated to extreme violence and are going back to a country with a recent tradition of, of jihadist violence?

00:47:09 I do not think that Russia is capable of, of dealing with that, which is why one of the policies of Russia has been to let them go, in hopes that they will jump headfirst into the meat grinder of jihad in Syria and never come back. But it's an enormous problem that's faced more by other countries than by us.

Clifford Chanin: Yeah, it doesn't really sound like-- whether because of the numbers or because of the legal systems in a variety of places-- that the structures really are in place to take in large numbers of people.

Devorah Margolin: I think children must be disaggregated from adults.

Clifford Chanin: Yeah.

00:47:44

Devorah Margolin: I think that's the number-one thing. You know, we always say, "Women and children, women and children"-- women have agency. Women, we're adults. Obviously, in certain situations, there's coercion, there's victimization, but they're not children. Children are victims.

And so, children should be treated as such. So, the ability to basically leave them there, there's not just the moral and humanitarian obligation, I think, but there is a security obligation. I think we're creating a hotbed and a breeding zone for the next generation of jihadis who will come and attack us here in the West. And I think that that's a huge block in our thinking.

00:48:20

Clifford Chanin: It does not really seem like there's a very neat box to put this in.

Devorah Margolin: Nope.

Clifford Chanin: Let's see if we have any questions from our audience. There will be microphones any moment now. Hang on one second. Yeah, in the middle there. Just wait for the mic, please.

Audience Member: Thank you both so much. You speak of a, a conflict between Al-Qaeda and ISIS, um... that has come to blows, the two groups fight one another, and actually, I was not aware of that. Can you fill us in a little more on that war between ISIS and Al-Qaeda?

00:49:06

Clifford Chanin: So, what's the origin? What's the reason that they can't just all line up behind this vision of jihad?

Devorah Margolin: I mean, they have the same end goal. How they get there is very different. And, you know, I would describe in very plain terms, you know, Al-Qaeda's end goal, I mean, Al-Qaeda's plan is kind of the long game. They're going to sit and wait, and they're going to play it out, and they're, they're going to watch, while ISIS takes kind of the more in-your-face, "We're going to declare this caliphate now" approach.

00:49:39

I mean, the end goal for violent Islamist groups is-- and I'm including, um, those inspired originally by the Muslim Brotherhood ideology or from Shia ideology-- is the world to be ruled by their version of Islam, um, and for there to be an Islamic state ruled by their leader, be it Sunni or Shia, um, and for all of us to kind of be living in that world. How you get there is very different.

00:50:10

So, some people believe in immense violence on your territory, some believe in immense violence on their territory, so the battle at home first versus, do you fight the-- this term, it's very complicated, sorry-- the near enemy versus far enemy. Who do you start the battle with? Do you start the internal struggle among the Muslim community first, win everyone over to your side, and then start fighting non-Muslims? Or do you start with the non-Muslims and then win people over to your side that way? So I mean, there's a... whole PhD on this, but... (laughs)

00:50:40

Graeme Wood: Yeah, there's, there's a lot of differences between the groups. But the, the short version of the history is that ISIS broke from Al-Qaeda and said, "All right, we're doing what you say you're going to do eventually. We're going to declare a caliphate and make this state that's

your desired end state. And you, right now, after we've demonstrated our disloyalty to you, you will bow down before us."

00:51:04

And when Al-Qaeda said, "No," ISIS said, Well, that makes you as bad as anyone, and we're going to fight you." ISIS also married that to an extreme of intolerance, especially toward Muslims. So, I'll point to one famous incident, where Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who was kind of the leader of the Al-Qaeda insurgency in Iraq in the early 2000s, he started blowing up just random gatherings of Shia in Iraq.

00:51:33

And he was told by Al-Qaeda Central, uh, "Stop doing that. These are just ordinary people that, they're dumb, they haven't been educated. They haven't been told that being Shia is bad, and there's still hope for them. And people don't like us when we do this."

And he did not respond, he just kept on doing it. And that became the M.O. of ISIS, saying, "Look, there are all of these prudential reasons, tactical reasons, strategic reasons, why we might not right now do everything that we think is eventually going to be just-- killing every Shia we, we meet, um, declaring the caliphate as soon as we can."

00:52:19

And Al-Qaeda said, "Take it easy. Do this when it's going to... when we're going to be at our strongest point." ISIS said, "We have to do it right now. It's a non-negotiable obligation." And that difference caused those groups to, to split pretty much, I think, irrevocably.

Clifford Chanin: I think one of the interesting things about it is, the stakes are so high for the believers in the different approaches to this. These are not sort of marginal differences towards a common end. The way you do this actually defines salvation and the, the ideal community and all these things that are fundamentally important to what motivates people-- please.

00:52:56

Devorah Margolin: I was just going add in that, you know, the greatest victims of ISIS were Muslims. You know, if you look at the numbers-wise, Muslims were the greatest victims of ISIS attacks.

Graeme Wood: And not Al-Qaeda.

Devorah Margolin: And not Al-Qaeda. Right, exactly, Al-Qaeda's kind of always been... When I was talking about near enemy-far enemy, that Al-Qaeda's kind of always focused on, "Focus on the West. Attack the West, attack the non-Muslims." You know, "We can, we can win Muslims over to our side slowly." And ISIS has just taken the other approach. And they said, "No, we're starting at home. We are cleaning house. Anyone who doesn't believe in us and come to our side very quickly, you are our first victims."

00:53:32

Clifford Chanin: Other questions. Right there in the front. Again, we'll ask you to wait for the mic.

Audience Member: Thank you both for being here. So, my question is, you sort of mentioned A.Q. offshoot elements just throughout the Levant, and you also mentioned escaped foreign fighters and also cross-ideological collaboration. So, to wrap that all together, do you expect, with the U.S. pulling out and prison breaks and foreign fighters potentially escaping—most likely escaping-- them to kind of bolster A.Q. elements within the Levant, or to try to go back to an ISIS core, whatever remains of it?

00:54:21

Devorah Margolin: Um, I think those that are attracted to the ISIS ideology are going to stay. Like I said, the whole near enemy-far enemy, the how you're getting there, is hugely important to people. Um, that being said, are there going to be small strategic alliances in the beginning, as they try to rebuild? I think probably. Um, but I think they'll think of those as small strategic alliances at the beginning, while they try to rebuild and then carry out the ideology they continue to believe in.

Clifford Chanin: Gentleman there.

00:54:57 Audience Member: Thank you very much for the beautiful presentation. I'm from the region, I'm Kurdish from Kurdistan of Iraq. I have two questions. First, it's about the ISIS members and their families. If you try them in their countries, the theory is that there is not enough evidence to try them.

00:55:20 If you do it in Iraq, in Syria, last time I talked to people in Mosul City, the commander of the security forces told me there is 100,000 arrest warrant against the ISIS members and the sympathizers. The smallest sentence they can get, it's either death-- execution-- or life in prison.

00:55:48 So you have this extreme here, and in Europe and in America, there is fear that there is not enough evidence to try them. Then what should we do with them? Should we ask Kurds, "Just keep them like that and feeding them"? My second question is, how much do you think-- like, in your studies, assessment-- how much do you think the Turkish incursion will contribute to the re-insurgence of ISIS?

Devorah Margolin: I...

00:56:17 Clifford Chanin: Two small subjects.

(laughter)

Devorah Margolin: So, you brought up Iraq. So I, I... plugging an article I just wrote for "Foreign Policy" a couple of days ago, with my colleagues Joana Cook and Charlie Winter, and we brought up Iraq, because Iraq has ten-minute trials. Um, anywhere between four and ten minutes, if you're going with it lengthy. 466 women were tried in 2018 alone.

00:56:39 The lightest sentence they got was life in prison, and most, a lot of them were also sentenced to death. These women are also being held with their children in these prisons, and so there's a question of, if you execute them, what happens to these children? And that's foreign women. There's also 108 minors that have been prosecuted in Iraq, as well, in the last year.

Um, and so that's kind of one extreme. The other extreme is also Syria. So, what happens if the Syrian military takes them? Are they going to do the same types of trials? Are they going to do the, um, "If you don't attack us, you're free to go" mentality? There's no right answer on that one, that that is not the correct option.

00:57:17 As we advocate in our article, even if there isn't necessarily the legal system in place, we must have a legal system in place, we must take the moral and humanitarian and security obligation of bringing these people back, because leaving them in this area is going to create another jihadi hotbed that is unsustainable for the region that's already been battered so harshly.

Clifford Chanin: He had also the question about the Turkish incursion, and the impact on... but what is the Turkish... I mean, let's broaden the question. What the Turks up to here, and does it bother them if ISIS or these jihadi groups find a new center if the Kurds are not any longer on the border?

00:57:51 Graeme Wood: Turkey has had a peculiar relationship with ISIS and with jihadist groups in Syria from the start. Um, you know, when, when ISIS took over the city of Mosul in, in 2014, there were 47 Turks who were kidnapped who were staffing the consulate in Mosul. They were released, and we don't know the, the terms of, of that release.

00:58:17 But we also... well, we definitely know that Turkey was like a Grand Central Terminal for jihadism. For years before and after that, there were jihadists going in and out of Syria, and all it took was, they would just stand at the border-- it might have had a barbed-wire fence-- and then

eventually, the Turkish guard would look the other way, and then 40 people would walk through and then get into a bus that was waiting, like a Peter Pan bus that was provided by ISIS going from the border to, to Raqqa.

00:58:48 So, this is, uh, not, shall we say, the most reliable partner we've had over the years in making sure that jihadism is, is responsibly contained in Syria. There's also been, on the Turkish side, support for a, a wide range of, of jihadist and jihadist-tinted groups against Bashar al-Assad. They've greatly preferred these groups, shall we say, to, to the SDF.

00:59:18 Um, so, with, with Turkey having a stronger hand in Syria, a stronger hand that, that's been just given to them by the United States in the last month, I think that, yeah, we should, we should really worry about, about which groups are going to be empowered.

Clifford Chanin: I see we have one more. Gentleman right here in the front.

00:59:44 (audience member speaking inaudibly)

Graeme Wood: So, I don't know if everybody could hear. The question was about the successors to Baghdadi. And, um, you know, as, as Devorah mentioned, we haven't even had confirmation from ISIS that they agree with us that we have killed Baghdadi.

01:00:11 So, I think that has probably something to do with the distance that Baghdadi kept between himself and the other arms, say, the propaganda arms of ISIS, where they may literally just not know whether it's true that Baghdadi has been killed. They may not be ready to name a successor because they haven't figured that out yet to their, to their satisfaction. Um, there are names that have been batted around. Uh, um, there are... There are people who have been with the movement for quite some time who, whose names have been mentioned.

01:00:49 I don't think it's going to matter as much, though. It was very important that the enemies of ISIS eliminate the first caliph. It will be much less important that the second one be eliminated. The inspiration that Baghdadi was able to give is going to be greater than any of the people who will replace him.

01:01:09 Baghdadi had a kind of unique combination of long time in service against... in, in jihadist service; also a, a background as a scholar, and, as Devorah mentioned, membership in the tribe of Quraysh, which classically has been a criterion for being a caliph. Um, there may be others that have at least the last of these, but no one will combine all of them.

Clifford Chanin: Thoughts on the succession?

01:01:37 Devorah Margolin: I mean, we were chatting about this before. I mean, there are so many names that could come up. But I, I think the idea is that... I don't necessarily know if it's going to be a caliph, even. I think there might be an emir. There's no physical territory. The caliphate has kind of, that dream has failed.

There might be another emir who's in place, who kind of brings the organization back to its glory, and then a new caliph who hits all three that they will be grooming from a young age, that will be the next caliph. But I don't think who the leader is truly matters, because it's the ideology, and it's beyond one person. It's the ideology that inspires.

01:02:07 Clifford Chanin: But is it fair to say that the ideology is centered on this idea of the establishment of a physical caliphate, regardless of how long it may take?

Devorah Margolin: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: Do you see that that will not change in ISIS's outlook?

Devorah Margolin: Yes, I think that the, the idea of re-establishing that caliphate again will... it's not going anywhere, and it's going to be immediate.

01:02:25 Graeme Wood: Yeah, I agree. There were... if you ask people who went, traveled to ISIS territory, there were a lot of different pushes and pulls of why they went. Maybe the life wasn't great at home. Maybe they thought there was a paradise coming. There's one thing that they all agreed on, though, which is, "There is an Islamic state here that is properly constituted in the classical mode," and that means it's headed by a caliph.

01:02:47 So, ISIS may just have to face the reality that it can't have this because it doesn't control territory in the old sense. But if it does that, it's giving up something that was a previously non-negotiable aspect of its brand. And that'll represent, uh, an admission of defeat.

01:03:06 One more thing I'll say. The president today announced that there was another assassination of, of a major ISIS figure, whom he characterized as the successor to Baghdadi. That's a guy named Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir. And, uh, it seems unlikely to me that, that he was actually the successor to Baghdadi. He was, however, the, the second-best-known name, because he was the official spokesman of the group. And, you know, the, to be the official spokesman of ISIS is, it's not quite like being, you know, Sarah Huckabee Sanders.

(laughter)

01:03:42 Graeme Wood: It's a much more important role, a decision-making role. But the name al-Muhajir means "the immigrant." Why does that matter? ISIS has been run by Iraqis, and to a lesser extent, Syrians, and if it was

the case-- which, again, I am doubting-- that al-Muhajir was the, the designated successor, then that would mean this strange turn of events, where ISIS, which claimed to be an internationalized jihadist organization bringing in Muslims from around the world, actually might have been run by someone who was not Iraqi or Syrian.

01:04:24 That would be a, a fulfillment of at least one promise of ISIS of being the, kind of, as one person put it, "The, the, uh, Disneyland of jihadism," bringing everybody in like the... You get to see French jihadists, Chinese jihadists, and so on. So, um, top guy's down, number two, maybe, as well. If it was, in fact, him, then ISIS had internationalized to a surprising degree.

01:04:50 Clifford Chanin: Well, as we can see, we're just at the beginning of this next phase in what seems an ongoing—I hate to say endless-- but long series of chapters of where this idea is going to go and who's going to rise up to espouse it. With that, and I want to... I know we have many members in the audience, but for those of you who are not members, I'd ask you to consider. A table outside where you might join.

01:05:13 Because the membership actually supports these programs and allows us to keep doing them. And secondly, we have more to come, which obviously now is going to be triggered by events that have not yet...

(laughter)

Clifford Chanin: Have not yet happened in the news, so I invite you all back. And in the meantime, while we're here, we can predict one thing, that we all want to thank Devorah Margolin and Graeme Wood for the this wonderful conversation.

Graeme Wood: Thank you.

(applause)

01:05:42

Devorah Margolin: Thank you.