

Gaslit Nation Transcript

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The Middle East Crisis Factory: The Iyad El-Baghdadi Interview

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Sarah Kendzior:

I'm Sarah Kendzior, the author of the bestselling books, *The View from Flyover Country* and *Hiding in Plain Sight*.

Andrea Chalupa:

I'm Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and filmmaker, and the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones*.

Sarah Kendzior:

And this is Gaslit Nation, a podcast covering corruption in the United States and rising autocracy around the world. And today, I'm very excited to bring our guest, Iyad el-Baghdadi. He is a Palestinian activist and writer. Since 2011, he has been a prominent online voice and an internationally recognized intellectual. For his Arab Spring activism, he was summarily jailed and expelled from the United Arab Emirates in 2014. He was subsequently granted political asylum in Norway.

Sarah Kendzior:

In 2019, the CIA alerted Norwegian authorities that he was a target of the Saudi regime, and he has been under protection by Norwegian authorities ever since. El-Baghdadi is the founder of the Kawakibi Center, a fellow of the Norwegian think tank, Civita, and a board member of The Munathara Initiative. His new book, *The Middle East Crisis Factory*, is out this month, and covers the entrenchment of tyranny, terrorism and foreign intervention, showing how these systems of oppression simultaneously feed off and battle each other. Welcome to Gaslit Nation, Iyad.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Thank you so much for having me.

Sarah Kendzior:

So, that is quite a biography that I just read and it barely skims the surface of your experience. Can you tell us a bit more about yourself; where your family is originally from, where you grew up, and how you ended up under Norwegian state protection?

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Yeah. Whenever someone introduces me, you have to summarize the past decade of my life or so in a few words, and a part of me goes like, "What the hell did you do with your life? How badly did you screw up your life that several nation states want you dead?"

Sarah Kendzior:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). We know the feeling.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Yeah. At the same time, in a certain sense—in a twisted activist kind of way—when they want to kill you, you know you're doing a good job.

Sarah Kendzior:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

But yeah, to answer your question, the history of my family is really a microcosm of the last, let's say, seven decades or so of the Middle East's history, really. Both my parents are Palestinians from Jaffa, which is basically now a suburb of Tel Aviv. My father was born there in 1948. My mother was born in diaspora in 1955. Both sides are basically refugees of the Nakba, of the 1948 Exodus.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

My father grew up in Egypt. My mother grew up between Syria and Kuwait. The family really was formed in the United Arab Emirates, and you can see that several countries are already appearing here. It's kind of a cross border story. I lived my entire life in the United Arab Emirates, even though I was born in Kuwait. My mother had to fly over to give birth because that's where her family lived. Strange situation, but I have never been to Kuwait since I was two weeks old, and I'm not allowed back in either, because I was born in Kuwait, which tells you a bit.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

We can probably come back and talk about the whole structure of tyranny that you hinted to when you were introducing my book. But yeah, so I only ever lived in the United Arab Emirates until the start of the Arab Spring in 2011. I was not really an activist before that. I had a career as a startup consultant, and I was basically a computer programmer. But then when the Arab Spring started in 2011, a lot of people in my generation felt this urge, that this is our moment. We have to say something now. We can't sit this out.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

And I took to Twitter, and whether it's fortunate or unfortunate, I became very popular on Twitter. And I became one of those voices—those go-to voices—not only for international media, but within the region. The story eventually sees me being sent to prison in the United Arab Emirates, because in 2014, they had kind of had enough with my activism. The United Arab Emirates, as you may know, is a country which is very deeply implicated in fighting back democratic change in the region.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Very closely allied with Saudi Arabia, which also is part of the same project which is preventing a democratic transition in the region. So, I found myself in prison, but of course, being Palestinian, they said, "You have to go back home." And I'm like, "I'm from here."

Sarah Kendzior:

Right.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Where are you going to send me? And you can't really deport a Palestinian back to Palestine because the place where I'm from is now Israel. And so I ended up in prison, eventually managing to get out by convincing the authorities that you can send me to Malaysia and I'll be able to take it from there. But then eventually, once I arrived in Malaysia, I was stuck in the airport and I lived in the airport in Kuala Lumpur for a month or so.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Long story short, eventually I was invited to a Human Rights Conference in Norway, and this came with an invitation from the Norwegian Foreign Ministry. And so I arrived in Norway and spoke at that conference and then applied for asylum. Being in Norway, of course, was a game changer, because I went from a country which does not allow free speech to a country which pretty much is consistently at the top of the list when it comes to free speech and also democracy. That allowed me to be a lot more effective.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Of course, I had to deal with keeping my family safe. The next few years were really some of the most difficult in my life, but there's also the fact that, after prison and after living in an airport for a while and after all of that, it's natural to come down with PTSD, which is what happened in my case. But eventually, I became an effective activist again. And wouldn't you know it? I started working with a certain Saudi journalist called Jamal Khashoggi.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Jamal was a friend, at least since he chose exile in 2017. He became closer to the dissident community. We used to see him with suspicion before that because he was associated with the regime, and we were suspicious of people who are. But eventually, we started to work on certain projects and you know the rest of the story. He was killed too soon. And I inherited a couple of his projects, and I started to really become very active in efforts to seek justice and to also expose the crime.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

And that eventually led me to exposing Mohammed bin Salman's hack of Jeff Bezos' phone, which was of course, not related to Amazon, but it was related to The Washington Post. Because Jeff Bezos, as you know, also owns The Washington Post. Mohammed bin Salman effectively wanted to punish Bezos because he did not curb The Washington Post's Justice for Jamal campaign. While I was involved in that, I started to become aware—increasingly aware—that I'm a target of the Saudi regime, and eventually that caught up with me.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Eventually, the Norwegian authorities took me into protection and told me that I am indeed a target of the Saudis. And I've been under formal protection since then. Of course, my work continues. But yeah, this is kind of a summary of how I got to this point.

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Sarah Kendzior:

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Sarah Kendzior:

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Sarah Kendzior:

It's an amazing life story. It's disheartening, but also inspiring that you've managed to endure this. Andrea and I have been watching this play out in Twitter in real-time. We've been watching as our own government has participated in events that led to your persecution, in particular, our government's relationship with Saudi Arabia, which under the Trump administration, you saw it more directly through individuals like Jared Kushner and their tight relationship with MBS.

Sarah Kendzior:

But I want to kind of back up a little bit to just talk more broadly about the region and especially about Saudi Arabia, because that country and MBS are the main source of your current plight. Can you just describe what is Saudi Arabia's influence on the Middle Eastern region as a whole? And also, how does the US contribute to its power and vice versa?

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Well, there are several ways. There are several layers to the question. Saudi Arabia was not, historically speaking ... Keep in mind, of course, Sarah, that this is an ancient region. And when we talk about our history, we can very easily take it back a millennium, two millenniums, et cetera. For us, this history is alive. But if we look specifically at Saudi Arabia, or Arabia in general... After the rise of Islam 1,500 years ago, the center of power of the Muslim world—at that time, it was not fully Arabized yet—shifted away from Arabia, and it never really returned.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

So it never really returned until the present day. So, what I'm trying to say here is that Saudi Arabia, historically, whether we're talking about the last 100 years or the last 500 years, or the last 1,000 years, Saudi Arabia was not a very big player. And I'm not talking here about the Saudi State, but the area called Saudi Arabia now, because the Saudi State itself, it only goes back to 1932. So it wasn't really the Saudis who were calling the shots in the region. It was the bigger countries in the region, particularly countries like Egypt, Syria, Iraq, et cetera.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

With the rise of this alliance between the United States and Saudi Arabia, this, of course, goes back to the creation of the Saudi State. Even before Saudi Arabia came to be what it is today, it already had a very close relationship with Western powers, especially the United Kingdom and United States. For this reason, Saudi Arabia was not really colonized, unlike other parts of the region. As you know, colonialism devastated the region, its political economy and also, really its identity. Colonialism does something to the people's perception of self, their sense of self. Saudi Arabia was kind of spared that.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

But at the same time, it wasn't the most advanced part of the region. But it really made very big strides when it comes to human development since the 1950s. If we go back to 1950 and we look at every marker of social progress, we see that there's been a complete transformation. One statistic I like to cite is that in 1950, less than 1% of Saudi women could read and write. Less than 1%. And men were also very, very unlikely to be literate, but then they were far more literate than women. So the parity between men and women was very high at the time. Today, this is absolutely different now because virtually 100% of all Saudis under the age of 24 can read and write.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

And there is gender parity; Saudi women and Saudi men have the same level of education. So this kind of tells you a little bit about the trouble in Saudi Arabia today, because the social realities have changed just so dramatically in this country—so absolutely dramatically—while the social norms did not, the kind of regime did not, the kind of alliances even did not. Whenever this happens, it's understandable that there's going to be trouble. There's going to be instability. In the Arabic world, we refer to a Muslim polymath called Ibn Khaldun. I don't know if you've heard of him.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yes.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Ibn Khaldun, he lived, I believe, in the 9th century or the 10th century, and he wrote what is considered the first book on the philosophy of history. And he was describing how nations and dynasties do not really survive more than around 70 to 80 years. And he described it as three generations.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

There's the founding generation, and then there's a generation that makes some progress, and then the third generation normally messes up. This is kind of where we are with Saudi Arabia right now, because Mohammed bin Salman is of that generation. And he is attempting the very heavy lift of reforming a state which avoided reform for a very long time—political reform, of course.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

But then, of course, the subtext over here is that he's not really attempting reform. All he's attempting is to vanquish his own family and come out on top as the autocrat—as the new autocrat, as the absolute ruler of Saudi Arabia—which he kind of managed to do so far. And I know this is a long-winded answer to your question, but I hope that your listeners appreciate the deep dive.

Sarah Kendzior:

No, that's why we asked you on. We love the deep dive, and I'm really glad that you provided historical context. About MBS, I have to ask you because I'm sure our listeners are probably still sitting there with their mouths open just from your opening biography. I have to ask you more about Jamal Khashoggi and MBS, because I'll never forget that day when the news came out that he had been murdered. And I remember looking at your Twitter feed, and you tweeting that, "From now on, everything was going to be different," that Arab activists and journalists like yourself are going to be in danger, and that this murder needed to be thoroughly investigated.

Sarah Kendzior:

And so now, we're here, three years later. The Trump administration which seemed to, at the least, condone the murder of a journalist working for a US publication. Kushner seems to have possibly been implicated in that murder with his friend MBS. And now, we have the Biden administration refusing to sanction MBS. I'm just curious, what are your thoughts on that, on MBS's dominance on the murder itself, on the position that it's put you and others in?

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

So I want to, again, zoom out a little bit and look at the history of the region beyond or around the time of Jamal's murder. So in 2011, we had, as you know, probably the biggest wave of uprisings in modern Arab history—probably in all of Arab history. This is when out of 22 Arab nations, 20 had significant protests, and several of them, of course, had full blown revolutions. Now consider, of course, that we experienced these events from the vantage point of a citizen. And both of you, of course, are experts on the topic of authoritarianism.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Imagine going through these events from the vantage point of a dictator. They were absolutely terrified. They were absolutely terrified. And it is their paranoia that continues to drive them to this day. To this day, their hysteria is really driven by their paranoia of what would happen if there is a democratic transition. Especially dictators, in many cases, they kind of paint themselves into a corner, but this is a different kind of painting into a corner because they actually paint themselves into a corner with blood.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

They spill so much blood that they know that they're married into power. There is no post presidency for them. They can't lose power because the moment they lose power, a 1,000 knives are going to be out for them. This is the situation which MBS finds himself in, because he assumed this position—of course, Mohammed bin Salman's rise itself goes back to 2015. After the Arab Spring, there was a concerted counter revolutionary effort led by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia and facilitated, unfortunately, by the United States and other world powers, including regional powers, of course.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Mohammed bin Salman was not a factor in that because he had not arrived on the scene yet. But then when he arrived on the scene in 2015, he was part of this new strategy where the meta message was, "Yeah, you can't have democracy, but you can have this guy. He's a liberal reformer, and he's going to reform you." This was the whole idea. Mohammed bin Salman was supposed to be a model or a template for saying that, "You know what, you don't really need democracy. You just need an autocrat who does the right things."

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Unfortunately, of course, for whoever believed in this, the whole façade didn't really last for a very long time. Mohammed bin Salman's tendencies really took over, especially with the rise of Trump. Trump really allowed a lot of these things to happen that ... A lot of things happened very quickly after Trump's election, which I believe they would have eventually happened, but they would have taken a lot longer if not for Trump. And I think maybe this is the one thing... Of course, Trump has caused disasters in the region, but in a certain sense, we feel like the regional order itself needed a sledgehammer and Trump just happened to be that sledgehammer.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

So Mohammed bin Salman himself has created the situation where he is incapable of stepping down. He simply can't. He actually started his ascent to power by rounding up his own family members—princes and businessmen and people who were his ... The Al Saud family is a big family after all, and they're immensely powerful. And the Saudi regime itself, before the rise of Mohammed bin Salman, was kind of a consultative monarchy. It was never a democracy, but there was a kind of consultative process within the family.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Mohammed bin Salman's rise completely destroyed that. And so between 2016, with Trump's election, and between 2020 when Trump was voted out, Mohammed bin Salman managed to change the reality of the situation within Saudi Arabia. Of course, a lot of the changes that happen outside Saudi Arabia were not to his advantage, but when it comes to his grip on Saudi Arabia, it's pretty strong. That is the reality that confronted the Biden administration when they had to decide what to do about this.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Mohammed bin Salman is simply... Further isolation is simply going to make him more repressive and it's going to drive him closer to his regional allies, being the United Arab Emirates and Israel. And these allies, of course, are simply going to validate his worst excesses, which they have been doing, as you know, when it comes to the hacking technology, for example, which he uses to hack... He probably also used it to hack Jamal Khashoggi himself. This has been provided by the Israelis, and it was Jared Kushner, as far as I know, who facilitated this.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

While it's definitely disappointing to someone like me that Biden did not do more—and I believe that Biden should have done more and can do more—I kind of understand where this is coming from. How do you punish a guy who actually is leading a nation like Saudi Arabia? Punishing someone like him is like... You can't really take him to court, for example. And even if you do, that's not going to remove him from power. Even if you sanction him, it's going to be a hit to his prestige, but it's not really going to remove him from power.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Eventually, someone like me, looking at the region, I have to ask myself, what is the best outcome? What outcome am I looking for? The theory of change that I adopted is really the one that Jamal Khashoggi did, which is that if you guarantee people freedom of speech, then they're going to start questioning the narratives that are imposed upon them and they're going to liberate themselves. Of course, the question

here is, how do you guarantee freedom of speech in a country like Saudi Arabia that jails dissidents and dismembers journalists, and sexually assaults women's rights activists, et cetera?

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

I actually wrote an article about this for The Washington Post after the recent release of the ODNI report into the Jamal Khashoggi murder, and what I advocated is that the United States should use its leverage towards the release of prisoners, towards ending the hostage-taking—which happens, which the Saudi regime does. I wouldn't really have prioritized sanctioning MBS, except as kind of a carrot and stick approach. I don't know if that makes sense, but eventually, we have to be realistic about what can be done to MBS. I think it'll be a tragedy if we focus on punishing the murderer rather than centering the cause of the person who was murdered. Jamal Khashoggi believed in freedom of speech and this is what we need to center.

Sarah Kendzior:

No, that's very understandable. I think the frustration for all of us is just the impunity; the impunity to kill, the impunity to attack, and the length to which that could go. You just referenced your recent Washington Post article, but I actually have a question about the one you wrote for The Washington Post back in May 2019 when you were unearthing the Jeff Bezos hacking that you referred to before, where his phone was hacked seemingly from a file sent from a WhatsApp account of MBS.

Sarah Kendzior:

And I'm going to quote a little bit of your article for our listeners and ask you to respond. You wrote, "When private messages from Bezos were leaked in a tabloid, he launched an investigation into their origin. This led to an attempt to blackmail him into silence, which failed when Bezos exposed it in a Medium post in which he loudly hinted to a Saudi connection. When this became public, I started investigating. After we published some preliminary thoughts on Twitter, I was contacted by Gavin de Becker, who headed Bezos' investigation team."

Sarah Kendzior:

"We began to collaborate on a volunteer basis, and the investigation culminated in an extensive report that was submitted by de Becker to federal investigators. De Becker's report concluded that the Saudis had hacked Bezos' phone." And then later in the article, you wrote, "MBS is sending a message. In a dark way, this mirrors the logic of targeting Bezos. If the richest man on earth can be targeted and potentially blackmailed, then who is safe?" And so I was curious on your thoughts about this two years later. Are we any safer? Has there been any accountability for this crime?

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Yeah. So you're absolutely right that whenever they get away with it, the world order itself—the rules-based international system—is degraded. This is not just about Saudi Arabia and it's not just about the morality or immorality of what happened, but it's really... I mean, if you want to speak to the language of people in the administration, or people who are basically steeped into foreign policy, this is bad not only for us as Arab dissidents, or democracy activists, this is bad for the entire world.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

At the same time, because of history, whenever we start working on an issue, we just have to acknowledge that the problem didn't really start from this point. The problem existed for a very long



time. The United States has had terrible allies in the region for a very long time, and its alliance with these dictators has really changed the entire political economy of the entire region. It's come to the point where every player in the region—every player, including whoever is opposing whom—everybody is a bad actor.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

The good actors are the people in prison, or the people tortured, or the people killed, or the people in diaspora because they can't go back home because they've been made into refugees. So, while I completely understand that this is infuriating ... I've been doing this for a decade now. It's the last decade of my life, and it's going to be the rest of my life. And I don't know. I mean, I know they want to kill me and I know that I'm a long-term problem to them, and they're going to be a long-term problem to me. Honestly, I hope they don't manage to kill me for another 20 years, so at least I can get to do my work.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

But maybe eventually they will, and I'm at peace with that. We have to think beyond our own lifetimes. This is so much bigger than a particular person who was killed. After all, Jamal Khashoggi was not the first that they killed and unfortunately, he's not going to be the last that they kill. There are Khashoggis all over the region and there's going to be more. And we have to think, what do we do? What can we do in the lifetime of this generation to make sure that this does not happen again?

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. I think your whole life story, in terms of your struggle, it's so compelling and representative of the region as a whole; being a displaced person fighting against tyranny and risking your life to do so. So, thank you so much for braving that and for sharing your insights in this book.

Andrea Chalupa:

What I appreciate about *The Middle East Crisis Factory* is how you and your writing partner, you present the mythology—the prevailing mythology that clouds Western understanding of the Middle East. And I learned so much from reading that section, especially the history. You've touched on some of the recent history in this conversation, but what I really love is how you go back centuries. And I think that's not done enough by analysts today.

Andrea Chalupa:

So for instance, with Ukraine, when you think in terms of centuries, it melts away your biases of that country, of that region. I think a lot of Westerners might think of Ukraine, for instance, as a "shithole country" with a babushka running around pulling a wooden cart, not realizing that it's very innovative today, and it has a long, rich history that has helped shape Europe over many centuries, and so forth. And of course, the Middle East has an extraordinarily rich history that shaped a broader human history, and a very vibrant period of enlightenment, and so forth.

Andrea Chalupa:

Could you give us a bit of an overview? Because I think it's fascinating. And I think it challenges a lot of biases about the Middle East. And even you mentioned in your book that Obama has fallen for some of these biases in his own speeches about the Middle East. Could you give us what you feel is the most

relevant historical context, going back even centuries for what people need to know to understand the Middle East today?

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Well, thank you for the question, Andrea. So I live in Europe now and I'm really fascinated and inspired by the European Union as a project, as an integration project. And I'm really excited to think where this can go, how much interregional integration can change history. As you know very well, 70 years ago, we had Nazis running around in Europe. We had the biggest World War in human history. We had 100 million people dead. Out of that came this project called the European Union. War in Europe was endemic and now war within Europe is almost unthinkable.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

If you think about a war, for example, between France and Germany, which they went to war repeatedly, but now it's completely unthinkable. It's almost like history has actually changed. The course of history has changed. When I kind of compare that to my own region, the Middle East or North Africa, which of course, is basically 25 different countries, a large number of people, I think up to 700 million people. It includes the Arabic-speaking world, but it also includes Turkey, it includes Iran, it includes, of course, Israel. What's interesting here is that the region itself, the majority of the nations in the region are Arabic-speaking, but this Arab identity itself was the result of a regional integration project that lasted for over a century.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

At the time of the rise of Islam in the 7th century AD, these countries were not really in the same political ecosystem. They were different nations, they were different people, they were different tribes, different languages. Over a very long period of time, the mainstream language became Arabic. People started to identify with their language. It's not that we actually all come from Arabia, it's just that in my own blood, there is Greek, there is Persian, there is Jewish, there is Arab, there is Kurdish, there is Assyrian; there are layers upon layers, upon layers of our history.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

But we just eventually kind of assimilated into a region which is both pluralistic, but at the same time, there are certain commonalities between people when it comes to their culture, when it comes to their lived realities, when it comes to their political awareness, when it comes to their histories. So this is important context for this region. And as you hinted, Andrea, of course, this region was one of the richest, and also the most important cultural centers and civilizational centers in the world for a very long time. With the rise of European colonialism, of course, this happened really after the European discovery of the Americas.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

And after certain European nations became fabulously rich from exploiting this whole half planet that was open to them to exploit. Of course, not to mention the crimes that actually happened in North America. But you can try to understand that colonialism was not really a matter of... It wasn't a historical inevitability, but it was really a matter of certain countries becoming so fabulously powerful and rich—so much more than anyone else—that they actually managed to subdue much larger regions of the world.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Colonialism, when it happens—and I've said this before—it robs the people of a sense of self. You start to think that you're not good enough, and that the reason why they're ruling over you is because—and they actually tell you that, they tell you that you're not civilized or you're not ready for self-rule, et cetera. And so the rise of the modern region, the modern MENA really came with the rise of the 20th century when this colonial order was starting to be dismantled.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

The book itself tries to tell the history of legitimacy. We tried to make it about legitimacy because we felt that if we speak only about the people's history, we might miss the political story. And if we talk about the political story, we might miss the people's history. But then if we talk about legitimacy, then it's something that ties both stories. It's basically the story of how people look at those who rule them, and how those who rule them look at how they justify their own control.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. But just as you touched on the Middle East was a world leader in a very influential period of enlightenment, then the Ottoman Empire was very much a dominant empire for a time. And then we had, of course, aggressive push of colonial powers, Great Britain and France. And now, most recently, the U.S. pushing in its colonial powers.

Andrea Chalupa:

And so a lot has impacted the region to shape it. But the Western sense, the Western bias... It was Obama who famously alluded to in the speech that you mentioned in your book, is that tribalism and aggression and fights going back a millennium, as though it's just a hopeless region.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

This is an annoying kind of trope that's always mentioned about ancient hatreds, and I think that's what you're referring to.

Andrea Chalupa:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

So the whole ancient hatreds thing, I started by speaking about the European Union. Yeah, people who live next to each other ... I live in Norway and now, Norway, Denmark and Sweden are some of the closest countries to each other in Europe. They're very close culturally, socially, economically, politically. They're allies, but they're also very close socially and culturally as well. But if you look at the history of wars between Denmark, Sweden and Norway, it's a never ending list.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

It just happens that people who live next to each other, they interact more and some of that interactions might be violent. So it is not completely untrue when you say that people within the region have fought against each other for a long time. But, so what? Nations that live like basically people who live next to each other, they intermarry a lot, they trade with each other a lot, they ally with each other a lot, and they fight with each other a lot. Even within families, you can kind of say the same thing, right? You've probably had more disputes or more fights with family members than with strangers.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

The whole point about ancient hatreds is that it is used to essentialize the region, and to say that this region has always been like this and so there's nothing that we should do, we should expect it to continue to be this way, and we should always have a low expectation, a bigotry of low expectations. The whole reason why I mentioned this in the book is that it's disappointing that even Obama would lean on such a line, because I think Obama knows better. The region has been frustrating many people.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Many American foreign policy thinkers have been frustrated with the region for a very long time. And I think what they really fail to see is that there is a direct relationship between dictatorship and instability. Dictators always fight with each other. They always do. Even when they agree on practically everything, they'll still find something to fight on, mainly because that's how they justify their rule. They have to create a crisis that they only can solve.

Andrea Chalupa:

And that's why your book is called *The Middle East Crisis Factory*. What's interesting about that bias that the West falls under when it comes to their misunderstandings of the Middle East is they will famously try to align with dictators, thinking that dictators bring stability, that you need a tough guy in a rough neighborhood who's going to protect you and provide you with coverage, intelligence on the ground, and so forth.

Andrea Chalupa:

And that's how you describe it in your book, is thinking that these dictators bring stability for Western foreign policy, but in reality, they don't. They bring instability because dictators are voracious with their greed and lust for power. They need external scapegoats and crises in order to hold on to that power.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Yeah. And I actually believe that this idea that dictators bring stability is one of the biggest causes of both dictatorship and instability in the world.

Andrea Chalupa:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And what's really interesting is that, in terms of the biases and mythology that you attack head on, what we're looking at in the Middle East is the same as the threat that we're under here in the United States, which is just plain, old, simple, far-right populism—or fake populism, whatever you want to call it—where it's not Islam, just like it's not Christianity. It's just this far-right gaslighting, far-right greed and corruption masquerading as populism, trying to come to power and stay in power. That's really the same threat that unites our regions essentially.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Yeah. And I like to think of the MENA and America as two different stories, stories which actually have a lot more in common than they think. Keep in mind, Andrea, that I'm talking about the story here, not the political system. I'll come back to the political system. The reason why America is important, for me, is that the world needs the story about people from all over the world—from different cultures, different religions, different faiths, different races, most of whom do not really come from there—found

themselves in this situation in this country, in this country with this promise of equality. And they managed to do it.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Now, of course, this story is still being written. We don't know how it's going to end. I'm rooting for America, that we will have an America which actually represents that, yeah, humanity can win. But then the story here really is a story of humanity. And if it can be done in America, then that story, I mean, it's going to be inspiring for everyone across the world and forever. It's a story basically about how, if people who have nothing in common except their common humanity can forge a nation and can actually accomplish equality, then that's a story which... I don't need to tell you more. This is basically the promise of America.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

In the MENA on the other hand, you have a situation where we're all from here. We are all from here, whether it's people, whether it's Jewish people, whether it's Palestinians, whether it's Arabs, whether it's Iranians, Persians, et cetera. Assyrians, Kurds, et cetera, we're all from here. We've always been here. Why can't we coexist as equals? So it's basically the same story, the same lesson in two different realms and told in two different ways. And I think that itself is what's inspiring to me.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

But then if you look at the political situation, I started by saying that in 2011, a lot of these dictators were terrified, were absolutely terrified and hysterical. And they felt like the world is ending. For them, the world is ending. The same kind of realization is also coming to two different groups, not just Arab dictators, but also a certain group of people in the United States, but also a certain group of people in Israel. I think the American side of that equation is pretty clear.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

America is demographically changing, America is becoming more diverse. A lot of these changes are happening around the world because there are many places in the world where there's kind of a slow demographic maturation. But along with this, America is changing its identity. The identity of the country is really changing from being something which is an extension of a White settler colony to something that's more native. That itself, of course, people who rooted their identity in Whiteness, unfortunately—that 30% who are always voting for Trump, and if today Trump runs for anything they would still vote for him—that problem is going to be with us for a while.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

And I understand, even though, of course, obviously, I'm not aligned with them politically, but I understand their fear. I understand their fear. In a similar sense, certain Arab elites who rooted for dictators and found themselves basically identified with them, they feel very threatened. They feel a certain familiar world is over. I feel the same situation is really happening with the Israelis at a certain level.

Sarah Kendzior:

So I want to go back to something you said before, when you were talking about colonialism and how it robs you of a sense of self. I was wondering if you could comment on that in regards to being a Palestinian and, if I'm correct, a second generation stateless Palestinian, or more broadly, if you prefer.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Yeah. I would say fourth generation because it was my grandfather and my great-grandfather who were ethnically cleansed. Of course, there is a bit of a difference with the Israeli situation because Israel, of course, started in 1948 as... I mean, the majority of the Israelis who were basically expelled from our own homes, two thirds of the fighters were coming from Europe. And these were people who were either fleeing the Holocaust or surviving the Holocaust. We can't really understand Israel without understanding or trying to really get close to how a Jewish person felt right after the Holocaust.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

And of course, the situation, of course... I mean, political Zionism did not really arise from the Holocaust. It existed for long before. The nation itself was forged after the Holocaust, and I think that really affects and continues to affect its identity. Soon after, however, it became a haven for the Middle East Jews. I think half of Jewish Israelis actually come from the Middle East. They're actually Middle Eastern, basically communities that were Iraqi Jews or Egyptian Jews, or Libyan Jews, or Moroccan Jews, et cetera.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

So the colonialism here shifted from being something which is based upon ... I wouldn't say it completely shifted, but it seems that we were subjected, as Palestinians, not only to this historical injustice of being robbed of our own homes, of a Jewish state being declared from under our own feet, where the most important cultural centers for Palestinian nationalism—like Jaffa, for example, where my parents came from—became the capital of a Jewish state. The conversation really should not be just about colonialism.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Of course, I can speak about colonialism forever, but I think it's really about the whole dynamic of ethnic nationalism, the whole idea that the correct response to our prolonged injustice is to separate out into separate realms, where we take turns standing on each other's necks. So I think our experience as Palestinians with colonialism is more multilayered. It's even more multilayered than other places of the region, because if you're talking, for example, about Egypt; Egypt was colonized, Syria was colonized, Lebanon was colonized.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Much of the region was colonized, but we were colonized multiple times, and we continue to be colonized today. The core of colonialism really is not just a matter of you occupying my land and extracting my resources and erasing me, but it's also you telling me that it's my fault. It's my mistake. You get to rule over me because you're better than me somehow.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah. That brings to mind, I was looking at your Twitter account this morning and noticing some of the things that you'd retweeted. And one of them was, "The biggest impediment to democracy and human rights on the planet is the behavior of those nations that claim to uphold democracy and human rights." And this can obviously apply to a multitude of countries. Most dictatorships claim to uphold human rights, for example.

Sarah Kendzior:

But also, you know, there is this historic legacy of countries in the West, and also Israel, defining themselves as uniquely democratic and therefore able to inflict certain policies on other nations. I was wondering if you could just comment on that tweet, and whether you were referring to something specific, or just what that means?

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Well, I was actually referring to two different things. There's two different layers to this. The first really is that in many cases, democratic nations do not act democratically outside their borders. They might be democratic for their own citizens, but when it comes to their actions—wars, foreign intervention, et cetera—the United States is probably an excellent example of this, where its impact on the world is not really pro democracy, at least in my part of the world.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

And of course, this was compounded by Trump, but it's not a problem that started with Trump. A lot of democracies support dictatorship around the world because it keeps them safer, because it keeps them prosperous. But also, there's a message that's being sent to the world, which is to say, democracy ... Of course, this is kind of simplistic, but unfortunately, dictators turn around and say this to their own people. They're like, "Look at these people. They call themselves Democrats, or they say that they're a democracy, but they're hypocritical." And this is used in narratives within those countries to shoot down the very idea of democracy.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

And this is something that happens every day, because when you actually read the ... One of the things that we do at the Kawakibi Center is that we study disinformation, and especially disinformation being produced on Twitter by especially the Saudi and Emirati regimes. And of course, a lot of this is in the Arabic language. And one thing they use a lot is to say that you guys are not ready for democracy—we as Arabs, we're not ready for democracy—but also democracy is not that great. Look what America does, look what the United Kingdom does, look what France does. So the conduct of democratic states is basically being used to construct a narrative which excuses dictatorship. This is not even counting the direct support of dictatorship.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

And in the end, at the same time, I think the main problem really with dictatorship is not really fully comprehended. The human cost of dictatorship is not really fully comprehended. And if you look at the number of people who live in extreme poverty in the world, the number of people who live without drinking water, the number of people who live, for example, impacted by climate change, the number of refugees, et cetera, compare that number—as tragic as it is—to the number of people who live under dictatorship. The number of people who live under dictatorship absolutely dwarfs any of those numbers.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

And in many cases, a lot of those problems—the other problem like the poverty and like the war, and like the refugee waves, and like the climate change, and all of that—a lot of these are also either caused or made a lot worse by dictatorship. The human cost alone is not really measured in the number of people they kill or imprison, but also the stunted human potential. The fact that there are lots of amazing people, talented people, living in these countries. They cannot become what they aspire because they live in a dictatorship.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Lots of people who are brilliant poets, for example, or writers or authors, or musicians, they simply can't have a career because they live in a country that doesn't really respect... They can't really express themselves freely. The human cost is absolutely enormous. And I think we need to understand that first, before we talk about what should be done about it. Because when it comes to what should be done, I think it's not a matter of a lack of political imagination, but really a lack of political will.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. No, absolutely. Looking back on the Arab Spring and the aftermath of this pushback against it—the strongman resurging across the region—do you think the Arab Spring was a good thing?

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

When I speak about the Arab Spring, a lot of people think or deal with the Arab Spring as something that happened in 2011. I kind of disagree. I speak about the Arab Spring as something that *began* in 2011, not something which ... It's not a binary event. It's not basically 2011, but rather it's a phase of our history as Arabs. It's basically an intergenerational transition. And when you look at the region, of course, you see that it's very turbulent. But then, again, that's what transitions to democracy look like.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

I ask Europeans sometimes, what did their transition to democracy look like? Well, it looked like two World Wars and 100 million people dead. Transitions to democracy do not happen very quickly. They take generations. They take a lot of time, and they're turbulent. This is how it is. So judging it now, 10 years... I tell people, it's a 30-year process. And this is actually what I say in the book. It's a 30-year process. We're 10 years into it, we still have 20 years ahead.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

So if people want to judge whether this has been a good thing or a bad thing, maybe you do that in 2041. But even then, we have to consider whose fault it is that this region has become a lot more unstable. A case in point is Syria, for example, which is absolutely in far worse shape than it was in 2011. But then you ask the question, what would have happened if Bashar al-Assad in 2011, instead of shooting protesters, said, "Let's have elections." It could have been that simple.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. No, absolutely. Could you speak a little bit about Russia's role in the region?

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Well, Russia is—in the region at least—is an opportunistic actor. There was a vacuum left by the Arab Spring because these regimes were very weak, and a lot of them collapsed. And of course, we have to remember also that after the 2003 debacle of the Iraq War, and a very long and diplomatically exhausting—not just militarily, but also diplomatically exhausting engagement in the region—it was also clear that the United States was exhausted and did not want to pursue any more expansive policies in the region.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:



We've seen, for example, how, whether it was Obama or whether it was Trump, both of them were trying to pull back from the region. And it continues under Biden, and I think it's still going to continue because this is really the matter that whether it's people on the left or the right in the United States, they really don't want more wars in the region. I don't know if you agree, and I would be interested to know what you think, but I think this is at least my impression.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah, I think Americans are very burnt out on war after the war in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq, the failures, and also, because of our own turn towards autocratic government, which had been long coming and had historical precedent, but obviously accelerated under Trump. And it's part of a broader global trend of the Western world falling into corrupt mafia states or autocratic regimes—with the U.S., with Brexit, with Hungary, with Poland, Turkey, et cetera.

Sarah Kendzior:

I was curious what you think of this global tendency, because within 10 years time, we've gone from the West lecturing the Middle East about how it should change and overthrow its dictators, to electing our own, to having electoral autocracies.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Just to continue with the thing about Putin and about Russia. In the end, Russia is not really a match for the West. If you look at its GDP, or if you look at its population, or if you look at its economic output, or even if it's its military, it's not really a match. But you're faced here with a core of democratic nations that are unsure about what to do, but these autocratic regimes which absolutely know what they have to do.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

They know that they have to degrade the world order. I know that. Putin, for example, could not throw missiles at Europe, but he could throw Syrian refugees at them. And this is exactly what he did. He used the situation. He used the fact that there's a vacuum in the region. And of course, we can talk forever about what I think Obama should have done.

Andrea Chalupa:

Oh, I'd love to, the next conversation.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

But yeah, we're actually very disappointed, of course, in the Obama years. And we feel absolutely let down by Obama. And I think it's really compounded by the fact that we actually believe that he's a good person, which makes it even more difficult because you're like, "Okay, I actually believe that you're a good person, but you have never shown that you care about us. Unfortunately, too, your foreign policy has made it so much worse for us."

Andrea Chalupa:

And you basically let Putin slaughter Syrians, and try to negotiate... long conversation there. But, yeah.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

It's a painful topic, to be honest, but I think it's an important one. Generally speaking, I would say that I enjoy having conversations with you guys because while you're aligned with the left, you understand authoritarianism.

Andrea Chalupa:

Right?

Sarah Kendzior:

Unfortunately, yes.

Andrea Chalupa:

Which isn't a small thing, unfortunately, because the region—especially Syria—has been plagued by people on the left who contribute to Russian propaganda, Russian state media, and try to gaslight the crimes of Assad and Putin in the region.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Absolutely. And I think it's rare to find American progressives—American people who are aligned with the left in America—who actually understand authoritarianism. Unfortunately, I don't understand it. I'm not American. Visited a few times, never lived there, and I don't really understand this hybrid insularity among many Americans. I think it'll be very useful to have these conversations about foreign authoritarians and how authoritarianism manifests itself in the world. And how to be a leftist is always to be on the side of the crushed, of the underprivileged, of the marginalized.

Andrea Chalupa:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, absolutely.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

How can you be on the side of a dictator?

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah, it's been very frustrating for us to watch this play out, to watch people in our own country having just this sense of either whataboutism, or excusing brutal dictatorships, of not having a moral standard, not having a moral core, and not thinking about the people who are suffering, which should be at the forefront of everybody's thoughts. And that's the tragedy of this era. And I have one last question, which is, how do you walk the line between being honest about the state of the world and giving hope to your audience?

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Yeah. Honestly, it's one and the same thing, Sarah, because in the end, when I speak of hope, really, I don't really speak about this idea that things are going to turn out a certain way. I think hope, for me, at least this is how I see it, and you might disagree or you might agree, I don't know, but hope really is the idea that some things are worth our lives, some things are really worth the effort, that however dark things get, the concept of light exists. That itself should be enough to motivate us to get up and do something.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

In the end, I know—especially as a Palestinian—I know that 20 years from now, we're going to be fighting. I know that with us, as Palestinians, we don't have a country to live in, but our country lives in us. We know that there are other people who pass on to their children, property and shares and stock options, I don't know what. We pass to them a cause, unfortunately, that they have to carry. And it's heavy. But then we're motivated by this idea that hope exists, like truth exists, goodness exists, equality exists.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

And these are things which are worth the effort, they're worth our lives. I don't know if we're going to get there within the span of one generation, but it's kind of also egotistical to think I only want to do this because I want to enjoy its fruits. I think it doesn't really work that way, especially if you internalize the history of your people and the history of your region. This is an ancient region, and the problems did not start with us and they're not going to end with us.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

The hope for a better future also did not start with us. The movement for equality and the movement for freedom did not start with us, and it's not going to end with us either. So we really have to root what really motivates us in something bigger than what might happen, what political outcomes might happen. Regardless, whether things are bad or good, we still have to fight.

Sarah Kendzior:

That's beautifully said. Thank you so much for coming on our show. We really liked having you.

Andrea Chalupa:

And you and your co-author, Ahmed Gatnash, you have a podcast called the Arab Tyrant Manual podcast, which people can check out for a deeper dive on The Middle East Crisis Factory, your book, and what to do about the future of the Middle East.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

Yeah, shoutout to my friend, Ahmed Gatnash. We've been working together for nearly a decade now. And I think I would suggest if you want to know more, to follow us on Twitter. I'm sure that Sarah and Andrea are going to put out our Twitter accounts.

Sarah Kendzior:

Oh, yes.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

It's actually on hiatus currently, because we're kind of expanding our team and really adding a lot of other stuff. We also have the book, The Middle East Crisis Factory, which comes out next month. I hope I'll be back on the show.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah, absolutely.

Sarah Kendzior:

I feel like we have a lot left to ask you. Every point you made, I kept wanting to do follow ups and I'm like, "You got to take your time."

Andrea Chalupa:

Exactly. We're the ones who are going to solve the Middle East, not Jared Kushner.

Iyad el-Baghdadi:

I felt also that sometimes you know so much about a topic and you think about it all the time, so you're tempted to do a very deep dive. And sometimes, I felt like I'm going way too deep for an hour-long conversation.

Sarah Kendzior:

No, it's good. We do this all the time on this show. And we're kind of an anomaly in that way, but it's necessary. I hope people took away a lot from this conversation. I hope they really learned stuff, but also learned what they didn't know, learned what the gaps are in their knowledge.

Sarah Kendzior:

And hopefully, they'll read your book and read other books, and keep learning, and explore more, because I think that's the only way that we can reach understanding. It's through these historical and comparative analyses, ones that center actual human beings instead of abstractions or raw power grabs. Anyway, I'm going on and on. Thank you so much.

Andrea Chalupa:

This has been part one of our conversation, and we'll have you and Ahmed back on.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah. Thank you so much for coming on.

Andrea Chalupa:

Our discussion continues and you can get access to that by signing up on our Patreon at the Truth Teller level or higher.

Sarah Kendzior:

We want to encourage you to donate to your local food bank, which is experiencing a spike in demand.

Andrea Chalupa:

We also encourage you to donate to the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian relief organization helping refugees from Syria. Donate at [rescue.org](https://rescue.org). And if you want to help critically endangered orangutans already under pressure from the palm oil industry, donate to The Orangutan Project at the [orangutanproject.org](https://orangutanproject.org) and research ways on how you can cut out palm oil in your life. Gaslit

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