

A violent sorting out: Middle East expert Joshua Landis

interview by [Richard A. Kauffman](#) in the [May 13, 2015](#) issue



Photo courtesy of the University of Oklahoma

Joshua M. Landis, associate professor at the University of Oklahoma and director of its Center for Middle East Studies, has served as a consultant to the State Department on Middle East issues. He is president of the Syrian Studies Association and runs the blog [Syria Comment](#).

How did you become an expert on Syria, of all places?

I lived in Beirut and in Saudi Arabia for the first ten years of my life. My father worked for Citibank. After college I got a teaching job rather serendipitously in Lebanon in 1979, when Lebanon was in the middle of a civil war. I started learning Arabic and trying to figure out why the Lebanese were shooting each other.

Two years later I got a Fulbright scholarship to the University of Damascus. I was there in 1982 when the Muslim Brotherhood took over the third-largest city in Syria. The regime smashed it, killing perhaps 20,000 people. Then I pursued Middle Eastern studies at Harvard and Princeton and wrote about Syria.

You saw early on the issues that were shaping Syria and Lebanon.

Right. And the civil war that I witnessed in Lebanon had similarities to what is going on today in Syria in that it was a sectarian struggle.

All the regimes in the Levant area of the Middle East were run by religious minorities: Lebanon by the Maronites, Iraq by the Sunnis, Syria by the Alawites. You could even say that the Jews were a minority in Palestine that turned themselves into a majority.

Autocratic rule by a minority sets up a very unstable situation?

Yes, it is unstable. We've been seeing over the past 30 years the popular demand to get rid of these minority regimes. In Lebanon it took a 15-year civil war to do it.

In Iraq, Saddam Hussein was powerful enough not to be overthrown, despite many attempts, until the United States invaded and threw the Sunnis—who were 20 percent of the country—to the bottom of society and catapulted the Shi'ites—the 60 percent majority—to the top. That unleashed an unholy sectarian war.

How has Syrian president Bashar Hafez al-Assad been able to stay in power so long?

In large measure because he's been preparing for this sort of uprising for years. He placed Alawites, the Islamic sect he belongs to, in the top security positions in the military and in the intelligence agency so that they would not abandon him in a crisis. By contrast, the military in Egypt abandoned Mubarak and in Tunisia they abandoned Ben Ali. All through the Arab Spring countries the militaries turned against their dictators—but not in Syria, because the Alawite minority understood that they would be swept away were the president to fall. They also have strong allies in Iran and Russia and support from other minorities.

Some Christians even support the Assad regime.

Christians make up perhaps 5 percent of Syria's population. That figure used to be more like 14 percent, after World War II. And there are the Druze, the Ismailis, and the Kurds. But the Arab Sunnis are 70 percent of the population, by far the majority. There are quite a few Sunnis who support the regime, oddly enough, because over 40 years many people worked for the regime or are implicated in its rule. If the opposition were to take power, many of the Assad supporters would lose their jobs and probably their property as well.

What interests do Western powers have in Syria?

Historically, very little. Certainly the United States has had limited interests. We've imposed sanctions on the country since the 1970s and have almost no trade with it. Our main interest is to not allow the chaos and violence in Syria to bring down friendly regimes in the neighborhood. And, of course, more recently our interest is in curbing ISIS and radicalism in the region.

What can be done?

President Obama has made the assessment that it would be damaging to the United States to try to organize a full-scale occupation of Syria to disarm the radicals and construct a new government—the sort of thing we attempted in Iraq (and didn't attempt in Libya). His aim is to pursue a very narrow policy of counterterrorism, which some Americans argue we're good at. We can listen to the terrorists' phone calls, track them, and keep them in databases. If they come to the West trying to kill Americans, we'll kill them first.

The president thinks this is a much less expensive and more doable policy than trying to somehow fix Syria and sort out the ethnic hostilities, defuse Islamism, and construct a liberal government along the lines the West would like.

The president has spoken of degrading and ultimately destroying ISIS. Is that feasible?

I think the degrading is going on. Destroying ISIS is not feasible—not with the policies that are now being pursued.

President Bush wanted to destroy Islamic extremism and was willing to spend trillions of dollars to do it in Afghanistan and Iraq with an occupation. He believed that effort would lead to power sharing and the emergence of democratic governments that would have a domino effect in the Middle East—democracies breaking out all over.

That didn't work out.

The United States spent a lot of money on the effort. It managed to put the Shi'ites in power in Iraq, so we were partly successful. But that hasn't brought liberalism to the Middle East, and it hasn't been an antidote to extremist Islamism. In fact, it has inflamed Islamism. Al-Qaeda is now well ensconced in Iraq. ISIS, a breakaway group from al-Qaeda, now controls one-third of Iraq and one-third of Syria. That is a direct

by-product of the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

Fifteen of the top 20 officers under Caliph al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, are former members of the Baathist Party in Iraq who were thrown out of power when the United States overthrew Saddam, and most of them spent long periods of time in American prisons.

Are you saying there's a revenge factor for these ISIS leaders?

They don't like America, but their main goal is to rule the Middle East and not to be ruled by the Shi'ites who were put in power by the United States in Iraq and who pushed the Baathists out of government in the country.

You have said elsewhere that military intervention by the United States in Syria would be a disaster. Why?

Theoretically, if you had NATO and international support, lots of money, and a willingness to stay for 20 or 30 years, you could rearrange Syrian society, rebuild its economy, provide people with education, and build a middle class and a new government. Obviously, the United States is not going to do that because we have had almost no interest in Syria.

Throwing arms into the area in the hope that somehow good people are going to end up on top is a very risky policy and one that's leading to the breakdown of Syrian society and the growth of jihadism.

Is there anything that the United States can do or should do?

It should spend a lot more money on helping and educating the refugees. The United States needs to set a clear agenda for the regional powers that are supporting the radicals. Turkey, for example, has been allowing al-Qaeda and ISIS to move back and forth across its territory. And Arabs in the Persian Gulf states have been pouring money into all kinds of jihadist groups.



The heart of the Ottoman Empire as of 1914.

You've talked in other places about a great "sorting out" happening in the Middle East. What do you mean?

What's going on in Lebanon, Israel, Syria, Iraq—the entire Levant—is a nation-building process. It's similar to what happened at the end of World War I when major empires were destroyed.

World War I in many ways was an empire-destroying war—it dismantled the Russian empire, the German empire, the Austro-Hungarian empire, and the Ottoman empire. The 1919 Paris Peace Conference at the end of the war drew borders rather haphazardly. The result was a series of multiethnic, multisectarian countries stretching from Poland to Palestine. These new borders and new nation states jumbled different peoples together, many of whom did not want to live with each other. This led to great tensions and the emergence of fascist and supernationalist movements. With the rise of Hitler all this exploded.

With World War II there was a great sorting out in Europe. Poland was 64 percent Polish before the war, but by the end of the war it was almost 100 percent Polish. Six million Jews had already been killed in this region. Thirteen million Germans were ethnically cleansed from Central Europe in just two years, between 1945 and 1947. A third of Czechoslovakia was made up of minorities, but by the end of the war the minorities were all gone. That's the pattern in Ukraine and Hungary, too. In Yugoslavia, Tito acted as a little emperor, and he held his mosaic together with coercion, but as soon as he was swept away the nation exploded into a very brutal ethnic war and was chopped into seven countries.

The same sorting out of ethnic groups has been and is happening in the Middle East. Half of Israeli citizens are Jews who came from the Middle East, where every major capital had a large Jewish neighborhood before World War I or before World War II. These Jews were caught between the hammer and anvil of Arab nationalism and Zionism. And almost every one of those Jewish neighborhoods is gone. There are a few Jews left in Morocco, Istanbul, and Iran, but the Jews in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Egypt are gone.

Christians are leaving too.

There aren't many Palestinian Christians left, and most Iraqi Christians have left. About 60,000 Christians in Iraq's Mosul were kicked out in one day with the ISIS conquest. The Yazidis have been enslaved or forced to convert or have fled. And Syria's largest city, Aleppo, in the north, was well over 20 percent Christian after World War I. Many Armenians had fled there from Turkey; Anatolia was 20 percent Christian before World War I. By the end of the Turkish revolution, which ended in 1922, Ataturk kicked the Greek army out and in the process ethnically cleansed the country of Christians. The Armenians had already been ethnically cleansed, so those 20 percent are gone. In Turkey less than 1 percent are Christians today, and Christians have not been allowed to build churches.

This sorting out simplifies the life of these countries. (The United States had its sorting-out process too—it got rid of Native Americans and other challengers.)

So the outlook is bleak for minority groups?

Space can be created for minority groups. Space could have been created for a Palestinian state in half of Israel, for example, but the Palestinians are increasingly being pushed out. It takes a commitment from the international community to save these minorities, and the international community ultimately doesn't care.

If you were asked to advise the Obama administration on Syria, what would you say?

I would say: try to help Syria's neighbors settle as many Syrians as they can, and help them get educated so they don't become a cauldron of future terrorists and freedom fighters.

Some Westerners think the Islamic world needs to go through a Reformation or Enlightenment of sorts. What do you think?

The dominant ideologies in the region are still absolutist and stem from the Qur'an, providing a religious justification for action. The region resembles Europe in the early modern period after the Reformation. Europe was embroiled in religious wars after the rise of Protestantism—from the late 1400s until the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Finally Catholics agreed that Protestant princes could be Protestant, that Protestants could build churches and worship, and that they weren't an abomination.

In a way the Enlightenment has begun in the Middle East. Look at the big debate in Iran today: President Rouhani says that he should be the true leader because elections brought him to power. And he wants to make a deal with the Americans. But Supreme Leader Khamenei says no, I'm the supreme leader, and God has empowered me, and this is a divine republic, an Islamic country.

Does authority stem from God or from the people? That debate is going on everywhere in the Middle East. And Shi'ites and Sunnis have to find an accommodation, a way both can exist under their version of a "separation of church and state."

So the fact that this debate is going on provides some hope?

It does provide hope. How do you encourage the debate? It requires education, opportunity, a solid middle class. Putting sanctions on countries is counterproductive. We had sanctions on Syria for decades. The estimates are that it reduced the GDP by 2 percent a year. We thought that Syria would then do a pirouette, leave Iran's sphere of influence, make peace with Israel, and love America because of a desire to get out from under the sanctions. It didn't lead to that; it led to civil war and a breakdown.

We put sanctions on Sudan, we put sanctions on Libya, we put sanctions on many countries, and it's not led to the outcomes we wanted because we've impoverished people. And we're doing it to Iran today. It may lead to a good outcome, but it could break the country.

How important are the youthful demographics in many of these countries?

Social scientists who study age have concluded that a revolution has a more than 50 percent chance of leading to a democratic transition if the median age of the population is 30 years old or older. In countries like Syria and Iraq, however, the median age is 21 years old. In Egypt it's 24; in Gaza and Yemen it's 18.

So the younger the population, the more likely that extremists will prevail?

Yes, because the younger people want radical change, and they're willing to risk a lot because they don't have a lot invested in the society. It makes more sense to go through a revolution if you're young, because even if it takes 15 years to sort things out, you'll be only 35 then and still have a future. But if you're 50 and experience a

revolution, and it only gets sorted out after 20 years, you're dead. It's hard for us to imagine what it's like to have a revolution in a country where the median age is 21.

Where do you see Israel fitting into this major sorting out in the Middle East?

Israel has gone through a sorting out, although not completely. The Jews were one-third of the population in 1948 when Israel got independence and the British left. They've made themselves into a very powerful majority. The Palestinians have largely lost, and it doesn't look like a two-state solution is in the offing. It looks like the Palestinians are going to live in some form of subjugation for a long time.

This sorting out is long and bloody. It's been long and bloody in Israel, and it's going to be long and bloody in much of the neighborhood. In Lebanon, the sorting is not over. Christians still retain 50 percent of all seats in Parliament—Sunnis and Shi'ites each get one-fourth of the seats—yet Christians are less than a third of the population.

There are over a million Sunni Syrian refugees in Lebanon, a country of 4 million people. That has completely thrown off the sectarian balance. Once those Syrian refugees get their feet on the ground and a generation has been brought up in Lebanon who feel Lebanese and not Syrian, they're not going to stand for the political arrangement.

Should the United States allow many more Syrian refugees to come here than what we have so far?

The entire world has to do more to try to alleviate these pressures. You can't just hold people in a tent. In the 19th century those people would have been able to leave and go to the New World. Today that's not the case; nobody wants immigrants. The world is filled up; we have good borders with fences, and we're building one with Mexico today to keep out the press of humanity from the south.

Look at Gaza: it's a ward of the entire West Bank, it's a ward of the international community. It doesn't produce anywhere near the wealth that it consumes. You don't want to set up refugee camps that become permanent cauldrons of injustice.

European countries haven't done a great job of assimilating immigrants, have they?

Well, they've taken on a lot of Muslims very quickly. In Sweden, for example, 20 percent of the population was born outside the country. In America the figure is only 13 or 14 percent. European nations are trying to figure out how to be multicultural societies after being rather homogenous. It's difficult to do. Every time the United States got close to having a 20 percent immigrant population—in the 1920s and a few other times—anti-immigrant parties have grown fairly strong. It's not an easy process.