



---

## The Samuel W. Lewis Memorial Symposium: Keynote Address by Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy  
September 29, 2014

Edited transcript of opening remarks and Q&A session with Ambassador Dennis Ross

---

I can't tell you both how touched and honored I am by that, Dennis, and I also happened to notice that the photo on the plaque reminds me of the time in our lives when neither of us had any gray hair. It's always an honor to be here at The Washington Institute but it's a special honor to be introduced by Dennis Ross, someone for whom I've had great respect over many years. I've learned an enormous amount from you about what it is to be a diplomat and what it is to pursue our country's interests and our country's values, and how to do it with integrity and decency. So thank you very, very much.

I'm also deeply honored to join all of you in celebrating the wonderful life and career of Sam Lewis, one of our country's most admired diplomats and peacemakers. From post-war Naples to the 1973 Afghanistan coup and from Camp David to Oslo, Sam lived a life of significance and adventure that most diplomats could only dream of. And with Sallie, he lived a life of friendship and romance that would make Woody Allen weep. His Texan charm, candor, courage, and common sense earned him the respect of countless leaders—both abroad and here at home. He was as comfortable going jaw to jaw with counterparts in the negotiation room as he was going cheek to cheek with sharks on his many scuba dives off the coast of the Sinai. He was a man who didn't just know where he—and the country he loved—needed to go. He knew how to get there, how to lead, and how to get things done.

Sam once called the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel—an historic achievement in which he played an indispensable part—"a mountain peak in a sea of sand." The same could be said about Sam's own extraordinary career. Generations of American diplomats have tried to learn from his example, follow in his footsteps, and scale the diplomatic peaks he conquered so skillfully over the years. None of us have been terribly successful. But all of us learned a great deal along the way—about our profession, about the Middle East, and about the promise of American leadership.

Through Sam's remarkable journey and my own checkered thirty-three year career in the Foreign Service, I have learned that the Middle East is a place where pessimists seldom lack for either company or validation, where skeptics hardly ever seem wrong. It is a place where American policymakers often learn humility the hard way...a place where you can most easily see the wisdom in Winston Churchill's famous comment that what he liked most about Americans was that they usually did the right thing in the end; they just liked to exhaust all the alternatives first.

I've learned that stability is not a static phenomenon, and that regimes which do not offer their citizens a sense of political dignity and economic possibility ultimately become brittle and break. I've learned that change in the Middle East is rarely neat or linear, but often messy and cruel, and deeply unpredictable in its second and

third order consequences. I've learned not to underestimate the depth of mistrust of American motives that animates so many people in the region, and I've learned that we often get far more credit than we deserve for complicated conspiracies. I've learned that, with all its stubborn dysfunction, the Middle East is a place where people and leaders are capable of great things...and that American diplomacy, with all of its own occasional dysfunction, can make a real and enduring difference.

During this incredible moment of testing in the region, we miss Sam's judgment and good counsel more than ever. If Sam were with us, I suspect he would be the first to say that we cannot afford to neglect what's at stake. And he would urge us not to neglect our responsibility to help shape, within the limits of our influence, the great generational struggle between moderation and extremism that is unfolding across the Middle East today.

### **A Changing Middle East**

Nothing embodies that struggle in starker terms than the threat posed by ISIL. ISIL is obviously not the only source of disorder in the Middle East today. But it is one of the most immediate, and most poisonous. And it is the most dramatic symptom of the layers of change unleashed by the second Arab Awakening—within, among, and beyond Arab states.

Within a number of states, we've seen the collapse of a half-century old political order. Societies that for far too long had known far too little freedom, far too little opportunity, and far too little dignity began to erupt. But what also spilled out, in addition to the thirst of individual citizens for dignity, were all the demons of sectarian and communal tension that authoritarian rulers had fueled and forcefully suppressed.

That dynamic in turn helped set off new uncertainties and frictions among states in the region, as political rivalries, sectarian troubles and old Sunni-Shia passions spilled across borders still not firmly rooted nearly a century after their post-World War One formation. Meanwhile, beyond Arab states, violent extremist groups were quick to try to fill emerging vacuums and take advantage of post-revolutionary chaos.

ISIL took advantage of all these developments—state collapse, proliferation of weapons, regional rivalries, and sectarian polarization—to prosper and grow. But more broadly, what all of these layers of change add up to is the most significant transition in the Arab world since the revolutions of the 1950's. And what they have laid bare is the long-term question of whether an "Arab center", as my friend and former Jordanian Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher has described it, can eventually replace the old order...gradually establishing democratic institutions to manage sectarian differences and provide an outlet for political pluralism and individual dignity...or whether hardliners and extremists of one stripe or another will prove more resilient. The United States has a powerful stake in that very complex competition, and in shaping a careful strategy for enhancing the long-term chances for a new, moderate order which best protects our interests and reflects our values.

### **A Global Coalition to Counter ISIL**

As all of you know very well, there is no shortage of obstacles to a moderate order in the Middle East today. An arc of instability, complicated transitions, and stagnating economies runs nearly uninterrupted from the Maghreb to the Levant and the Gulf. Iran's nuclear program continues to loom large as we near the November 24 deadline for a comprehensive deal. And if we needed any reminder, this summer's tragic conflict in Gaza underscored just how unsustainable and combustible the status quo between Palestinians and Israelis remains.

We are seized with all of these challenges. I know Dennis and I will have the opportunity to touch on a number of them in our conversation. But let me just make a couple of points up front about what I'm sure is on everyone's mind this afternoon: the challenge posed by ISIL and our strategy to degrade and ultimately defeat it.

First, it's important to keep perspective. ISIL is not ten feet tall—it has no state partner and its most impressive achievement to date has been to unite the entire region—and the world—against it. But it poses a serious challenge that demands a serious response. If left unchecked, ISIL would control more territory, amass more resources, attract more foreign fighters, further destabilize an already deeply unstable region, and over time, pose a growing threat.

Second, as President Obama and Secretary Kerry have made clear, this is not America's fight alone. A successful strategy to counter ISIL—and indeed to strengthen the forces of moderation in the region—cannot be about us. It has to be about the people and governments in the region and the choices they make. This is why President Obama made the formation of a united and inclusive Iraqi government an essential prerequisite to going on the offensive against ISIL. It's why he has insisted that we help our partners on the ground secure their own country's future. And it's why he has placed so much focus on building and leading a broad-based coalition of states who have a stake in this fight and the means to provide practical support.

My third point is about the coalition and the comprehensive strategy it is pursuing. Beginning this month with the NATO summit in Wales and following meetings in Baghdad, Jeddah, Cairo, Paris, and last week at the UN General Assembly in New York, we've worked hard to build a coalition unified around shared goals, objectives, and actions. President Obama appointed John Allen—a retired four-star general and one of our nation's finest public servants—to oversee this effort. And already, more than 50 countries from all corners of the globe have joined the coalition and we expect others to join in the weeks and months ahead.

Together, we will deny ISIL a safe-haven by continuing to conduct carefully targeted airstrikes against its leadership, and logistical and operational capabilities, and we will impede its ability to plan, prepare, and execute attacks. We've already conducted more than 200 such airstrikes in Iraq, and last week, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Bahrain, and Qatar joined in strikes against ISIL targets in Syria. While we target ISIL from the air, we will strengthen the capacity of our partners to push back against ISIL on the ground. President Obama sent an additional 475 military advisors to Iraq this month to support Iraqi and Kurdish forces with training, intelligence, and equipment, and to help the Government of Iraq stand up National Guard Units to help Sunni communities push back against ISIL. We will also continue and step-up our support to the moderate Syrian opposition, including through the train and equip program recently authorized by bipartisan majorities in both chambers of Congress.

But this is far more than just a military effort. We also need to cut off the flow of foreign terrorist fighters into and out of the region. ISIL has recruited thousands of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria from nearly 80 countries, including over 100 Americans. These fighters pose an immediate threat to the region and a real and growing terrorism threat more broadly. Last week, the UN Security Council unanimously passed a binding resolution requiring countries to prevent and suppress funding, financing, recruiting, organizing, transporting, and equipping of foreign fighters. This resolution received the second most co-sponsors in the history of the United Nations.

Alongside this historic resolution, the coalition will press hard to accelerate global efforts to dry up ISIL's funding, including by reducing ISIL's revenue from oil and other plundered assets, extortion of local populations, kidnapping for ransom, and external donors.

We will also continue to provide urgent humanitarian assistance to states and societies carrying the heaviest burden from this conflict. Even before ISIL's advance this spring, the scale and scope of the human tragedy in Syria was staggering—the world's largest mass displacement in over three decades. ISIL's campaign of terror has only exacerbated this tragedy, displacing over a million Iraqis and even more Syrians from their homes. The United States has been the single-largest contributor of humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people and the nations most directly affected by the refugee crisis, with nearly \$3 billion in contributions since the start of the conflict. And we've led the way in preventing mass atrocities in Iraq. Together with our coalition partners, we will continue to assist populations in need, including vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities.

And we will continue to coordinate efforts to expose ISIL's true nature and undercut its ideological appeal. Muslim leaders from Al-Azhar to Mecca have denounced ISIL and its false claim to be acting in the name of a great religion. We will work to amplify their efforts and to demonstrate, as President Obama said last week, that "the future belongs to those who build—not to those who destroy."

All these steps are critical to success. But they will not have any sustainable effect on their own. There is no shortcut to getting at the roots of this moment of turbulence—the political paralysis that has failed to answer the region's rising aspirations for dignity, political participation, and economic opportunity. Prime Minister Abadi and the new Iraqi government have outlined a bold and ambitious national program that has received broad cross-sectarian support. And it deserves international support as well. We will continue to engage diplomatically to find resolution to longstanding Sunni and Kurdish aspirations and to increase the stake of Iraq's neighbors in its sovereignty and success. And we will continue to pursue a political transition in Syria to end this crisis once and for all.

## **Conclusion**

If this sounds like a tall order, it is. But it is not impossible. ISIL's advance can be blunted, and it can be rolled back—with people and leaderships in the region fully committed to working with us and our other international partners.

Sam Lewis knew as well as anyone how unforgiving the Middle East can be for American policymakers and diplomats. But he also knew that we can't afford to pull back and retrench. There's too much at issue right now. Together, we can degrade and defeat ISIL. Together, we can increase the odds that moderates across the region can succeed in the years ahead, that they can succeed in the great generational struggle to help open up space for pluralism and economic opportunity.

Sam would be the first to understand that we will not get every judgment right. But he also understood profoundly that we are far better off working persistently to help shape events, rather than wait for them to be shaped for us. Sam Lewis led a life of extraordinary significance in the service of our country, and all of us have been hugely honored to follow in his remarkable footsteps. Thank you very much.

## **Q&A SESSION WITH AMBASSADOR DENNIS ROSS**

**Ross:** So, Bill and I are going to have a chance for a conversation for the next few minutes, before he has to go off to his other responsibilities. Look, Bill, that was a comprehensive overview of what is a region characterized in your words as "turmoil and upheaval." Let me start with one question on one thing you said in your comments. You talked about what has been our long-term objective of a political transition in Syria. As you look at that as an objective, what are the steps you see as necessary to be able to move us along that transition?

**Burns:** It's crucial to do everything we can to step up support for the moderate Syrian opposition. Even if the immediate challenge, as I said in my remarks and as [President Obama] has emphasized, is ISIL and the threat that it poses to order, not just in Syria but in Iraq and potentially across the region, I think it's absolutely essential to build up a moderate force in Syria, particularly a force that the Sunni community can rally around, that can help in the conflict against ISIL in the first instance. I don't think there's any chance of rolling back ISIL's advance in Iraq unless we strike at its base of support in Syria—but also unless we support a Syrian opposition that then provides a counterweight to the Assad regime. As the president and [Secretary of State John] Kerry have made clear, all of us seek a transition to new leadership in Syria that's brought about by political means, but there's no chance you're going to be able to have that kind of negotiation, which would be hard enough if you could even enter into it, unless we build some leverage against the Assad regime first. And a critical element to building that leverage is a strengthened moderate opposition. So I think that's the logic chain, at least at this point.

**Ross:** Jessica [Matthews, president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace], when she was speaking earlier today, raised an interesting issue that I'm going to paraphrase: that this might be a moment of some potential opportunity, with both the Assad regime and much of the Syrian opposition being threatened by ISIS—is there a possibility of some kind of mutual ceasefires, given that common threat, or is that something that you think is just not in the cards?

**Burns:** I'm a little bit skeptical, to be honest with you. I mean, this idea of local ceasefires had come up at different points during Kofi Annan's tenure as the United Nations negotiator, as well as in Lakhdar Brahimi's. The Assad regime proved stubbornly resistant to those kinds of things. So to answer the question honestly, I'm skeptical that that kind of space is going to open up, and I'm similarly skeptical at this stage that the Assad regime's calculus is going to change, unless you begin to see this kind of counterweight and leverage built up in Syria, which again, as I said, is a tall order. I'm not naive about how complicated this is to do, but I do think that's the essential ingredient in setting the stage for any potential negotiated transition in leadership.

**Ross:** I want to cover a number of the different hotspots, or potential hotspots, in the region. Let me ask a question about Iran: you have been—you were certainly involved in helping to establish a channel to the Iranians in the negotiations. Now there's been plenty of speculation about whether there's going to be an agreement or not an agreement, and I'd say people have been able to restrain their optimism about the potential for an agreement. How would you define the Iranian approach to the negotiations at this point?

**Burns:** First, just in terms of an interaction with the negotiators, the Iranian negotiators we've been working with for almost a year and a half, in what were first secret bilateral negotiations and later wrapped into the P5+1 [Britain, China, France, Russia, the United States, plus Germany] negotiations, have been tough and professional, not surprisingly. I think they proved able to negotiate a first agreement which provided a six-month period—later extended—and some space for a negotiation of a comprehensive agreement. They proved able, along with their leadership, to actually implement that agreement and follow through on the commitments they made.

But the comprehensive negotiations are much more complex and much more difficult. It's no secret that the gaps that remain in the negotiations are quite significant right now. It shouldn't be impossible to reach a comprehensive agreement, in the sense that the Iranian leadership insists that it's not pursuing and has no intention of pursuing a nuclear weapon. The international community, embodied in the P5+1 countries and our international partners, has made clear that we understand that Iran can pursue a peaceful nuclear program. What's at issue is reaching an agreement which creates mutually agreed limitations on that program over a substantial period of time, with some quite significant monitoring and verification measures to give all the rest

of us in the international community confidence that this is an exclusively peaceful program. And given the history of this program and more than two decades of unresolved questions—to put it diplomatically—it’s essential to have a substantial period of time in which you can do that. And, as I said, there are some quite significant gaps right now on the issues that are going to be critical to overcoming those problems.

**Ross:** You were ambassador to Russia. This is obviously—I’ll use a diplomatic term—a “complex” time in the relationship with the Russians. I guess one question that occurs to me is, given what is going on with Ukraine, have you been surprised that the Russians, to this point, have basically held to the consensus position in the P5+1, and are there any circumstances under which you would be worried that that might change?

**Burns:** I think it’s a very fair question. In my experience, the Russian leadership tends to be pretty unsentimental about pursuing its interests in the Middle East, and I think that leadership has made clear that it doesn’t have an interest in a nuclear-armed Iran. I think it values its role as a member of this P5+1 group and leading the negotiations. And so far, there has been a fair amount of cohesion in that group, including from the Russians, and some creativity on their side in thinking through how you bridge some of these negotiating challenges. And there have been other areas as well: in the Middle East, through the work of the Quartet, and at least on a portion of the Syria issue, on the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons, Russia has played, I think, a reasonably constructive role.

At the same time, there remain profound differences over the wider issue of Syria. We have our differences over other issues in the Middle East, and the Russian leadership, from my perspective, at least, still tends to pursue a kind of zero-sum view of our relationship in the Middle East. But as Russia looks at the challenge posed by ISIL, it has to be worried about and conscious of its own extremist challenges in the north Caucasus, and so I think objectively there’s a shared interest in dealing with that threat. Now, that doesn’t mean we’re going to have neat cooperation on every issue. But if you look at questions like the flow of foreign fighters, the financing of ISIL or other violent extremist groups, objectively, the Russians have an interest in trying to take on those kinds of challenges.

**Ross:** Would you be looking at that as one of the indicators of, that would suggest—if they were to be more, shall we say, constructive, in terms of producing a political transition in Syria, would you view that as a broader indication of where Russia might be going, or would you just see it again as a, kind of, more isolated reflection of what they see as their more immediate interests?

**Burns:** Well, it would certainly be a welcome step. It would be a welcome step if Russia was prepared to put its leverage behind a serious effort to produce a political transition in Syria which ultimately would produce a new and inclusive leadership. It’s hard to see how you defeat ISIL in Syria unless you create that kind of environment, in the same sense that in Iraq it was essential to have the [Haider al-]Abadi government emerge and take at least the first steps toward a more inclusive approach to the different sects and ethnic groups in Iraq. And there’s a lot of ground that obviously has to be covered. But certainly a Russia that was prepared to play that kind of a role would be contributing to a solution that, I think, would, serve its interests as well. But, as I said, going back through the Geneva process and the various failed efforts at reaching that kind of a settlement over the last two or three years, I think that’s a tall order.

**Ross:** I know you’re going to have to go in a minute. Let me ask you one more question. Listen, I’ve known you a long time. You did a dissertation on Egypt, followed Egypt closely for a long period of time. We clearly have a, kind of, common interest when it comes to fighting terror. How would you view the developments in Egypt, and how do you see the U.S.-Egyptian relationship at this point? Where are things headed, and what are the, sort of, opportunities and the potential problems still there?

**Burns:** I'm still waiting for the TV movie version of my dissertation [laughter], but I think I'll be waiting for a long time. The truth is, the United States government has been engaged in a very complicated balancing act with Egypt, Egyptian society and the Egyptian leadership, since the revolution. And like in most balancing acts, you don't always get the balance exactly right in every instance. We've been balancing on the one hand some obvious and compelling strategic interests and partnership with Egypt, whose significance has only been underscored by the emergence of ISIL, by terrorist threats in the Sinai, by the role that Egypt played in helping to produce the ceasefire in the most recent crisis in Gaza, and for a lot of very obvious strategic and security reasons; and, obviously, because of Egypt's continuing political weight in the Arab world and in a region that matters a lot to the United States.

Now, having said that, we've also made no secret, and others have made no secret, of our concerns about some of the aspects of the transition in Egypt since the revolution. We have made no secret of the importance that we attach to respect for pluralism and respect for freedom of speech in Egypt—not as a favor to the United States or any other outsider, but very much in the self-interest of Egypt as it tries to build the kind of stability that will be essential for economic modernization, attracting foreign investment, and attracting domestic capital back into the country, not to mention attracting tourists back to Egypt.

So, we haven't always seen eye to eye on all those issues with the Egyptian leadership. I think it was very important that the president had a chance to talk to President [Abdul Fattah al-]Sisi about this. There's no substitute, especially given the significance of our partnership with Egypt, for that kind of direct engagement. And the president was very clear both in public and in private on the significance we attach to the strategic partnership but also our candid concerns about detention of journalists or instances of human rights violations in Egypt. We will not be shy about expressing those concerns in the future. But I think it's very important for us to engage directly with the Egyptian leadership, to take stock of its significance across the whole range of issues that I mentioned, and see if over time, we can't build a healthier relationship and realize the full potential of that partnership. And I think the president's meeting with Sisi in New York a couple of days ago was a good step in that direction.

**Ross:** Bill, thank you, I don't want us to overstay *your* welcome, our welcome, and really appreciate you coming. I know, given the nature of your schedule, that under other circumstances you probably would not have been here except for one thing: it really is a tribute to Sam Lewis and what he represented for all of us. I think that when you look at Bill, when you look at me, you're looking at two people who've spent a lot of time, in effect, studying—in the best sense of the word—under the tutelage of Sam Lewis. And even after he was no longer in government, he was still a guide for both of us. So, thank you, Bill. And thank you for coming today.