Center for Strategic and International Studies

Global Security Forum 2015: Iran and the Way Forward in the Middle East: A Conversation with Henry Kissinger

Speaker:  
Henry Kissinger  
Former Secretary of State and National Security Advisor

Moderator:  
John J. Hamre,  
President and CEO, CSIS

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JOHN J. HAMRE: That was – the last time I saw a greeting like that I think it was the shah of Iran who came in. (Laughter.) You know, I mean, unbelievable. (Laughs.) It’s great.

Henry, thank you so much. And you can see the huge crowd that wants to hear your thoughts this afternoon. I am with them. This is a – we didn’t intend to have this come right after a very tumultuous weekend, but it did. And it was a weekend where all of us were kind of shaken and had to think about the fundamentals.

We asked you to come initially to share with us your thoughts about what it means, this new dynamic with Iran. But we have a new dynamic throughout the region. Can I just ask you to open up with your thoughts about this weekend and what it means? What does this last weekend mean for all of us?

HENRY KISSINGER: Of course, let me say you – this is a great example of John’s negotiating tactics. (Laughter.) When he invited me, I – he gave me no idea of the size of the group, magnitude of the group – (laughter) – that many ambassadors would be here, newsmen. The perfect setting for a suicide. (Laughter.) So I – whatever it is you will hear, it’s improvised.

And so the reaction to this week’s – weekend’s events. On the one hand, it is no different from several events like this we have seen – in New York, in London, in Madrid. And now in Paris, where we’ve seen a similar event before. But at the same time, the brutality and the imperviousness to the feelings of the victims is particularly shocking, and that this would happen in a capital of Europe that has had close connections with the Arab World and has on the whole been extremely understanding. So I put – I think it is a challenge, really, to the future of Europe in this sense.

When one looks at the immigration problem that faces Europe, which really has the aspect of frontiers that are essentially open, and the aspect of a possible cultural transformation of the whole region, and now this challenge to a capital that has so long been a symbol on the continent of the political evolution of Europe, it sort of raises the question whether this is the sort of challenge that should impel Europe – if that’s still possible – to develop its strategic conception as a participant in international affairs and not to believe that soft power by itself can remedy the world, or that Europe should be a passive – a more passive participant. It’s really a challenge for Europe to help define where we are and to participate as an active member of the Western community in order – it’s a fundamental challenge to our values and in some ways our existence: our existence in the form in which we are.

This, of course, coupled with sadness at the event itself. But in asking myself where do we go from here, it isn’t enough to be compassionate and it isn’t enough to say we stand by you. We have to develop what we are going to stand by for and to do it jointly.

MR. HAMRE: Henry, over the weekend I was in the United Arab Emirates for a big conference. Oh, can you hear? I’m sorry.
Over the weekend I was in the UAE for a conference on the Middle East, and we talked about four – the four crises that are underway. We have a crisis in Yemen. We have a crisis in Syria. We have a crisis in Iraq. We have a crisis in Libya. The region is on fire. What do we do?

MR. KISSINGER: Well, I think we have to begin by understanding the nature of the crisis. And it isn’t one crisis; it is a number of crises occurring simultaneously. There is a crisis of governance in which the subjects of the – of the region, the people who are – have lost faith in most of their governments. And so there is a tension between the subjects and the rulers. And that, indeed, was the beginning of the Syrian crisis.

But then, when we thought of the Syrian crisis as a conflict between a ruler and a homogeneous population, we lost track of the other crises that are going on – namely, the fact that many of these countries are composites of different ethnic and religious groupings, so that when the central authority is weakened either by revolution or by foreign pressures or by its own weakness, that what happens is not a homogeneous opposition within which you can apply democratic methods but a conflict between these various ethnic and religious groups for predominance or sometimes even for self-preservation.

In addition, as a third element, these ethnic and religious conflicts are not confined by national boundaries. So when they break out, they involve neighboring countries and sometimes the whole region. And all of the various civil wars that are going on simultaneously are united by a rejection of the world order that was created at the end of World War I, so that we’re seeing the collapse of national boundaries side by side with the collapse of governing authority, and therefore the rise of non-state groupings within countries and between countries are achieving a very strong and sometimes dominant position.

And this is why ISIS is so significant, because it goes across national borders. It asserts universal claims. It tries to make these universal claims a means of overthrowing the whole international system. And it uses methods which, in their shocking brutality, are supposed to demonstrate the irrelevance of the existing system. All these things are coming together. And so it’s very difficult to say what is the one policy that can affect them.

Because the one – but the traditional states that exist in the region – like, I would say, Egypt and Iran and Turkey, which is not fully in the region – and so the solution of these problems, of even the amelioration of these problems, is going to be linked to the emergence of these countries into a possibly dominant position. And that is the aspect of the Iranian problem, in addition to the nuclear capacity.

So this is a challenge which, for Americans, it’s very hard to understand because we believe that there is one single world order that follows accepted principles, that challenges have solutions that can be defined in a limited period of time. And yet, our challenge is to at least understand it and then to build a policy to which others can relate.
MR. HAMRE: Henry, you are – you’re a very strategic thinker, and I’d like to ask your view on what do you think it means for the very dramatic way that Russia interjected itself into Syria? This is a very different thing. What does it mean?

MR. KISSINGER: Well, I have a personal reaction, in part, because in 1973 the Middle East system that emerged from the Middle East war was substantially based on our previous effort of demonstrating that political solutions could not be achieved by Russian military assistance. And as a result of that policy, from ’73 for about three decades the United States had sort of the leading role in designing the diplomatic issues and was an essential participant – sometimes skillfully, sometimes less so. But nevertheless, the United States was the dominant political element in the evolution of the Middle East, so that the reappearance of Soviet military forces introduced without any consultation with the United States, symbolically even a day after Putin had appeared at the United Nations, represents a change in the balance of power that is of symbolic and substantive significance.

At the same time, the capacity of Russia to be a dominant element in the region is limited, and its capacity to undertake significant military operations by itself is prescribed by its economic difficulties and its other problems. In my opinion, the strategic reason why Putin – why Russia – I wouldn’t really like to put it on one leader – why Russia reentered the Middle East game, if one could call it that, is because one of the dominant strategic concerns of Russia is the impact of the Middle East on Russian domestic stability, and the fear that if non-state organizations with a radical Islamic content evolve in the Middle East, they will sooner or later reach into Russia, and that they will have a very fertile field in Russia. So Russia is trying to prevent the emergence and the consolidation of this kind of radical Islamist direction. And in that respect their objectives, developed on their own, are really parallel with ours.

And so I see a possibility – in fact, a likelihood – that we could come to an understanding with Russia about a parallel approach drives us, and especially if we make clear that if Russia pursues another course that we will be obliged to return to the pre-’73 policy of demonstrating the limits of their capacities. That would not be a desirable alternative because in the long run, on the issue of radical Islam, our objectives should be parallel.

MR. HAMRE: Henry, let me follow up on this. I’m having some difficulty discerning a strategy on the part of our government about what to do. But I also look at the Republican candidates who are speaking, and I don’t discern very much clarity there either. (Laughter.) So you are – you’re a counselor to every president, I think, in the last 40 years. What would you say to any of them who right now would ask you, what should we do?

MR. KISSINGER: Let me just go back one step to the previous question.

MR. HAMRE: Yes, sir.

MR. KISSINGER: If we – if there were to be a discussion with Russia about the future in the Middle East, it would have to include a discussion of Ukraine. One cannot imagine two totally separate policies.
You know, the nature of our political contest now is with public opinion polls taken every week, that the emphasis is on immediate impact. And the problem we are discussing is a very long-range problem. So what I’d probably say to a candidate if they asked me is to say everybody should drop the phrase “on my first day in office, I will do the following” thing. (Laughter.) If we can achieve that, we will have made a contribution.

MR. HAMRE: (Laughs.) That would be a contribution. (Laughs, laughter.) Yeah, I mean, a sense of reflection and perspective would be welcomed for all of our politicians, I would say.

Henry, let me – let me go back to the topic that we originally asked you to address when we invited you. And this was – we did this several months ago. We saw the unfolding deal with Iran. This was a very big deal – not just the organic issue of the nuclear program, but the way in which is opens up political opportunities for Iran in the region, it creates a different dynamic. I’ll also say, having been in the Middle East the last three days, there’s a lot of nervousness about this. What do you think about this deal – not just the nuclear deal, but the way in which it creates a new geopolitical dynamic in the Gulf?

MR. KISSINGER: When the deal was first proposed, I raised some questions about the inspection provisions. But I think that has now been superseded by the evolution. The more fundamental concern I had is what will follow afterwards.

If this deal is interpreted in the region as an end to the nonproliferation efforts of the United States and of the world, and if then every other state in the region attempts to develop or demand the same capabilities that Iran has achieved through the agreement, then we will see a breakdown of the nonproliferation system. And then we will face a situation in which, because of the short distances, because of the limited technological capability to cover the whole range of deterrence, that a premium will be put on preemptive actions between these countries. And this should be a fundamental concern for us in the – in the next decade or so, that it is logical that the Sunni countries will think that they must strengthen their military capabilities vis-à-vis a growing Iranian military and economic capability. So that’s one aspect. That’s the nuclear aspect.

But even if we – if one can avoid the spread of nuclear military technology, if what emerges is two blocs – a Sunni bloc and a Shia bloc – and if the Western countries are attempting to maneuver between them to conduct a balance-of-power policy between two countries, it’s – or between two blocs, it’s extremely difficult. And if you look at the experience of Europe before World War I, when their system had congealed into two rigid – more or less rigid alliances, sooner or later it becomes unmanageable. So that’s the structural problem.

And then the political long-range problem is that Iran is now governed by ayatollahs, but it was an empire before ayatollahs, and an empire reaching from the borders of China into North Africa, so that dominating the region is not a new thought to educated Iranians. And their economic capacity, and probably their military capacity, is stronger than that of any other single nation in the region. And their outreach today, by supporting non-state actors in Lebanon, Yemen, Palestine, some would say, has given them a strategic base beyond the ideology of the – of the ayatollahs. So in the minds of the Sunni states, there is a real threat. At the same time, it
is also conceivable that as Iran evolves that a more moderate perception of the international system evolves with it.

And for us, the challenge is to pursue two, on the face of it, contradictory policies at the same time. On the one hand, we have to stand by the Sunni countries that have been our allies and on whose cooperation we have relied for many decades. And therefore, we have to set a limit to Iranian imperialism. But we also have to be prepared to engage in a dialogue with an Iran that conducts its policies as a national state with a great history and great capacities, and which could be a major influence for peace, progress and stability. And we have to be able to conduct both of these policies simultaneously, and to avoid getting into a position in which we are now in danger of falling – that the Sunni states vocally distrust us and the Iranians have not shifted or adopted a concept of international order with which we – with which we can connect. And that has to be our objective, and to maintain a position in both the Sunni and in the Shia world. And that will be very difficult to do, but I think it’s possible and I think it’s necessary.

MR. HAMRE: Henry, let me just ask, do you – you’ve posed the great question, which is, what’s the domestic dynamic within Iran? Is this now a time when they want to find a practical solution for their historical cultural greatness and have a legitimate expression of that? Or is it still a revolutionary country that’s looking to transform politics in their region? What do you think is the answer to that?

MR. KISSINGER: I think it’s probably both. It’s probable that some of the senior leaders and maybe – and probably even the supreme leader are still adhering to the revolutionary ideology of Khomeini. But it also seems to be the case that the younger generation has more connections to the non-Islamic international order to have a different view. And within – where I differ from some of the literature that I read is this. There are some people that one reads often that the ayatollahs will go away and that we should just wait for them to go away, and then something will happen, that it’s more reasonable. I think we should be focusing on the expressions of Iranian foreign policy and not on their internal (pontification ?). And they should understand our objectives and our limit and not assume that the overthrow of the existing system is the direct objective of American foreign policy.

And so the major effort intellectually that we should make is to say, what kind of foreign policy of Iran is compatible with American security and American objectives, and pursue that. Hopefully in the process and likely in the process the Iranian government will modify itself in order to achieve this.

I think back in respect to, literal, when we dealt with Nasser’s Egypt. It was – one faced some of the same revolutionary tendencies. Not so religious, as radical in general. And the American position at the time was we will judge you by your conduct, and we don’t believe you can achieve your objectives with Russian military support. But if you are prepared to discuss on another basis, we will be ready to discuss an overall settlement with you. And then they said that policy was not a direct revolution within the system, although practically it brought about a total reorientation of Egyptian policy.
MR. HAMRE: Forgive me for asking such a crude question, but can American politics handle such a sophisticated foreign policy? (Laughter.)

MR. KISSINGER: I – no –

MR. HAMRE: Forgive me. I –

MR. KISSINGER: No, I think – I think there are two answers to that.

One, it has to get to that point, and it cannot now but for a number of understandable reasons. We have not had in our history faced a situation in which the permanent calibration of a fluid situation became a principal objective necessity of American policy. Our foreign policy involvements have usually been – have invariably been in the face of an immediate danger that could be overcome, and afterwards we could return to stability. No other major nation has ever been in such a fortunate position.

Then we change our leadership so regularly, and so totally when we change it, that every time a new administration comes in, one starts a reexamination of the entire policy while, in fact, a successful foreign policy has to be a continuum that you can modify in the light of experience, but not something which you can pretend you can recast every four or eight years. But I think we have to get ourselves into the position where – if one looks at Britain in the 19th century and you look at their succession of prime ministers from different parties and the substantially continuous foreign policy they maintained, that is sort of an objective which we have not yet reached.

MR. HAMRE: This is why our motto is “In God We Trust.” (Laughter.) OK.

Let me ask one last question, and then I will turn to the audience. Henry, you are a policy strategist that has grounded yourself in an understanding of history. This is a region of profound historical impact. We’ve got a 300-year relationship between Turkey and Russia, between Turkey and the Levant. We have – we come into this with a very superficial kind of a historical consciousness. What is your sense about how we should be working with the other powers in the world that have historically had a greater involvement and impact in this region? And how would you first approach it?

MR. KISSINGER: Well, of course, if you look at the history of Russia and Turkey, you cannot say that they have been brilliant in solving the –

MR. HAMRE: It’s not been happy. No, it’s not been happy.

MR. KISSINGER: Between themselves. So having experience with each other can also teach you constant conflict.

The uniqueness of the present world situation is that, in many regions, a permanent conflict will lead to disaster for everybody. I would say that’s particularly true between China and the United States. And if one – if one looks at the crisis in the Middle East now, it has many
similarities to the Thirty Years’ War in Europe, where religions, countries were fighting against each other with sometimes overlapping and sometimes different wars. And at the end of it, out of that horrifying experience, which killed about 30 percent of the populations of Central Europe with – not with weapons of mass destruction, they came up with the Westphalian settlement, which created a framework that lasted for a few hundred years. Now, I’m not saying the same will happen in the Middle East, but the objective of foreign policy should be to distill out of deep crisis some pattern that will – that can be maintained by the agreement of the – of the principal countries.

At this moment, that looks very hopeless when you look at the patterns, events. But I’m hoping that we in America, regardless of which party wins, will begin to focus on concentrating on a long-range policy when we come in. And many of our European allies – certainly Britain and France – have a long experience, but have in effect resigned from the management of the crisis.

So I’m not saying that I know exactly how to do this, but I think if we set ourselves that objective – and we also have to understand that, as time goes on, when we’re talking about the Middle East, it is very probable that India will play a more active role because its own internal survival is very much dependent – affected by what happens to the radicalization in the region. And China will begin to do – play a strategic role, if not – and all of this will have to be thought through as the – as the new world emerges.

We are too focused on the world that was created by a few European countries 150 years ago in its structure. And we have now to understand what the new forces are, what our necessities are, and what our limitations are. And that doesn’t mean that I am sitting here knowing how to do it, but we’ve got to ask the right questions before we can give the answers. And we still remain the key element in devising this.

MR. HAMRE: I have been very selfish. I’ve indulged myself at your expense, because I’ve had so many questions. But let me turn to the audience. And I do want to ask a few questions, and we will open it up.

But, sir, his hand is up prominently. Only questions, by the way. If you start giving lectures, I’m going to cut you off and humiliate you. (Laughter.) So only questions, OK?

MR. KISSINGER: Are you saying you are permitted to have questions, too?

MR. HAMRE: No, sir, I will interpret the question. (Laughs, laughter.)

Q: Hi. Joe Graziano with DOD Inspector General. Thank you, Dr. Kissinger, for being here.

MR. HAMRE: A little closer. Lift it up a little closer.

Q: Yes.
In the aftermath of the bombings in Paris, the greatest concern among sort of European politicians seems to be a potential turn towards rightist parties and policies by the public. What is your assessment? You know, sort of will that happen? And perhaps more importantly, should that happen in Europe? Thank you, sir.

MR. HAMRE: Sir, I think his question is, is will the terrorist incidents create an impulse towards a reactionary rightist direction in Europe that will become –

MR. KISSINGER: No, but there will certainly be an initial impetus in that direction. But I hope that the Europeans will generate a leadership in which they assume a political role without going to the extreme – to the extreme right- or left-wing parties. The immediate impact will be towards the right.

MR. HAMRE: Right back here with the red tie. Please stand up, so that way my microphone guy can find you.

Q: Thank you. Peter Shutley (sp), retired State Department.

I think it was Jefferson that said a democracy to work needs an informed electorate. I’m not sure our electorate is very much informed about foreign affairs. So my question to you is, what’s your assessment of that? (Laughter.)

MR. HAMRE: Are we as stupid as we looks is – (laughter, applause) – no, no, no, no, no, don’t say that. (Laughs, laughter.)

MR. KISSINGER: In evaluating motivations, just ask yourself, what motivation do I have to answer any of these questions? (Laughter, laughs.)

One of the differences between 19th century democracy and 21st century democracy is that the issues in 19th century democracy were relatively simpler and were not so global. And therefore, it was possible to reduce – to reduce them to a number of key principles. This was especially true in domestic policy, but it was also true in – very much true in foreign policy. Now the elements that impinge on foreign policy are so widespread and cover so many different fields that to present a relevant picture to the public is increasingly difficult.

And I think also that the modern form of technology, which puts a premium on forming an opinion by a quick look at a screen, which presents essence in a very condensed form, appeals more to emotion than the more rationalist approach of the Enlightenment which Jefferson represented. So the nature of modern democracy and modern information technology is one of the issues of our time.

MR. HAMRE: Let me go back right down here in the second row, please. Let’s try this.

Q: Henry Nuzum, SEACOR Holdings. Dr. Kissinger, thanks very much for the excellent presentation.
You lamented the effect of quadrennial elections on our foreign policy and noted that it forces an oscillation between two extremes, or at least different policy. Might a reversal of the migration of power – of the last seven decades of power from the executive to the legislature – excuse me, from the legislature to the executive mitigate that?

MR. KISSINGER: You know, I have hearing aids –

MR. HAMRE: Yes, I think the –

Q: I’m happy to repeat.

MR. HAMRE: Pardon me, sir?

Q: I’m happy to repeat.

MR. HAMRE: No, I think the –

MR. KISSINGER: No, let him simply for me.

MR. HAMRE: I think the question is, is that, with the debate that’s going on, we’ve had this oscillation of domestic power between the executive branch and the legislative branch. It’s shifted so much to the executive branch, and yet it seems to be captured by, you know, the passions of one party. What do you think about how do we strike a balance for – where American democracy reflects itself in foreign policy?

Q: And if you – if the legislature had more power, would you have – (comes on mic) – if the legislature had more power, would you have a greater continuum in policy? Because you had commented that the presidential elections break that continuum.

MR. KISSINGER: Well, when I first had a significant position here, in the Nixon administration, I thought life was tough. (Laughter.) And it was. But the congressional organization was such that there were a number of senior members of the – that were the heads of committees that had been there for a long time. So it was possible to conduct a national dialogue. When the leadership in Congress becomes more transitory and it then – it’s more affected by the immediate mood of foreign policy. And what the democratic process has to do in general, it’s to respond to the immediate reaction, on the one hand. But it also has to put the immediate reaction into a wider context, and that wider context has to become part of the thinking of the people at large. And that is one of the issues that CSIS will help solve for the next – (laughter).

MR. HAMRE: (Laughs.) That’s tomorrow.

I’m going to reserve the last question for somebody below the age of 30, OK? I mean, that’s – OK, right back here. You got a little – you know, I got a – no, I got a guy here, he’s going to ask a question. You’re too old. (Laughter.) You go.
Q: Hi, Mr. Kissinger. My name’s Andrew Lama (sp). I’m a –

MR. HAMRE: You have to speak up.

Q: Sorry. Hi. I’m a freshman at George Washington University. My name is Andrew Lama (sp). And I just had a question.

But as a – as a supporter of the Westphalian order, but also as somebody who diagnoses artificial borders as a reason for why we have a lot of instability in the Middle East, how do you approach how – the readjustment of power with self-determination and how conflicts have to be solved with minority groups in countries that may not recognize self-determined people, such as Turkey and Kurdistan or Iraq and Kurdistan, and how we approach – how we shouldn’t be looking at national sovereignty as this absolute, but we should be looking to human sovereignty?

MR. HAMRE: Thank you. This was a very interesting question, because what he asked was, the international system drew borders for other people, and it created a political instability in this region that’s now showing up. And I think the question is, do we – what do we do about that? Because we created an inherent instability with a(n) imperial dynamic that was in creating the boundaries in the Middle East, but does it get better if we try to change it? What do you think?

MR. KISSINGER: Well, first of all, if you look at history, the borders – in the medieval period, borders were not drawn on the basis of nationality; they were based on the feudal tradition. And countries – whole sections of countries could be moved to other countries, and that was considered a normal way of operating the international system. The notion of boundaries drawn on the basis of national identity and cultural identity really began to develop in the 18th century and gained momentum only in the 19th century. The Austrian Empire was considered a perfectly natural phenomenon in the 18th century and became outdated in the 19th century, when the nation-state became the key element.

Now, at the end of World War I, the European victors of World War I carved up the Middle East on the model of the European system. But that meant a number of states of roughly equal size who would balance each other, but that were no longer buttressed by a common sense of nationality. So these countries were inherently rickety. And it is therefore very unlikely that, if you look at it from an historical point of view, that the national boundaries as we know them now of countries like Iraq and Syria – that had never existed before – will have the same significance in a new international system.

But the problem is, when you change the boundaries, you create a period of tension in the – there has never been an Iraq before 1920, and it was composed of Kurds, Sunnis and Shia. So in a – in a world system based on national identity, you can imagine that Iraq would break up over a period of time. But to do that peacefully is a – is a huge challenge. And then when you add to the fact that what is now an autonomous Kurdish region borders significant Kurdish minorities in Turkey, Iran and Syria, you have another complication. That’s one of the issues of our time.
One would hope that the leading countries get together on some system of reconstructing the states that has some viability. But it’s a very – it’s a very tough, tough thing.

And I really want to say to this group, I didn’t know what I was being invited for. (Laughter.) And if I had, I would probably have –

MR. HAMRE: Said no? (Laughs, laughter.) I hope not.

MR. KISSINGER: —stayed in China—(laughter)—where I was a week ago. But these are important issues, and I don’t want to give you the impression that I am here pontificating because I know all the answers. What we have to do now is agree on a direction and agree on what it is we want to solve and what its components need to be, instead of repeating the slogans that have gotten us into this position. And it’s going to be a painful process, but it’s an essential process. And so really we – it’s not my normal habit that I say I know the questions better than the answers, but that really is the challenge that’s before us.

MR. HAMRE: What you do for us, Henry, is you bring us into a different dimension to think about problems in a strategic way. And that’s what’s missing right now in America. We’re so busy trying to propagandize our own point of view rather than to listen and to think strategically. You’ve given us a wonderful opportunity this afternoon to think strategically.

Can I ask all of you to thank Henry Kissinger? (Applause.)

(END)