

Keynote Luncheon with Robert Ford

Wendy Chamberlin: Ambassador Robert Ford is, as well you know, was Ambassador to, our last American ambassador to Syria. He is now a Senior Fellow at the Middle East Institute. Robert was very well known, he's still well known in Syria, as the symbol of American solidarity for the Syrian people who were protesting the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad. Since leaving government Robert has continued to remain very much engaged with Syria and the Syrian struggle and the Syrian issues there. He's a prolific speaker, commentator, writer and analyst in the media. He exhausts himself traveling around the United States. He works with us in the Middle East Institute and traveling abroad and talking to opposition leaders to foreign governments still seeking a solution to this obscene problem there. Syria's not his only expertise. Robert has served twice in Iraq and is quite knowledgeable. You can, if you still have questions on Iraq you can please ask him anything you want to in that regard as well, and he was ambassador to Algeria from 2006 to 2008, but what I like best about Robert is that he genuinely, sincerely cares about people. So please, Robert, if you would step up here and deliver some remarks and then we'll (inaudible 1:45).

[applause]

Robert Ford: Wendy, thank you very much for those kind introductory remarks. I saw an old friend here today and I'm hoping he's still here 'cause I'd actually like to do a shout out. Since we're talking about healthcare and access to healthcare there's a man here who works with an organization called The Syrian/American Medical Society and for people who don't know what The Syrian/American Medical Society is, it's a group of Syrian/American doctors from places like Chicago and California and Cleveland who get on an airplane and go to Turkey and go into Syria and go to places like Aleppo and work in hospitals often underground because of the government's bombing campaign. The Syrian/American Medical Society has lost several of their people who have bravely gone into Syria, but if Zaher Sahloul is here, Zaher, would you just stand up because you should be recognized.

[inaudible audience comment]

Oh, he, okay, that's good. I just want people to know what fabulous work they do. Well, it's very nice to be here. I'm a little flustered. I'm reminded of the story of an actor who had been out of work for five years, 'cause he could never remember his lines, and always had a problem with his lines, and then he got a call one day from a big director who said, "we want to give you a part in a play, but you must remember your line and your line when you come on stage is, hark, hark, I hear the roar of a cannon." So he was nervous about this, but he took the job, he needed the job so he agreed to do the part in the play and he went and he was practicing his lines offstage. Hark, I hear the roar of a cannon. Hark, I hear the roar of a cannon. And

Keynote Luncheon with Robert Ford

then at the designated moment he came onto the stage and there was a loud boom! And he turned around and said, “what the hell was that?”

[laughter]

So if you will bear with me, what’s happening now with refugee populations in the Middle East is really frightening. I recommend very highly remarks that David Miliband, from the International Rescue Committee made before the Hague at a meeting there with a Dutch organization. David called what’s happening now in the Middle East a decade of disorder. A decade of disorder. The speech you can find on the internet. Just go to the IRC website. David makes terrific points. So what is this decade of disorder? The numbers of course are frightening and I’m sure you heard numbers of refugees and internally displaced people during the morning, but this is the context that I understand.

There are now with the conflict in Syria and the conflict in Iraq and growing numbers of internally displaced people now in Yemen as well, there are about 15 to 15 ½ million refugees and internally displaced people in the Middle East, 15 to 15 1/2 . To give you some context, think of how destabilizing it was for the region when there were 700,000 Palestinian refugees in 1948. This is 20 times that number. The tragedy of the Palestinians in 1948. This number 15, 15 ½ million, is 20 times that. On top of it it’s a difficult time for the region anyway with the existing youth bulge that is seeking jobs, that is seeking housing, and that is seeking to have a voice and dignity in a way that previous generations had not had the same level of frustrations and oil prices are down and so a lot of governments have fewer resources. I have to tell you, and I think some of the morning speakers were also a little bit downbeat, I’m personally not hopeful that the humanitarian crisis is going to abate anytime soon.

The reason I’m not hopeful is that the Middle East right now in this decade of disorder, as David Miliband labeled it, is going through the largest amount of political change since the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1917, 1918, 1919. Its process in 1917, the end of World War I, 1918, 1919 was a long process. It took several years to shake out and this is, too. This is, too, but what we do see is the breakdown of entire states. I was at a panel with the very good Middle East writer Robin Wright in Houston, Texas at the Baker Center in 2012, and I remember Robin said, “oh, I’m not sure with the Syria problems and the Iraq problems we won’t see an end to the borders drawn out in the initial Sykes Picot Agreements,” and I remember at the time saying to her in Texas, in front of a big panel, “oh, I don’t think it’s that bad.” Three years later Robin looks very prescient to me, but it’s worse than that because it isn’t going to be some nice, tidy political deal. Let me tell you what I mean.

What we’re seeing is state failure, state failure. States are losing their monopoly on force, they’re increasingly unable to maintain security in many of these countries,

Keynote Luncheon with Robert Ford

Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya are the most obvious ones. In the breakdown of security sectarian or tribal identity becomes more vital for one's own personal safety and the safety of your family. When there's no state to protect you then you have to fall back on something else to protect you, sectarian and/or tribal identity. This is exactly what I saw when I was serving in Iraq starting in 2003, but now we're seeing it on a wider scale. Now we're seeing it in places like Yemen, we're seeing it in places like Syria, we're even seeing it now in places like Libya.

I mentioned that I've been in Iraq. I don't know if Iraq is going to be a complete state failure or not. I'm still somewhat hopeful on Iraq. I see very few Iraqi Sunnis, I see very few Iraqi Shia who are calling for an end to the state of Iraq. And I think this is really important. I see so many pundits here in Washington who say, "it's the end of Iraq, there's nothing to be done, it needs to be broken into three pieces." I don't hear a lot of Iraqis saying that and so I wish we'd let them work on this problem, but there is obviously a struggle for power and there's a struggle for identity and there is as I mentioned a deeply engrained sectarian issue, the vision which we saw in May of Iraqi internally displaced people fleeing the Islamic State's attack on Ramadi. People, literally thousands of people trying to get into Baghdad and Baghdad is not very far from Ramadi. It's maybe an hour drive, a little more, hour and 20 minutes.

People who were literally blocked at a bridge going into Baghdad and the Iraq police would not let them pass because they were afraid they were security threats. That's a very dark image for Iraq. Similarly there are right now today, June 25th, there are people stranded in the desert in western Iraq who can't get into Syria, they can't go back to their homes in places like Fallujah and Ramadi and Al Hit, and they have nowhere to go and they are stuck. They are stuck in the desert. So this issue in Iraq is a really bad one. However, Iraq is the good news.

Now I'm gonna talk about Syria. And Syria to me is the worst case. It is the worst case. I won't go into all the details of what's going on except to say this, the situation is actually escalating. There's more fighting on the ground now, June 25, 2015 than there was two years ago. There are more parts of the country where there is fighting. The Islamic State wasn't what it is now. Back in 2013 it was there but it wasn't as big and as powerful. The Syrian government is getting weaker in the war of attrition and what's happening in Syria is it's actually fragmenting into pieces. There aren't a lot of Syrians demanding that, but it's happening on the ground.

Some of you may remember Lebanon, in the bad old days, and how Lebanon fragmented under the control of different war lords, or think about Somalia. That's what's happening right now in Syria and if there isn't a change, that's the future of Syria. That's the worst case scenario.

Keynote Luncheon with Robert Ford

You all have come together to talk about how to help refugees and in particular how to improve access to healthcare. So let me give you a few of my thoughts as someone who has worked both in an embassy in countries like Iraq and Syria where there is the issue of state failure and the desperate need to help refugees and also from Washington, from the State Department. The obvious answer is that there has to be more humanitarian aid and there has to be a greater international diplomatic effort. That's obvious. I am very struck that the United States is now up to almost four billion, that's B for billion, four billion dollars in humanitarian assistance only for Syria.

If you had told me before I went out as ambassador to Syria in early 2011 that the United States would spend four billion dollars on anything in Syria I would not have believed it. So we're now up to almost four billion dollars, but let me give you a perspective on this. We do need more humanitarian aid. The cost of the military operations which we have been conducting against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria just in a year and a half is now over five billion dollars, that's with a B, just in a year and a half.

So the military operations are quite expensive, too, and obviously there's a link between the desperate situation of Sunni refugees and the ability of the Islamic State to recruit new fighters. That should be obvious to everyone.

The need for more aid of course goes beyond the United States. The United Nations High Commission of Refugees today, June 25th, issued you a report, you can see it online, that they had a request before the international community of 4.5 billion dollars to help Syrian refugees just this calendar year, just calendar year 2015, and so far they have raised, The United Nation System has only received one billion dollars. They're three and a half billion dollars short. They've only gotten just not even a quarter of what they need. The implications of that shortfall I think many of the people in this room who are working for nongovernment organizations and are trying to get aid through, the implications of that shortfall I think they know far better than me, but it's very grim.

So the issue of getting more funding is not just for the United States, but it's for the European Union, it's for Gulf countries, it's even for countries like China and Malaysia and Indonesia and it's not just to help the Syrian refugees, but it's also to help countries that are struggling with the numbers of people that you discussed this morning, countries like Lebanon, countries like Jordan, Iraq and yes, even Turkey. They all need more help and they need it promptly. When you go to Gaziantep in southern Turkey it is amazing how many Syrian refugees are now on the streets there, and even in Istanbul you see Syrian children begging throughout large parts of the city. All of those countries need more help, and of course I'm not even going into

Keynote Luncheon with Robert Ford

the issue of people fleeing across the Mediterranean in small boats from places like Libya.

So there's a need for more money, but there's also a need for more political and diplomatic work. I was sitting at the lunch table with Chris from the International Medical Corp and we were talking a little bit about access and problems that IMC has had in different places. What I saw in Iraq and what I saw in Syria is that in countries where the states have failed, like Syria, like Iraq, armed groups regularly impede access. They block aid, they steal it, they tax it, or they use it as a weapon, and I don't mean just governments, I mean, armed groups that are fighting governments, too. In these state failure locations, these countries, there's almost always substantial foreign country involvement with the armed groups and with the government.

These cases, these battles, these fights, these conflicts in the Middle East do not happen in isolation. There are foreign countries that are involved in it. So how can we use those relationships to get better access? And this I do want to talk about. The patron governments, I call them that because they're giving assistance to clients in these countries, sometimes governments, sometimes armed opposition groups. We need to get them to weigh in with their clients to unblock aid flows, but I have to be honest with you. Governments themselves need concrete facts about what's going on on the ground and what group is blocking what aid flow? They can't have an intelligent discussion with the armed group or the government if they don't have really precise details because almost people, whoever is blocking the aid will deny that they're doing it.

Please, please, for those of you who work in the international NGO community, do not assume, do not assume the governments that are providing this assistance to these clients, that they have perfect information about what's going on in their countries. They don't. And I was literally in the embassy in Iraq and I was in the embassy in Damascus and (inaudible 17:25). Frequently we had very little clue about what was going on 100 miles away. We need you to help us with information. It's not that we want to interfere in your operations. We don't. Obviously you need to be independent, you need to make your own decisions about what is safe and what you can share, but it's very hard to make a political argument to an armed group, or to a foreign government that's blocking aid, if you don't have hard facts. They'll always deny it, but when you can present hard facts the conversation really changes.

Just to give you a good example of that. When we were trying to get, in the United Nations Security Council in late 2013, a resolution permitting the movement of humanitarian assistance over the Syrian borders there was not unanimity in the Security Council initially about that. Several countries said that would be a violation

Keynote Luncheon with Robert Ford

of Syrian sovereignty. If the Syrian government did not approve those cross border aid and of course the Syrian government was not approving them. They didn't want that assistance to go to opposition held areas. It took repeated efforts to show exactly how the Syrian government was blocking aid flows throughout the country to convince countries that had been reluctant at first, finally to sign onto that Security Council resolution, and it did pass finally, in November 2013, and I have to say the American team up at the United Nations mission did a terrific job on that.

So it's not that we want to interfere with what NGOs are doing, but we have to have concrete information if we're going to have useful international diplomatic engagement.

Second comment, what needs to be done. There's a lot of, although money is short, there's still a lot of money flowing into countries like Syria, like Lebanon. Increasingly I think there'll be money going into Iraq. It'll be important to build local capacity and to work with local organizations, including host country governments. Sometimes it's not always best to go with Washington-based firms or others, and I say that not out of any animosity towards people in Washington, but rather because the refugee problem in the Middle East is going to be with us for a very long time, we need to start thinking about building capacity, including relief organization capacity and host country relief organization capacity in places like Syria and Iraq and even Yemen and Libya. Obviously there has to be accountability taken into consideration. A lot of these organizations are small, they don't have a lot of organizational capacity, they're not always impartial, and corruption is an issue.

So you have to do this intelligently, but I think as a policy we need to be looking more and more at going in that direction, simply because the refugee issue and access is going to be a long-term problem and host country organizations in the end will have the best understanding of local sensitivities, and even things as basic as language skills.

Last suggestion. I actually was really surprised how hard it was to get the approval for cross border aid into Syria when people were literally starving to death. I was shocked how hard it was. And I was surprised how many countries would defend the Syrian government's right to break international humanitarian law, more or less with impunity. What also really helped us a lot in addition to the concrete examples that we were able to use in the Security Council discussions, there was a really terrific letter written by a group of about three dozen lawyers, international lawyers, that was first circulated in August, sorry the autumn of 2013. It later was published for everyone to see in April 2014. You can Google it.

But it made the case that state sovereignty does not give any government the right to block access for humanitarian assistance. State sovereignty does not give you

Keynote Luncheon with Robert Ford

that right. It was a very detailed legal argument, it was quite good, and that, too, factored into the deliberations in the Security Council and it leads me to wonder, and I think you all are better placed than me to think about this. If there's not some kind of a need at an international level perhaps with the UN Secretary General and the Director General of the, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Red Crescent as well, for some kind of a reaffirmation on an international level about the basic principles of international humanitarian law, so that everybody agrees on that before we begin discussing then what has to be done in one specific case of state failure or another.

Without that reaffirmation of the principles I think we see the case of Syria being repeated over and over again and it takes too long to get the access that organizations need. Wendy, thank you very much for hosting this conference, the Middle East Institute, this is a hugely important issue for literally millions of people and it was a pleasure to be with you today. Thank you.

Wendy Chamberlin: Thank you, Robert, I think these things are on. We get to chat again. I know we chat daily but you've mentioned a lot of very provocative statements today. Let me just take that last...

Robert Ford: It's going to be out of government.

Wendy Chamberlin: No, it's fine. Let's just take that last comment about the need to challenge whether a government can block humanitarian aid to its own people, and you mentioned quite rightly an issue that's very important to people in this room, the cross border delivery of humanitarian aid, but let's drill down a bit, because there's another phenomenon that's equally as troubling, and that is, it was mentioned this morning by one of our speakers, and that is the number of Syrian civilians who are under siege, mostly by their own government, and the food and the medicine, the healthcare that is denied to them by their own government as their cities are under siege. And I think we, and that's not even a question because I think we can all agree that that's obscene, but you have a wonderful story about a very popular soccer player and I'm wondering if you could share that with us, and the reaction when a government put its people under siege and the feeling when those people are released, are finally able to escape the siege and what happens.

Robert Ford: Yeah. The United Nations tracks this, actually, very carefully. The UN Office for the Coordinator of Humanitarian Assistance, OCHA. Right now the UN's latest estimates are that there are somewhere between 200 and 250,000 Syrians living under siege, which means no food goes in, no medicine goes in, no water goes in, obviously no electricity. They're regularly bombed. A lot of the barrel bombs that you read about or you see on TV are being dropped on these communities. No medical supplies. It's a horrible situation. There was such a siege imposed on the

Keynote Luncheon with Robert Ford

city of Homs. Homs before the revolution in Syria in 2011, Homs was Syria's third largest city, was actually a growing commercial center with agro industry was really booming there, including projects by some Syrian/Americans. When the revolution started it was peaceful. Literally, you can Google it, you'll see pictures of these huge demonstrations in Homs, hundreds of thousands of people on the streets. And the government began to shoot at people in June and one of the people who had been in the protest marches was their city's football, soccer team goalie. It was a guy name Abdelbasset Saroot.

And Abdelbasset was a terrific goalie. He was supposed to be the best in the country, on any of teams in Syria. Abdelbasset Saroot. Abdelbasset left the peaceful protests and took up arms when the government started shooting and because he was such a celebrity in town he was put in command of an armed group and maybe some of you would remember the American journalist who was killed in Homs. She had a black eye patch. Her name was Marie Colvin. Marie was frequently with Abdelbasset and his armed group. Of course she was killed in the siege. She was killed during a bombing attack. And the siege went on, no food, no medicine, no water, bombing, for two years, and Abdelbasset's men, with their families and lots of other Syrian civilians were holed up in a neighborhood of homes called Khalidiya. It's part of the old city of Homs. Finally, after two years, people were starving to death, people were dying of even small medical problems 'cause there was no medicine, doctors couldn't go in. The government wouldn't let people out either. If you were in you couldn't come out.

This was all linked up through the internet so you could see pictures of it. Some of that IT stuff actually came from the State Department before the siege started, when we were trying to get Syrian opposition people the ability to communicate with the outside world so they can tell their story. So they uploaded a lot of it. You could see the videos of the suffering. The UN, after of two years of this siege, just about a year ago got a ceasefire and Abdelbasset and the surviving fighters and the surviving members of their families, hundreds of people, came out. Abdelbasset promptly when to Eastern Syria and joined the Islamic State.

Another Syrian opposition figure that I know, through family connections, his family knows Abdelbasset's family, was able to talk to Abdelbasset last January. So about five months ago, and this guy is very secular, not an Islam at all no beard, and he said, "Abdelbasset, how could you possibly join a group as awful, as reprehensible, as Muncar, as the Islamic State?" And he said Abdelbasset Saroot let him have it, started yelling at him on the phone, "how dare you? For two years people were starving, people were dying, there was no medicine, there was no water, and now you want to lecture me about human rights when the world didn't lift a finger to help us and they knew the suffering we going through, how dare you?"

Keynote Luncheon with Robert Ford

I think the import of this story is to understand that the conflict which is generating refugees and generating so many civilian casualties, the brutality of the conflict in Syria is actually driving recruitment for the Islamic State. And so this is not only a humanitarian story, in terms of lifting sieges and respecting international humanitarian law, including the non-targeting of civilian populations, no indiscriminant bombing, that targeting is not just breaking international humanitarian law and aggravating a humanity crisis, but it's also feeding into a very dangerous organization which means to do, not just people in the Middle East harm, but eventually will do us harm as well. So it becomes a national security issue for us beyond the humanitarian angles.

Wendy Chamberlin: You mentioned our national security interests. Let me ask you a policy question, because you spoke a few minutes ago from the podium about the evolution of this situation within Syria. And certainly Assad's power is weakening, the Hezbollah and the Iranians are beginning to pull back, we call it Plan B to protect Damascus and the Corridor. ISIS developed, didn't develop in this, wasn't in existence when this crisis first started but it's certainly there now. It's a huge factor, controls, what, 70% of the land area, 5% of the...

Robert Ford: Maybe 60, yeah. Just in terms of geography.

Wendy Chamberlin: In geography but in terms of the economic resources we heard the statistic about 50% of what constitutes the GDP. Okay, that didn't exist in the beginning, yet has there been an evolution in Washington's policies? There's been an evolution on the ground, but has there been an evolution in Washington's policy which is basically no regime change? Go ahead. You're not in government anymore.

Robert Ford: Yeah, yeah.

Wendy Chamberlin: I set you up for this.

Robert Ford: Yeah, you did.

Wendy Chamberlin: I did it on purpose.

Robert Ford: So there is an evolution and that is that a year ago we weren't bombing in Syria and I spent five years in Iraq trying to stand up an Iraq government so we could get our guys out of Iraq, our men and women in uniform. So I'm not very happy that we're bombing in Syria and I'm especially unhappy because it's an open-ended mission. I don't see a clear definition of what success in Syria would be. How do we know when we've beaten the Islamic State? And I certainly don't see any estimates coming out of anywhere, Pentagon or White House or anyplace, about how long the mission is gonna take As I say, it's open-ended. So I'm very

Keynote Luncheon with Robert Ford

uncomfortable with that, which is why I think, and I've been publically saying, if we want to deal with the Syria problem in a way that addresses both the Islamic State and the root cause which is generating refugees and other problems, then we have to help the indigenous people there who are fighting and that means helping the armed Syrian opposition that's fighting both Assad and fighting the Islamic State and there are tens of thousands of those people and they deserve more help. There isn't another alternative except to just go on bombing endlessly and you know, think about what they did to that Jordanian pilot. You think they're gonna treat one of our pilots any better? I don't think so.

Wendy Chamberlin: Last question because we keep talking about sober assessments, this has certainly been one, so let me ask you to tell the group a little bit about the effort that we were briefed on when you and I were in Beirut with Track II, a conflict resolution initiative that the Middle East Institute is sponsoring, just a couple of weeks ago from (inaudible 33:30) because quite often we say here in Washington that our efforts at nation building in Afghanistan, our efforts at nation building in Iraq were not such sterling successes and that these efforts are best done if they're done by the people themselves. Tell us about what is going on by Syrians.

Robert Ford: There are multiple efforts and there are some people I see in the audience here that I know are doing some things on the ground, trying to build bridges between fighting communities in Syria and in Iraq as well, but the one that we heard about in detail in Beirut is from former Deputy Prime Minister Abdallah Daar who's from a very prominent family in Damascus. Very prominent family, his father was a general in the Syrian army, very close to Bashar's father. Abdallah has, with the help of the United Nations' Economic and Social Affairs office in Beirut, assembled a very detailed study several hundred pages long addressing different facets of how to rebuild Syria, both economically in terms of how would you address such issues as reconstruction of shattered infrastructure, how would you address restarting a national agricultural sector? How would you go about rebuilding the labor market and generating jobs?

But it also includes an entire section on how to rebuild the badly frayed, if not in some instances, completely shattered connections between different communities, And he has assembled a team of both Syrian nongovernment organizations and he even has some people who have worked with the Syrian government and are now helping him on this. The Syrian government is aware of this effort. He has briefed them. Abdallah, of course since he's working for the United Nations the international community knows about it, but it's a very detailed effort. As I said, it's hundreds of pages long and I think he's going not make a public announcement about it in the coming weeks. That's what he told us in Beirut.

Keynote Luncheon with Robert Ford

Wendy Chamberlin: Preview for this group.

Robert Ford: Yeah. But it goes back, and this was a point that Abdallah emphasized to us, the importance of nongovernment organizations and civil society, even in a country as torn and as shattered as Syria. Abdallah was very optimistic and he lives in Beirut but regularly travels back into Syria. He was actually very upbeat that there is still elements of a Syrian civil society which have survived and in some cases matured under the terrible conditions of the last three to four years and this is what I was saying, too, the need for all of us as we think about humanitarian aid and access how do we at the same time build great capacity in the civil societies of these countries where state failure is a real risk or an existing problem?

Wendy Chamberlin: And that's what we are focused on at the Middle East Institute. Let me open this up for questions from the audience for Robert. We have a question here from May. Wait for the microphone and if you again could just mention your name and affiliation if you have one.

May Rihani: May Rihani, former United Nations Girls' Education Co-Chair. Ambassador Ford, Ambassador Chamberlin. Ambassador Ford, this was amazingly informative and thank you for your insights.

Robert Ford: I didn't pay her, to be clear.

[laughter]

May Rihani: No, you did not. No, you did not. You have been a voice of reason from very, very early on, on the Syrian problem. I wish all of us listen to you and heard you clearly and profoundly, all of us including our government. I wish that was the case because maybe we would have avoided possibly the growth of ISIS, and as you said ISIS is because of the brutality of a regime like Syria, the Syrian Regime. My question to you is the following: given how tragic all what happened in Syria, the spillover is on countries around Syria, including two small countries possible vulnerable, Lebanon and Jordan. What is gonna happen to Lebanon and Jordan who really are carrying the burden of a large number of refugees and of economic problems because of all of that situation and security and violence problems, what are your insights?

Robert Ford: First, I view Lebanon and Jordan actually as in some ways good news stories in that they have survived relatively unscathed, so far. Had you told us in the State Department in 2011 that Lebanon would have somewhere around one and a half million refugees from a conflict in Syria I think almost all of the experts at the State Department would have said, "Well, Lebanon can't survive that," and yet we were just in Beirut and it's doing surprisingly well. In fact real estate is booming in

Keynote Luncheon with Robert Ford

downtown Beirut. I think they may need to have Professor Shiller from Princeton go there and look at bubbles in Beirut real estate. I mean, that may be their most immediate problem, but obviously there are huge challenges in Lebanon both politically but then economically in terms of absorption. I've been many, many, many horrible images out of the Syrian Civil War but the one that rips me the hardest was last winter in Lebanon and it was a picture of a cardboard box, I think it was taken in January, a cardboard box about that big, and there were two babies wrapped up in paper who had frozen to death and were in the box awaiting burial. No human being could look at that picture and that happened in Lebanon, and it's not because Lebanon's a bad place. It happens because Lebanon doesn't have enough resources and it also needs reassurance politically that it can find ways to absorb, at least temporarily, so many of these refugees. So I think Lebanon is an extremely urgent case, even though Beirut on the surface looks fine.

Jordan, by contrast I think actually has a stronger state and it, too, has huge challenges, but I don't think quite of the same scale as Lebanon. You know what the, I think people, if you didn't hear it this morning I'll tell you, the fourth largest city in Jordan now is Za'atri Refugee Camp. And when I visited it twice in 2012 and 2013 it was still growing and it's much bigger now than it was then and it's an extremely ugly, dusty place. In the summer it's not very nice. I think now it's a little more stabilized. They even have things like police stations in the camp, which they didn't before, and then there's been a second large camp at a place called Zarqa which the Emirates helped build, but there are issues ranging from jobs to education, in Jordan as there are in Lebanon.

One of the interesting things which we were talking about this with a Jordanian who participated in this Track II in Beirut, he's a journalist actually, and we were talking to him about the strain of the refugees and he said something which I thought was actually quite insightful. He said, "well, you know, over the long term Jordan may benefit from this because a lot of the Syrian refugees who come here are actually very entrepreneurial and very well-educated, experienced professionals who could make a real contribution to the Jordanian economy over time, even if they don't go home to Syria. So that's sort of the upside of it, but the downside is huge resource challenges in the short and medium term, in both countries.

Wendy Chamberlin: Question right there.

Male: (inaudible 42:28) from Johns Hopkins and Ambassador Ford, we really appreciate your insights and your courage and your leadership over these many years. I'm very interested in your view of safe zones or humanitarian corridors, no fly zones that would have to be backed by military force.

Keynote Luncheon with Robert Ford

Robert Ford: Charles at our table was asking me the same question. I'm happy to talk about this at length but bottom line upfront, (inaudible 42:55) as they say in all the military briefings I sat through in Iraq. President doesn't want to go there. President doesn't want an additional open-ended military commitment in Syria and I think most Americans are very wary of that as well, and he reflects that. So I don't see any prospect of it anytime soon, and whenever I've met Syrian opposition people, dating back to 2011 in Damascus and they would say, "well, the American Air Force will come help us." I used to say, "no, it won't. Please believe me." And you will remember we were there.

So I don't have my hopes up that there's gonna be a no fly zone. I do see some advantages to a no fly zone. Frankly, if it was properly negotiated with the regional states I think that a no fly zone might help us get to the political negotiation for a new national unity government that Syria needs. But if it isn't worked out as part of a package of measures and levers to get to the political negotiation I don't think the no fly zone is a sustainable policy issue in Washington because it looks like an open-ended military commitment. You know, we had a no fly zone in Iraq for 12 years and it certainly helped the Kurdish people enormously, but it was a 12-year military commitment. I don't think many Americans now, after, you know, Afghanistan and Iraq, I don't think many Americans want a 12-year military commitment in the Middle East. I don't think.

Wendy Chamberlin: I'm gonna apologize but this is gonna have to be our last question.

Tom Staal: I'm Tom Staal with the USAID, also former Mission Director in Iraq. As you mentioned now Islamic State, Daesh, they control huge parts of Syria, and Iraq, and there are a lot of needy people in those areas under their control that need humanitarian assistance but it's obviously a huge challenge for us to work in those areas just, you know, our partners going there, but then there are also policy implications if we're gonna work there. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that and how we deal with that.

Robert Ford: You know, Tom, I appreciate that question and if I understand it what we're really talking about is should the United States government be using taxpayer dollars to help people, civilians, who are caught behind Daesh lines, because it eases the resource draw on the Islamic State. Kind of saves them the money to keep people alive because we're paying for it. Is that the...?

Tom Staal: Yeah.

Robert Ford: This is my point of view, but I can imagine that there are many points of view. My point of view is civilians should never be used as pawns in this, that if there

Keynote Luncheon with Robert Ford

are people in need we shouldn't be looking at the politics of the local rulers. It should just be a basic principle. If you can get the aid, get the aid in, and fix the politics on the political track, or the military track if you have to, but don't hold civilians hostage to (inaudible 46:17) political groups. That's my personal opinion and I think once we stray too far from that we get into all kinds of gray areas and I worry once we get into gray areas where we're gonna end up.

Wendy Chamberlin: Ambassador Ford, thank you very much.

Robert Ford: Thank you.

End of transcript