



The ISIS Files (4/22/19)

00:00:25 Jessica Chen: Good evening, everyone. My name is Jessica Chen, and I'm the senior director of public and professional programs here at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. It's my pleasure to welcome all of you to tonight's program, The ISIS Files. As always, I'd like to extend a special welcome to our museum members-- if you are not a member yet, I encourage you to consider joining as one by visiting our website-- and to the George Washington University alumni who have joined us as well.

00:00:50 As ISIS retreated from Iraq in 2017, it left behind vast quantities of records, illustrating what life was like under the caliphate. "New York Times" foreign correspondent Rukmini Callimachi collected over 15,000 pages of documents they left behind. Now "The New York Times" has partnered with the program on extremism at George Washington University to review, research, and publish this unprecedented trove of information about life under the Islamic state. We are joined tonight by Rukmini and Lorenzo Vidino to take a closer look at this important undertaking.

00:01:23 Rukmini Callimachi is a foreign correspondent for "The New York Times," covering Islamic extremism, and is a four-time Pulitzer Prize finalist. She has become the go-to reporter on the Islamic State, and she hosts Caliphate, the "Times"' first serialized podcast, which has been downloaded over a million times. "Wired" magazine called her arguably the best reporter on the most important beat in the world.

00:01:45 Lorenzo Vidino is the director of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University. An expert on Islamism in Europe and North America, his research over the past 15 years has focused on the

mobilization dynamics of jihadist networks and the activities of Muslim Brotherhood-inspired organizations in the West. He has testified before the United States Congress and other international parliaments, and he regularly provides commentary to media outlets, such as "The New York Times," CNN, and the BBC, to name a few.

00:02:13 With their combined professional experience and considerable expertise, we are truly fortunate to have both of them here tonight to share their insights with us. We at the museum are also especially grateful to the George Washington University's Program on Extremism, whose experts have collaborated generously with us now on a number of public programs since 2016.

00:02:30 To open the program, Rukmini will give us a short presentation on her work collecting the ISIS files. This will be followed by a conversation with Rukmini and Lorenzo, moderated by executive vice president and deputy director for museum programs Clifford Chanin. So, without further ado, please join me in welcoming Rukmini Callimachi.

(applause)

00:02:56 Clifford Chanin: Thank you, Rukmini, that was fascinating. Welcome, everybody. I'd just like to greet you as well; Lorenzo as well. You talk about this vast number of pages found at random. Talk about the mechanics of gathering it, getting it out, and bringing it to George Washington University. And at that point, Lorenzo, I'd like to ask you what you thought when these documents showed up on the door. (chuckling) But, please, Rukmini.

Rukmini Callimachi: Is this on?

Clifford Chanin: Yeah.

00:03:27 Rukmini Callimachi: Yeah. So the mechanics of it. When... when I was in Iraq, I was always embedded with Iraqi troops. As a foreign reporter, you can't go to these areas without being on an, on an official embed. Before every embed, you meet with the officer who is in charge of that unit. It's typically a general, sometimes a colonel, sometimes a captain, but usually a senior officer. And they want to know what your objectives are.

So, most of my colleagues were asking to get as close to the violence as they could, because they wanted to have the most dramatic images or the most recent information about ISIS. I was always asking for the same thing, which is, "I want to go to the buildings right after you've cleared them, and I want to look for ISIS documents."

00:04:10 They were initially a little bit puzzled, you know, by this. They didn't see what the, what the big fuss was about these... about these records. But over time, I gained their trust. And so in area after area, what I would do is we would wait for a neighborhood to essentially be taken back. Iraqi forces, and typically their intelligence units, and I'm assuming our country's intelligence, would go in ahead of time and take what they thought was interesting.

00:04:36 And from what I can tell, those people were ripping out the hard drives of computers and were looking for records that included names, which is not that interesting to me. I was looking for the governing records. And I would be allowed to go in essentially in the second or third wave. The officers in question would assign one to sometimes three or four soldiers to accompany me. And they would go ahead of me.

00:05:01 I would, I was always under instructions to walk directly in their footsteps because the biggest danger was IEDs. And they would help me scour the area and look for these records and I would show up with garbage bags and literally pick them up and take them away. (chuckling): Glad. Glad trash bags are my favorite bags.

(laughter)

- 00:05:22 Rukmini Callimachi: I then spent-- we spent weeks in Iraq trying to scan them in situ, and, I mean, at one point there were three of us in my hotel room in Erbil that spent close to two weeks just trying to scan them on our phones. And it was impossible. It was impossible to finish it. We ended up bringing the documents back to New York, and it took in total, I think, six weeks of a group of people, two or three people working almost full time just to be able to digitize, I would say 90% of the trove.
- 00:05:57 I spent months translating them and working on my story. And as we were getting closer and closer to publication, my first thought was I really had hoped that "The New York Times" would create a digital archive of their own. And I went and barked up a number of different trees at "The New York Times"—the graphics department, this department, that department. And what came back is that this is, this is just not the role of a newspaper.
- 00:06:24 "We're not archivists, we're not historians, and we can't just dump these things." You know, I kept saying, "Why can't we just create someplace to put them?" "Well, we can't put a bunch of documents in Arabic on our website without a proper translation." The translation would have been in the tens of thousands of dollars, you know, to complete for this trove. So it became clear as we got closer to publication that the "Times" was not going to be able to house them, as I had hoped.
- 00:06:52 So we began to reach out to potential partners, because I recognized right away that this is, in the end, a historical trove, not just for us as researchers, but certainly for the Iraqi people who are, who are named, you know, in them. And we initially spoke to CDC at West Point. They, of course, do amazing work. Dean Baquet, the editor in chief of "The New York Times," felt that that would not be a partnership that we could have because of the perception that West Point is linked to the U.S. military.
- 00:07:27 And so what we did is we included a box with the publication of my story, saying that we were looking to make these documents publicly available. We'd had a couple of other conversations on the side, and then we

published the story. And then we began to field inquiries, you know, from people. And GW is, of course, one of the premier programs on extremism not just in America, I would say, but in the world. And so we were, we were delighted when Lorenzo and Seamus came to us and began this discussion.

00:07:58 Clifford Chanin: Let me just point out that the article you mentioned, "The ISIS Files," runs on April 4 of 2018. And it's a very, very long takeout. But it's only, essentially, the highlights, or a very slim, you know, drill down into the detail of this. Lorenzo, I assume that by the time the documents come to you, they're out of the garbage bags...

Lorenzo Vidino: Yeah, we cleaned them up.

Clifford Chanin: ...Sorted out, and so you have something to look at. What's your thought in developing this interest? And what purpose do you see it serving and that GW can be sort of the medium for?

00:08:36 Lorenzo Vidino: I think I very much share the approach that Rukmini has, that documents are key. I run a center that is fairly new. We're five years old. But I think we specialize in looking at documents with a different angle for us. It's always been the ISIS-related mobilization in the States.

00:08:53 I came here to speak in this venue a few years ago, presenting our report on ISIS in America. And the core to us has always been the documents, primary sources. So we love documents. And we do see this approach as invaluable, whether you're looking at the domestic mobilization for ISIS or places like Mali or Iraq. We immediately understood the importance for an academic institution to be preserving what is invaluable information, to make that accessible to the public.

00:09:25 I think we found a very valuable and like-minded ally in the GW library, which, of course, brings their own archiving expertise. And the idea, the philosophy behind it is, exactly like we have repositories of documents of

other moments in—tragic moments in history, from the Rwandan genocide, to the Holocaust Museum-- different entities that collect the information that is so crucial in understanding a certain phenomenon.

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We feel, we felt that it was crucially important for us to be involved in that effort. It was a privilege to do so. And I really want to thank Rukmini for that. Now, of course, there's different aspects in that project. The first one is the technical, the digitizing, which in itself is not very easy to do. Then, of course, the second part is translating all this information. The goal of this project is within two years to digitize, translate, and then publish on a website all the 15,000 documents that Rukmini collected.

00:10:30

And what we also want to do, of course, is accompany the release of these documents with an analysis. It would make no sense to just put the documents on the website with no contextualizing, with no explanation.

So what we are trying to do is put together a team of experts, some of the best in the field. You mentioned Cole Bunzel, who is here, and a few other scholars, whether in the West or from Iraq, to basically analyze the documents. There's different categories. I mean, as we saw, there's some documents that talk about the economy.

00:11:01

There's other documents that talk about education, how ISIS was running an education system. There's documents that have to do with the military side of things. So different categories, different reports, we see analyzing those batches of documents and being released over the next couple of years.

Rukmini Callimachi: If I can just add, right after the publication of "The ISIS Files," we were initially flooded with probably two dozen institutions, very famous institutions, that wanted to partner with us. And one of the things that stood out about GW is that they completely understood the public service aspect of this trove.

00:11:46 So many of the other discussions we had were with academics who wanted them for their own research, or for the research of their students, and hadn't really, you know, spent much time thinking about this being a public archive, and specifically hadn't thought about the Iraqi and the Syrian angle. And Lorenzo is working very hard to create a partnership with universities in Iraq, specifically so that Iraqis who are named in these documents have can access to them.

00:12:16 Clifford Chanin: Let me ask-- obviously you found what you came across by chance. This is a tiny, tiny fraction, presumably, of the vast bureaucracy that created many more documents than the ones we're looking at here. Are you aware of any effort, which would presumably be in Iraq, to gather these more mundane documents, not things of intelligence value, but things that essentially paint a daily life picture of what the Islamic State was, and perhaps what it could be, if they have their wish?

00:12:49 Rukmini Callimachi: I am not. And in fact one of the things that we discovered as we were searching these buildings, is that Iraqi forces, after the papers were searched over by their intelligence agents, were actually burning them. And they're not, they're not doing this, you know, to be malicious or whatever.

It was part of, I just think, this effort of ridding the landscape of ISIS. And so it's actually the opposite. The documents were being, were being destroyed. If the slide presentation is still up, I would love to play an audio clip. Henry, can we get it back up? Let's see if we can get it.

(overlapping conversation on recording)

00:13:30 Sorry, let me just set this up. You're going to hear three voices here: me, Hawk, who is my translator, speaking English, and then you're going to hear Iraqi troops that welcomed us as we arrived at a building that was a church, that in fact had been the seat of Diwan al-Ghanima which is the ministry of war spoils of ISIS. And they explained to us...

Clifford Chanin: Let me just-- "War spoils," just so everybody understands.

Rukmini Callimachi: Yes, ministry of war spoils. Hawk is... he's initially struggling to translate it, so I think he calls it the "booty church."

(laughter)

Clifford Chanin: Different problem altogether.

Rukmini Callimachi: But you'll hear the response of the Iraqi troops when we get there.

00:14:12

(clip begins)

Hawk: He says, he says sometimes...

(Iraqi troop member speaking)

Hawk (chuckling): He says you are the first... the first people to ask about documents, actually. So, every time we find some documents, we just burn it.

Rukmini Callimachi (in clip): Oh, my God! No! Are you serious? You burn it?

(Iraqi troop member speaking)

Hawk: Yes.

Rukmini Callimachi (in clip): Oh!

00:14:29

(Iraqi troop member and Hawk conversing in local language)

Hawk: He says "Anything that belongs to... we just burn it."

Rukmini Callimachi (in clip): Tell them you can learn so much more about this terrorist group by looking at these documents.

(Iraqi troop member and Hawk conversing)

(conversation continues)

00:15:07

Hawk: There is a church here. It's called the, the booty church... the booty... or "Ghana'im"... center. So this thing is like the booty, the war booty. And there are some papers in there as well, if you want to go.

00:15:22

(clip ends)

Rukmini Callimachi: Anyway, you get the point.

Clifford Chanin: Did you find it was too much for you to take at some points?

Rukmini Callimachi: (laughs) I mean, it's, obviously very sad if you're, if you realize the value, you know, of these things. And I just came back from Syria in February; I was there for three weeks. And same thing

there, you know. Like, they're... they're just being burned. They're seen almost as this embarrassing, you know, reminder of this brutal group that was there, and better to get rid of this stuff.

00:15:52

Clifford Chanin: So, you know, there have been criticisms raised about this. And Middle East Studies Association, which has its own history in all of this stuff, but nonetheless raises the question of shouldn't this be the property of the Iraqi people and in the hands of the Iraqi people? And bringing it out, then, of course, raises questions.

Rukmini Callimachi: Sure.

00:16:11

Clifford Chanin: Now, the question may be answered by the fact that no one was interested in this, not completely, but nonetheless, something to take into account. But, you know, it is... there is, nonetheless, value in the statement that ultimately, as you yourselves were saying, this needs to serve somehow and return somehow to the use of Iraq, the state and the people. So, you know, how do you look at that challenge, and is the partnership potentially with the university or universities in Iraq...

Lorenzo Vidino: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: ...the answer to that challenge?

00:16:39

Lorenzo Vidino: That's a big part of it. And I think what-- one of the very first things we did is returning the documents, the original documents, to the Iraqi government. So they have them. It's the, the perception that the documents were stolen or anything, first of all, dispelled by the... the sort of idea that, you know, most of the Iraqis don't... were burning those documents. If anything, I would say that what Rukmini did was preserving something very valuable that was about to be destroyed.

- 00:17:04 The documents were returned, and I think then led to a very positive cooperation now with the Iraqi government, where we're at the point that I'm about to go to Iraq, invited by the Iraqi government. We were very keen on establishing different forms of cooperation. Understanding of these documents can serve a purpose, exactly in reconciliation, in making some information available to the Iraqi people.
- 00:17:34 Keep in mind also that... the event we had earlier today, not everybody in this room knows, but before the public event, we had a workshop with around 20, 25 people, mostly experts in the field-- I want to thank everybody who participated-- with the idea of getting input on how to do this ethically, how to handle these documents.
- 00:17:56 So we're going to be spending, basically, the next 12 months doing this kind of research, trying to get tips from people who have been working on this, with longer experience than we do, on how to handle these documents ethically. What do we publish? What do we redact? What do we not redact? What are the legal and ethical issues that can arise in doing this kind of work?
- 00:18:20 So we're not taking this lightly. Some of the criticism-- but not all of it, to be honest-- but some of the criticism that has been leveraged, are points that we were considering. And they're fair points to be looked at, and we are doing that. So I'm very comfortable where we are, the kind of work we're going to be doing over the next 12 months in handling this. It's work in progress. There are certain issues which are very difficult to sort out.
- What we want to do is do something that is useful to as broad as possible the range of stakeholders. And, again, this is done very much with the support-- indirect support, of course—of the Iraqi government. So I'm very comfortable with that.
- 00:19:06 Clifford Chanin: Let me ask if we can go a bit into the actual content of some of the interactions that these documents describe. Because it's fascinating based on the article you wrote, and, of course, the many

transactions that are involved always involved a person, a private person, individual, or representative of the state, and some sort of state overseer who is enforcing an ideology.

So let's put that person out of the scene, because you do describe in agricultural exchanges the relationship between bureaucrats who wake up one morning, it's no longer the government of the Iraq, it's now the Islamic State, and they're told to go back to work. In fact, they're threatened if

00:19:44 Rukmini Callimachi: Right.

Clifford Chanin: And they are now running transactions with Iraqi farmers or merchants or whatever it is. And all of a sudden, the context has changed entirely, but the basic transaction has not changed.

Rukmini Callimachi: Right.

Clifford Chanin: And so, how do you look at the dynamic that the documents reveal? Is this something where people are trying not to support this? Do they have no choice? Or do they essentially give in to the new order that we're dealing with?

00:20:11 Rukmini Callimachi: So, there's a couple of things that come through. Number one, it's clear that ISIS built its state on the back of the state that was there before. Basically, they took the existing Iraqi government structure and put their people at the top, put an emir from ISIS at the very top, but they kept the civil service, the civil servants in place if they were Sunni.

00:20:34 So of course, Shias, Christians, Yazidis, were immediately chased out. But if they were Sunnis, they were immediately ordered to go back to work. That doesn't sound very revolutionary, until you think of what we, as the

American government did in 2003, when we went into Iraq, and when instead, the coalition passed an order that essentially dissolved the Ba'athist state.

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And that decision is one of the decisions that has been blamed for the chaos that followed, because all of the-- you know, all of the people that were the bureaucrats were suddenly out of work. They became the fodder of the insurgency much later. And the Iraqi state very nearly collapsed.

Clifford Chanin: And still hasn't recovered.

Rukmini Callimachi: And still hasn't recovered. So that's the first thing that you see. So, for example, when you look at ISIS's ministry of agriculture, it's basically aping the rituals of the Iraqi directorate of agriculture, down to the head of this office, the head of that office. They haven't changed.

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So I'm looking at documents that are signed by the Islamic State's ministry of agriculture, director of the Sahel office. And I'm assuming that that person is an ISIS member. I go to the police station after finding these records and ask them, you know, what they know about these people, And they're like, "Oh yeah, this guy still lives here."

And I'm like, "How does he still live here?" "Oh, he was a civilian. "He was, he was basically just an Iraqi agronomist who was forced into the service of ISIS." And I actually was able to go and find these people who have signed ISIS forms, who basically just became bureaucrats under duress for them. So that's one level.

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But then, of course, there are the war crimes. So, for example, in the area of land management, one of the policies that ISIS passed was that any land belonging to Yazidis, Shiites, Christians, apostates-- which by that they mean Sunnis who have collaborated with the service or the state--

and the last category was Sunni... people living outside the caliphate. Anybody in those categories, their property was for the taking.

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So you suddenly see document after document attesting to essentially ethnic cleansing, where Sunnis who have been left behind and who are now working for ISIS are going and seizing the farmland of a Shia, the orchard of a Christian, the home of a Yazidi, and giving it over to a fellow Sunni. And that's where you see the complicity with the Islamic State.

Clifford Chanin: So this is essentially a documentation, the paperwork of the mechanics of whether it's ethnic cleansing or... simply war spoils...

Rukmini Callimachi: Yeah.

00:23:16

Clifford Chanin: Is another way that they had identified it in a positive sense, or they believed it was.

Rukmini Callimachi: Right.

Clifford Chanin: You know, I wanted to sort of step back because there is so much still, the latest news about all of this-- so the Islamic State, such as it was, no longer has the territory that, at its peak in this documentation, it... it was in charge. I'd like to ask both of you, you know, this doesn't go away. It seems to morph. Before there was a state, it was a movement towards a state.

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Now that there's no state, what is it a movement towards? Because the one thing that seems consistent is it's a movement of some kind or another, whether it's holding territory. So how do you assess the current state and the threat as the Islamic State represents it? And we'll talk about its relation with Al Qaeda after that.

00:24:08 Rukmini Callimachi: So I spent three weeks in February in Syria. I rushed there with my hair on fire at six-and-a-half-months pregnant, thinking that the last village under ISIS rule was about to fall. I was told that it was going to fall within two or three days and that I was going to miss it. And I ended up staying three weeks, until I was almost seven-and-a-half-months pregnant because this village that was the size of Central Park, just refused, refused to give up.

00:24:35 And among the work that I did there is I found documents in basically the second and the third to last village to fall, a place called Marashida and a place called Ash Sha'fah. And what's interesting in those documents is that they are dated from January of 2019. Some were dated February of 2019, so right now. And they still, they still showed the ministry structure of ISIS working.

00:25:02 We went into an ISIS hospital, and they had prescriptions that were still being issued on ISIS ministry of health stationery, that they're still issuing. Even as they lost everything around them, they're still going through, you know, the rituals of this bureaucracy. That to me shows that the bureaucracy was really important to them. And I don't know in what way they're going to carry it forward, but the group was still structured and organized. It hadn't, it hadn't fallen apart.

00:25:34 The second observation I would share is that, yes, now this last village has finally, has finally fallen. But when I was driving back and forth to the front lines, we were going from the northeastern part of Syria, the... kind of the place that you leave from, is a town called Hasakah. And you drive 100 miles south past the village of Shaddadi, to a place called Omar oil field, a famous oil field that ISIS took over.

00:26:02 And from there you drive to the front lines. This 100-mile stretch of road had been liberated in 2015 and 2016. So it's been liberated for years. It was so dangerous on this stretch of road because of insurgent attacks by ISIS, IEDs, ambushes, targeted assassinations, that my drivers were more afraid to go on the liberated stretch of road than they were to go to the front lines in the village of Baghouz.

- 00:26:29 And I think that points to the future of ISIS. What we had before was ISIS was in a specific address. We knew where they were. There was a front line. You know, they shoot at you in front of this front line, and behind you, technically, you are safe. But now it's like the hornet's nest has been kicked. And they're everywhere and nowhere. And these areas that are technically liberated are not safe. They're not safe at all. There was an IED practically twice a week on this road when I was there. And that's what liberation looks like. So you have an insurgency now, which in some ways is actually, is actually harder to handle than a sort of conventional fight on the front lines.
- 00:27:13 Lorenzo Vidino: Let me expand it more on a global level. I think the analysis on Syria and Iraq are, I'll leave it to Rukmini, but I think what we're seeing globally is that the different entities that either ISIS created or for the most part co-opted or entertained some kind of relationship globally, are still very much active. Every theater will deserve a separate analysis, but from, from North Africa, to areas from like Sinai-- Rukmini a great story over the weekend about Congo, and the presence of ISIS in Congo.
- 00:27:47 Interesting some of the very materials that she collected in Iraq actually were found on a dead ISIS militant in Congo. To places like Southeast Asia, to Afghanistan. We don't know exactly what happened in Sri Lanka, but of course there's speculation there was some kind of connection to ISIS. I think it's premature to call it.
- 00:28:09 But I think we do see these entities, again with different levels of connectivity towards ISIS, in some cases is fairly operational. In other cases, purely inspirational. But they are still very much active. They all work on the local dynamics. They exploit the local circumstances. They all push the ISIS agenda, and, of course, there's the drive to send a message that the group is still active. If I look at the area I studied the most, which is the West, we do still have a broad number of sympathizers.

- 00:28:52 There is, of course, a big debate as to why we have seen less attacks carried out by ISIS in the West. Last year was the year we had the least, the lowest number of attacks, only seven attacks. If we go back to 2014, '15, we were seeing around 25, 30 attacks in the West. That is not to say that... again, most individuals who are inspired by ISIS are not trying, we have seen a fairly high number of attacks have been thwarted. That also applies to the United States as well.
- 00:29:27 We do see that we have still very charismatic individuals and certain recruiting pipelines that are very much operational. And, of course, even though I do think it's to some degree a bit overblown, the whole idea of returning foreign fighters, it is very much of a dynamic that needs to be taken into consideration. So the message is still there. It's still very much available online. It is still very much resonates with a fairly broad constituency in different parts of the world.
- 00:29:58 My concern is mostly with the reaction from us, from the West. I mean, I'm to some degree, I think it's reminiscent of what we saw around ten years ago, when, you know, there was sort of a conjunction of events. Bin Laden was killed. It was the beginning of the Arab Spring, which, of course, at the beginning at least, looked like something very positive as a development. There was a bit of fatigue. I think it is fair to say that after ten years of the war on terror, by 2008, 2009, 2010, we hadn't seen major attacks.
- 00:30:34 We kind of got used to seeing one or two successful attacks in the West, not of a very big scale, a couple attacks outside the West. Basically, everybody saw the phenomena in decline, and we had this lowering of attention, which to some degree one can argue is what led to the international community's lack of interest in the rise of ISIS at the very beginning.
- 00:30:58 So I think to some degree, again, we are at the end of another decade where it's been very intense from this point of view, and there is this sense of fatigue, and maybe this sort of illusion that, well, the caliphate is no longer around, so terrorism is not, you know-- ISIS, or jihadism in

general-- is no longer a priority. And I think that's potentially very dangerous.

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Clifford Chanin: What's the relationship between the disappearance of the physical caliphate and the continuing appeal of the idea that there ought to be a caliphate? Is the fact that the caliphate existed an incentive to try to reestablish it? It doesn't strike me that this is seen as a defeat by the people who believed in it then, and would presumably continue to have those beliefs? Rukmini?

Rukmini Callimachi: I think two kind of contradictory thoughts. On the one hand, the physical caliphate was obviously the biggest draw for the tens of thousands of people-- 40,000, we estimate-- that traveled from foreign countries to join ISIS from, I believe, 100 different nations around the world. So that's gone.

00:32:06

And so that recruitment message is no longer working. But at the same time, if you look at their own internal messaging, they've been preparing for this for a long time. They've been, they've been getting their cadres, their troops, ready for this defeat. And what... and the examples they, you know, they pull out is that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who was the founder of Al Qaeda in Iraq, he died. He never saw the actual caliphate, and yet the group that he founded reached heights that he never would have assumed, and so on and so forth. And so they see this as, I think, a setback. But part of this historical march that they believe they are a part of.

00:32:53

Clifford Chanin: Lorenzo, is that still an aspiration? Does it matter that the physical caliphate has been removed for the moment in terms of the motivations and the inspirations?

Lorenzo Vidino: I think to some degree, yes. I think it's very true that the hardcore supporters do believe that this is simply God testing his followers, and it's the normal tribulation. I mean, of course, everything that ISIS does is always framed through religious, or pseudo-religious

frames. So exactly like the Prophet Muhammad suffered setbacks in the early... his early followers suffered setbacks.

00:33:30 This is normal, and it should be cherished, if anything. I think when you go to potential supporters, that enthusiasm has dwindled to some degree. That is not to say we don't have supporters. I think if you monitor certain spaces online, you do see that there's a bit of doubt in certain quarters.

00:33:55 You know, Dabiq was supposed to be this legendary battle where ISIS would stand up to the unbelievers, and it didn't really happen. They kind of fled pretty... pretty fast. There's unquestionably the success of controlling land, of establishing the caliphate, had such an impact on a lot of people, many of which maybe didn't even have thought about it, had no sympathy for jihadism before. But it was such an emotional pull at some point in 2014, '15. And I think the fact that it has disappeared in that way has diminished the pool of people who are attracted to the ideology.

00:34:37 Clifford Chanin: How do we layer the Al Qaeda question into this? Because, you know, the theory has been, you know, one goes up and the other goes down on a seesaw. But as circumstances change, does it come down to the shared belief that, you know, whether the groups split politically or not, they are fundamentally directed towards upsetting the order of the world and establishing a very different kind of rule. So where is Al Qaeda at this point, watching the caliphate physically disappear?

00:35:08 Lorenzo Vidino: Different views. So this is one of the questions that splits analysts into two big camps here. It's a vicious fight on what is the relation between the two groups. I'm more of the belief that while unquestionably, when it comes to leadership, there's rivalry and animosity between the two groups. When it comes to the grassroots, it's not that big of a problem, meaning that there's a certain fluidity, and people go from one group to the other.

00:35:40 And two examples to that is how many ISIS fighters have joined Al Qaeda-linked groups in certain parts of Syria now. And the second piece of evidence is basically listening to most jihadi wannabes in the West. And to them, they don't care about ISIS. To them they want to join a jihadist group. And that is most particularly evident in 2013, 2014, where you had a lot of spontaneous traveling with people who had no connections whatsoever to any jihadist group and would just pick up and go. And whatever group they could link up with, they would have joined it.

00:36:22 It's one of the things that puzzles me, but I know with other people didn't, probably other people in this room would disagree. There is that fluidity. There's... since we're in New York, I'm thinking of, as a good example, the manifesto that the New Jersey bomber put out after carrying out his, you know, attack...

Clifford Chanin: The Chelsea bomber.

Rukmini Callimachi: The Chelsea bomber.

Lorenzo Vidino: The Chelsea bomber, yeah. He was from New Jersey.

Clifford Chanin: Mm-hmm.

00:36:50 Lorenzo Vidino: And on the first page, he quotes his inspirations. And guess what? Half of them are ISIS, half of them are Al Qaeda. There's Awlaki, who is sort of the big glue that brings everybody together. There's bin Laden. There's Baghdadi. And I think a lot of analysts were puzzled. How could it be, the two groups are fighting one another? Yes, they are.

00:37:09 And unquestionably, there's competition between the leaders. But if you are somebody who believes in jihadist ideology, you don't really care about which incarnation of the ideology you want to follow. If anything, you're kind of annoyed and frustrated that there's not a united front. You

find these petty squabbles between the leadership counterproductive.
And you just want... to join, join a group.

00:37:34

Where are the two groups going to go? That's... you know, anybody can have a different analysis. But I'm not one who would be shocked by some kind of... peacemaking between the two groups. I think it's an hypothesis, that I wouldn't completely rule out.

Clifford Chanin: Rukmini, did you want to come in on this?

Rukmini Callimachi: I think Lorenzo covered that one.

Clifford Chanin: All right. Let's see if we have any, question or two from the audience. Just give a moment here. Gentleman, please stand up. Yep.

00:38:06

Audience Member: I was just wondering, if one were to go to one of these areas that was occupied by ISIS, and-- assume that it was a Sunni area-- gather 100 Sunnis and say, "What was it like?" Would 90% say it was awful? Would they say "eh"? What would the reaction be?

Rukmini Callimachi: It depends on how many hours you have with them. (chuckles) When you show up as a Western reporter in an area that has been controlled by ISIS, and you're talking to Sunnis, they understand instinctively that you come from a position of not liking ISIS. So in the first hour of talking to them, the answer is always that ISIS was horrific, examples here and there, "My brother was jailed, my wife was beaten," blah, blah, blah.

00:38:47

And the question that I discovered that would turn, that would turn things on their head, is I would say to them, "How was garbage collection under ISIS?" And they would stop. Some of them would start giggling. And then, and then the conversation would take a different turn. Because

garbage collection in Mosul was much better under ISIS than it was under the Iraqi government.

00:39:10

And then we would start talking about the services and about the things that ISIS provided. It's a very... it's an uncomfortable thing to talk about, because it's a terrorist group. But that's when you start to see the affinity that they had for the group, because they delivered, you know, for Sunni populations.

Clifford Chanin: Do we have another question? In the back there, the woman over yeah, yeah.

Audience Member: Hi.

Rukmini Callimachi: Hi.

Clifford Chanin: Would you stand up, please?

Audience Member: All right. You are a national treasure...

Rukmini Callimachi: Thank you. Thank you.

00:39:43

Audience Member: And you're a hero of mine. But anyway, you kind of addressed this throughout the conversation, but I wanted to ask you about the continuous and extremely intense (inaudible) ...relationship between the extreme spectacle and violence that ISIS... you know, puts out towards the world and inflicts upon its population. First thing, this (inaudible) bureaucracy...

Rukmini Callimachi: Mm-hmm.

Audience Member: And what does that look like, and feel like for people with that, are living within that...

Rukmini Callimachi: Mm-hmm.

Audience Member: (inaudible)

00:40:22 Rukmini Callimachi: Yeah. Thank you for your very nice comment and your intelligent question. (chuckling): So... if you are are a Sunni living under ISIS, one of the things that the group tried to do is instill this very clear "us-versus-them" narrative. So the violence is towards the Shia, towards the Christians, towards the Yazidis, towards the apostates. These are Sunnis who have, who have fallen, you know, somehow.

00:40:51 And so initially I think there was a feeling that if you are just, you know, a good Sunni living life normally under them, it doesn't touch you. But, of course, this broke down with time, and it broke down pretty quickly. As soon as anybody crossed them, ISIS would find a reason to torture that person, to throw them in jail, to kill them.

00:41:12 And this is where the resentment grew. But initially, the spectacles of violence, I mean, all over Mosul, they would have media... what they called media kiosks, where on a large... on a large screen, they would project their most famous execution videos. The James Foley beheading, the burning of the Jordanian pilot, images like this. And they were there for people to see and to consume in a way that you might go to the cinema.

00:41:42 And I've spoken to people who have gone there, children who have gone there. And the feeling that they had was that they were not looking at something that affected them. They're looking at the killing of their enemies, at the enemies of Islam. So I think this is how they justified it internally. And... but of course with time it fell apart, because as they became less disciplined, and started to suspect their own, their own

Sunni population, the brutality turned inwards, and that, obviously, turned people off.

00:42:19

Clifford Chanin: Another question. Ma'am.

Audience Member: (inaudible)

Rukmini Callimachi: Hi, ma'am.

Audience Member: And I really want to thank you for the work that you've done.

Rukmini Callimachi: Thank you.

Audience Member: But what I-- you know, what I'm astounded by, is the comment that you made (inaudible)... story, in terms by saying that what was happening, whether it was the state... (inaudible) but this kind of analysis is not taking place, and I find it incredible. And I know that the same thing, much of it happened also with the Taliban...

00:42:59

Rukmini Callimachi: Right.

Audience Member: (inaudible) you know, that Taliban (inaudible)... So I just... can you... anyone reflect on is there something that is the (inaudible) perhaps, that we're not privy to? I mean... (inaudible)... intelligence, everything. I find it astounding that troves of paper...

Rukmini Callimachi: Yeah, I do, too. I do too, really. Yeah.

00:43:30 Audience Member: And that, you know, there isn't more... (coughing) (inaudible) I mean, I can't believe it.

Rukmini Callimachi: I... It's taken me years to wrap my own head around it. And I don't completely understand it. But I think, I think there's two vectors at work. One is things like the Abbottabad files. Which... if you go and read the Abbottabad files, and they were finally, I think, declassified... what was it, last year? Yeah, last year. You see the very things that I was learning in Mali.

00:44:02 You see letters between Osama bin Laden, detailed letters between him and his affiliates, talking about the minutia of should this person be the number three in the organization that we have in Libya? And Osama bin Laden weighing in on it, right.

At the same time that reporters are being told that he's a lion in winter, that he's... that he's isolated, et cetera. So I think one factor that's at work is that the people who get this intelligence are not even sharing it amongst themselves. I've spoken to different branches of intelligence in America who did not have access to the Abbottabad documents. So that was guarded very closely by one group. And even within the U.S. government, it was... it was not shared.

00:44:48 But I think the other very big vector is politics. And that is that there's, there's no administration that can come and that can look like they were weak on terrorism. We saw this with the Obama administration in his final speech in Chicago where he's touting all of the things that have happened during his eight years in office. And there was a throwaway line where he said, "No international terrorist group has targeted the United States in my time in office."

00:45:17 The only way that that statement is true is if you fail to understand that a person like Omar Mateen, who shot up the Orlando Pulse nightclub, that if you think of terrorism as only people from over there coming over here, that's the only definition of terrorism. Well, we've gone way beyond that since 9/11. People are now simply going online and entering

ISIS's chat rooms on Telegram and on other apps, and gathering the tools that they need to carry out terror in that group's name here, here at home. So I think politics is a big... is a big factor in that, where every politician wants to look like they have made progress.

00:45:57

Right now, the rhetoric is that ISIS has been defeated. We've been hearing this from the White House time and again. And, of course, it's not true. It's not even close to true. But that's what we're hearing now. And, unfortunately, some people will believe it.

Clifford Chanin: One more. Gentleman all the way in the back.

Audience Member: (inaudible)

Rukmini Callimachi: Thank you.

Audience Member: ...of how the recovered documents color your understanding of (inaudible) governments, in the territories, and how these (inaudible) were distributed between the central government and (inaudible)?

Clifford Chanin: So, how the collection of these taxes was distributed from the central authority to localities.

00:46:40

Rukmini Callimachi: To localities within ISIS's territory? I don't know that I have enough documents to answer that. But I have a couple of data points, let's say. There's one set of letters that were written by the guy who had the briefcase, who was the head of the trade division of the ministry of agriculture, and several people below him, where they're talking about the fact that a huge sum of money, I think it was like half a million dollars, had been deposited into ISIS' treasury from wheat and barley, et cetera, that had been... that had been cultivated in the Nineveh plains, which is Mosul, and that it had not been picked up and cashed by

the requisite offices that were supposed to benefit from that. And so you saw a transference there.

00:47:29

So basically wheat and barley that was being cultivated in the Nineveh plains, that money was being used to finance the budgets of a bunch of other offices that were, that were not in the Nineveh plains. But I have a couple things like that. But I don't know that I have enough to be able to intelligently answer your question. Thank you.

00:47:50

Clifford Chanin: We have, you know, 15,000 documents and many stories in them. Unfortunately, not the time to take them all apart. But, you know, these are sort of remarkable resources. And we look forward here to continuing this work with you, and with George Washington and Lorenzo and his colleagues, to understand and get a fuller picture.

In the meantime, please join me in thanking Rukmini Callimachi and Lorenzo Vidino.

(applause)