

An Interview with Dr. Joshua Landis

By Shree Pandya and Kevin Wallentine

“It was serendipitous,” Dr. Joshua Landis says of his first encounters with Middle East. Currently Director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, Landis has been studying the Middle East since 1979. After speaking at the Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum on September 13th, 2011, he took the time to discuss his perspective on the Middle East with the Keck Center of International and Strategic Studies.

A Serendipitous Beginning

When Landis, a fresh-faced graduate from Swarthmore, arrived in Beirut in 1979, he found himself in the midst of a civil war. His surroundings went from being “so peaceful that you wanted to fall asleep the whole time” to containing “real world problems where people had to make terrible decisions all the time.”

“Here was little spoiled American kid from a small liberal arts college who was trying to figure out why people were shooting each other,” he said. “That was the beginning of a slippery slope.”

Landis began to learn Arabic, and went on to receive three Fulbright scholarships to further his studies. Upon returning to the United States, he completed his master’s in Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University. His time thereafter was divided between the United States and the Middle East, and in 1997 he received his PhD in Near East Studies at Princeton University.

Over the course of his studies in the Middle East, Landis developed a close academic and personal connection with Syria. He married into Syrian society, and his family visits Syria every summer. While he still emphasizes that he is a foreigner, Landis’ deep ties with the nation have provided him with insight into the perspectives and prejudices that shape modern Syrian society.

Through his extensive interaction with the nation, Landis has emerged as a leading Syrian expert. His blog, *Syrian Comment*, has a readership of 120,000 people a month, ranging from government officials to expatriates. Landis views his blog as “crucial” because “it provides a place for Syrians from different walks of life to debate.”

The type of debate Landis’ blog encourages is notably absent in Syrian society. In a nation with very little free speech and no free press, Syrians “have not been able to talk.” The most important and divisive topic – religion – is considered taboo in common conversation.

“People don’t talk about [religion] enough,” Landis explains. “That’s one way to keep the peace, by banning talking about it.” However, this policy of suppression has done little to assuage religious tensions within the state between the Alawite minority and the Sunni Muslim majority. Relations between the two groups are strained by mistrust and prejudice, something that Landis hopes to ameliorate through his forum.

The Arab Spring

When widespread protests erupted in Tunisia in December 2010, Landis was surprised. When the protests reached Syria, he was shocked. “Having studied the Middle East since 1979, I had become lulled into a sense that the regional dictatorships were too strong to be thrown off,” he said.

Landis certainly understands the visceral motivations behind the Arab Spring. “These regimes have made people feel so alone and fearful.” Based on a narrow group of people ruling from the top, the regimes across the Middle East are characterized by their tight control of power and an inability to support pluralism. In what seems to be right out of the pages of an Orwellian dystopia, Landis describes the average citizen as being unable to express his real thoughts on the

phone because “Big Brother” – the oppressive regime – is always listening. For decades, people had been “full of despair” and isolated, with “no way out.”

What changed everything, in Landis’ opinion, was technology. On YouTube, clips ranging from the abuse people suffer at the hands of respective regimes to the potential success in solidarity against them are widely accessible. More importantly, they’re very difficult to censor.

“The camera videophone is amazing,” Landis marvels. “It’s the weapon – like the sixshooter in the Old West that allowed the little guy to stand up. If someone beats you up, you record it, post it on YouTube, and people say ‘those dogs’. You aren’t alone anymore.”

Facebook has also created a way for people to get around the widespread censorship of communication. “Young people began to notice that they could share opinions through Facebook, things that the governments weren’t able to censor,” Landis explains. “And this new virtual reality sank in, and it changed everything.”

Broader Implications

When talk turned to the current political situation in Syria, Landis described it as an “extremely tumultuous period” in which everyone’s final goal is “normalcy.” “It’s going to be a long road,” Landis concluded. “I fear that there’s going to be a lot of fighting. Every Syrian family is worried. Richer people are worried about their property and money and protect[ing] themselves. Poorer people are worried about surviving.” Like many Syrian families, Landis’ own Alawite in-laws are attempting to ensure that they have a way to leave the country, should it become too unstable. Because of the fear of civil war or ethnic cleansing, he notes that countries like Turkey are prepared for an influx of Syrian refugees. At the same time, Landis urges Americans and the international community to remember Syria for its positive aspects, as it is “beautiful and has centuries of history.”

The Arab Spring strikes Landis as being a moment that is “very hopeful,” yet fraught with apprehension. This anxiety is produced by worries about what is to come and the “incipient violence that is everywhere,” with many concerned “that public order could break down.” Landis also sees a generational divide in attitudes about the Arab Spring – “the younger generations have thrown themselves into this” while “the older generations tend to be much more fearful because they worry about what could go wrong.” He sees the November Egyptian elections as a sign of hope, but remains concerned about the potential for factional Islamic groups to gain power. Indeed, the lack of a “good example” of a democratic model in the Arab world continues to disquiet observers of the Arab Spring, Landis notes.

In light of the Arab Spring, Turkey has been looked to as a model of a successful Islamic democracy. Yet Landis points out that Turkey at the time of its democratization had many benefits. As the head of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey had the intellectual elite and preexisting institutions. “Ataturk was able to use that intellectual and governing capital to free his people,” Landis explains. As most of the reforms of the Ottoman Empire had taken place in Istanbul, Ataturk was able to “force the enlightenment on Turkey,” leading to the secular state present today.

The entrenched constitutional division of church and state present in Turkey is absent in many countries of the Arab Spring, Syria included. According to Landis, “It’s much more difficult to avoid religion in a society that’s trying to rebuild from the bottom up. Religion gives you morality.” For these nations rocked by domestic turbulence, morality is something the people certainly wouldn’t mind in government. In terms of the chances of an eventual “Arab

Enlightenment,” Landis points out, “Ultimately, it takes looking for morality not simply in the Quran.”

Given the sweeping changes occurring simultaneously in many Middle East countries, one might wonder if some form of Pan-Arabism is being revived. Landis rejects that notion, explaining that the idea of Pan-Arabism has “brought a lot of pain to the Middle East,” along with “a lot of failure.” He believes that the people of the Middle East are comfortable with something akin to European sentiment and “recognize the importance and power of having common cultural connections and a common history and language, but don’t want to give up their borders.” Additionally, Landis noted that Pan-Arabism initially emerged from a backlash against the European-established borders; today, a similar outside force isn’t present in the Arab Spring, and movements tend to be centered domestically. Indeed, despite the broader similarities tying the Arab Spring movements together, the domestic conflicts inherent to each state are vastly different, rooted in varying ethnic, religious, and political conflicts.

As some of these movements within the Arab Spring deteriorate into protracted civil wars, the role of the international community becomes increasingly important. “Clearly, there are times when military force is needed,” Landis stated. Whereas Ataturk was a strong national leader for Turkey who emerged out of hardship, waiting for unifying leaders to emerge out of the Arab Spring could be too costly. Landis urges caution for intervention, however, suggesting that global powers “follow the Hippocratic oath, which is ‘do no harm’.” At the same time, he points out that even good intentions are not infallible, which is why foreign powers should exercise extreme “caution” when involving themselves in the Arab Spring.

Foreign powers may have a clearer path in dealing with the endemic weak-state problem in the Middle East. Many of the conflicts seen in the Middle East today have their origins in the weakness of Arab nation-states and confusion regarding borders. “The United States, the United Nations, and the international community should use international law and their power to try to resolve border disputes,” Landis furthers. By helping to “define communities,” Landis believes that these countries will be able to begin to strengthen internally and build stronger and more resilient institutions.

Back To Campus

Dr. Landis offered a thought-provoking analysis of the Middle East that was shaped by his extensive understanding and experience within the region. While much of the rhetoric currently being tossed around in regard to the Middle East seems to have an overly optimistic or pessimistic slant, Landis’ vision takes into account religious and ethnic divisions, governance issues, western intervention, and historical precedent to communicate the past, present, and future of the Middle East. Given the expertise Landis exhibits from years of living abroad and diligent foreign study, we wanted to know if he had any suggestions for current international relations students. His advice? “Be a little daring.”