Beyond the Headlines Event

Featuring Robin Wright,
Author of the Book, ROCK THE CASBAH: Rage and Rebellion Across the Islamic World

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International Peace Institute
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TRANSCRIPTION

Moderator: **Warren Hoge,** *Senior Adviser for External Relations, IPI*

Speaker: **Robin Wright,** *Author of book, ROCK THE CASBAH: Rage and Rebellion across the Islamic World*

Warren Hoge: I'm Warren Hoge, IPI Senior Advisor for External Relations and I'm happy to welcome you to this Beyond the Headlines Event featuring Robin Wright, author of, *Rock the Casbah: Rage and Rebellion Across the Islamic World*.

I actually knew a lot about Robin Wright before I knew Robin Wright and I put that to good use, and I'll now explain what that means. It was in 1984 and I had just become the foreign editor of the New York Times and she was already in her tenth year of roaming around the Middle East and filing knowing and often prescient dispatches from the region. To make matters worse for me, her articles appeared in the publication of the enemy, *The Washington Post*.

Now that caused me angst, but it also gave me access to a critical management tool. One of the jobs of an editor in daily journalism is to fire up the correspondents on a daily basis, and we are known to be pretty manipulative in doing that sometimes. The war that occupied our attention at that point was the

conflict in Lebanon, and it was what we call a very competitive story. It was also Robin Wright's beat.

So, I would fly out to Beirut and go with my correspondents to patrol the contested green line that divided the warring communities back then, and this was a way of showing solidarity with the correspondents and that we really cared about the story back in New York. But nothing worked better in motivating them than to mention the latest Robin Wright exclusive story in *The Washington Post*. And I confess I resorted to that little trick more than once.

In the decades since then Robin, has continued to lead the way in helping us all understand the Middle East, writing for a number of publications, authoring six books and appearing frequently in lecture halls and on television.

And she hasn't lost her courage. Just a couple of weeks ago she went mano–a–mano with Stephen Colbert.

This book, she says in her introduction, is something of a culmination. I hope that doesn't mean it's the end – the result of nearly four decades of reporting from the 57 countries across the region, and that experience gives *Rock the Casbah* a real on-the-ground authenticity and sweep. And by the way, for you other aging hippies out there, *Rock the Casbah* is a title of a 1982 song – I see a nod in the front row – by the English punk rock group The Clash.

In the book, Robin concludes that the rebellion that is redefining politics, culture and security in the region is not just one against autocrats and rulers, but also, and this is a central point, one against extremists.

She calls the movement the counter–Jihad. It's a soft revolution that is not a clash with other civilizations, but rather quote, "a struggle within the faith itself to rescue Islam's central values from a small, but virulent minority". The new confrontation, she writes, is effectively a jihad against the Jihad.

As a foreign editor and as a foreign correspondent, I used to bang on about how you're not supposed to just cover a country, you're covering a culture, and Robin demonstrates the value of that point convincingly in her book. To make her argument that the younger generation will show us that Islam can be compatible with modernity and democracy, she focuses not just on politicians and public figures, but also on local hip-hop artists, on poets and playwrights, feminists, human rights activists, television satellite Sheikhs, comic book makers and comedians. These portraits are a great strength of this book. I can tell you that *Rock the Casbah* is a rich reading experience and the book is for sale at the door and Robin will be here when we finish to sign books for you. As I think I've made clear, I'm delighted to welcome to IPI, my esteemed frenemy, Robin Wright.

Robin Wright: Thank you very much Warren. I should say that the one experience that I wanted in my life that I never had was working for Warren.

Hoge: Oh thank you.

Wright: He was considered the foreign editor's foreign editor. He knew the world, himself, was not someone put in a position to edit others and as a correspondent and foreign editor, he was one of a kind. So, my life has been almost perfect, except for that.

Warren suggested that I stand, but the reality is I'm 5'1", and I may have a better perch right here. So, I'm going to stay here and talk.

I first landed in the Middle East on October 6th, 1973, which was the day the fourth Middle East war broke out. I was a young correspondent, heady, convinced that, you know, I could do this. Looking back I think, God, what was I thinking? But I've covered all six Middle East wars in the meantime and two intifadas, the Revolution in Iran, the hostage ordeal, the first suicide bombs against American targets in Beirut. I was there when the first bomb went off at the American Embassy. I can still hear in my head the explosion at the Marine Compound in 1983 when 241 Marines died, our largest loss of U.S. military life in a single incident since Iwo Jima, still to this day, largest non–nuclear explosion on Earth since World War II. I also covered the Israeli invasion and, you know, the rise of Hezbollah and so forth.

So I've had this really rich experience in the Middle East and I feel very privileged to have, it's actually my seventh book and my father wrote twenty-seven, I'll never make that far, but, you know, I think this is – I've been fortunate to see the entire narrative arc from the rise of extremism in Islam all the way to what I think, today, is an extraordinary turning point, that is the beginning of the beginning. I'm not one to argue that it's all, you know, light and hope from now on, but I think in the world's most volatile region, we are beginning to see something that is quite different and that is, as Warren described it, the counter–Jihad and I use the term deliberately.

I think it involves three different things. It is, as we see on the streets, across the region in Tunisia and Libya and Egypt and Syria and Yemen, Bahrain and beyond, the challenge of the political status quo, that the last block of countries to hold out against the democratic tide is beginning to want to be part of what's happened elsewhere in the world with the demise of communism in Eastern Europe, the collapse of Apartheid and minority rule in Africa, the end of military dictatorships in Latin America. So the first part of it is the challenge to the status quo.

The second is what's important to us in taking on the war on terrorism, extremism, whatever label you want to give it, and that is the challenge, the rejection of violence and as an idiom of expression, that when you stand back, stand, my father liked to say, stand on top of the world and look down, what you find is, the common denominator, whether it's in oil rich Sheikdoms or dirt poor countries like Yemen, whether it's in monarchies or military dictatorships, is that the people in all these societies, whatever their political experience, have turned to peaceful, civil disobedience to launch their uprisings.

Now when Libya disintegrated, for a lot of reasons, in Yemen it's begun to disintegrate, Syria it may be as well, but for months in each of these places you saw people take to the streets and not resort to Molotov cocktails or suicide bombs and all the other tools of violence that have defined that region for so long, and that's an extraordinary message, because we will never, ever be able to defeat extremists. We can kill Bin Laden, kill Anwar al–Awlaki and twenty-four others, senior leadership officials in the last two years, but we can never turn the tide until we have Muslims wanting the same thing we do, and what's interesting and the reason we see this counter–Jihad is because they have paid an even greater price than we have.

When you look at Iraq since 2003, we're all focused on how many Americans have died. When it comes to suicide bombs, some 200 American soldiers have

died at the hands of suicide bombs. Since 2003 over 12,000 Iraqis have died at the hands of suicide bombs. Over 30,000 people have been injured by suicide bombs and it is their anger at the price this has. They've been forced to pay, plus the loss of property, the chaos, the uncertainty, the economic price, and so across the region you see. In 2003 we have someone – a couple of people here from Morocco or have been in Morocco, that the Casablanca bombings in 2003, in Saudi Arabia, 2004, the beginning of the attacks against the foreign residences, this period when Al–Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula was based in Saudi Arabia and was so active, that all of these societies began to see they were paying a price too and they have turned, not because of any altruistic love for us, in fact, in some cases it's despite us, but it is this extraordinary anger that they have felt.

The third part of this counter–Jihad is the rejection of the Islamist, extremist, rigid, ideology personified particularly by Iran and in many ways the kind of Arab uprisings we've seen since the middle of last December. We saw, first of all, in Iran with the protests, millions of people taking to the streets in twelve major cities and many towns, in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential election, when people believed that the vote was fraudulent putting President Ahmadinejad back in power, so you have these three different phenomena, so why now? Why is this the turning point? I think there are three reasons.

One is the basic demographics. The baby boom, and we know what the baby boom did in this country in redefining it, everything including the issues today. You have the largest proportionate baby boom in the world in the Middle East. Two–thirds of the 300 million people in the Arab world are under the age of 30 and that plays into the second factor, which is the majority for the first time are literate and that includes women and they may not have high school and certainly not college degrees, but they do have a sense of the broader world. The women have a sense of wanting to be more than inheritors of the roles of their mother, they want to be players, whether it's in a more dynamic role in the home, or to have a profession. They want, many of them, to marry up, when they're arranged marriages, where they have some choice in it, you know, want to have the ability to – the roles are changing, and then the third is, of course, the tools of technology, and this is not just Twitter and Facebook and so forth.

We've seen a fundamental change since the mid 1990s, when Al Jazeera emerged. You had one satellite channel, which gave voice beyond state-controlled media, radio, television, the print media, and Al Jazeera, in their own language, not CNN, which was in English, gave them an alternative story. The whole idea was not just the alternative story, but diversity, a different opinion and so it was the principal of, there's not just one truth, there are multiple truths and today, there are over 500 independent satellite stations, some of them tiny, some of them major, that give people diversity. So when we talk about, you know, what is the truth, you can get a lot of them and I think these three things have really redefined the region in important ways.

Another one of the important trends that we've begun to see as a result of all of this, the counter–Jihad and kind of the factors of change is the emergence of what I call a new martyrdom. What's happening in the region is as important for the future of Islam as it is for the politics, because today when the young are dying, it is not to kill leaders or foreign diplomats or armies. The uprising was started by a young street vendor in Tunisia, in a remote town who was fed up with paying bribes every time the inspector came around and would you believe, I would love to know what the estimates are on lost income, you know, whether it's what NATO has spent or what economies have suffered, what regimes have

– the Saudis alone have forked out $136 billion in aid to try to preempt an uprising and the whole thing was started over a $7 bribe, ten dinars which was the equivalent of one day's pay and the inspector demanded a bribe. A young man named Mohammed Bouazizi said no and so the inspector confiscated the fruit and the electronic scale, a $100 item, and he was so mad that he went to government office after another to try to demand recourse and when he failed he was so angry, he went down to the governor's office, poured paint thinner all over his body and set himself on fire and it was not to hurt anyone else. It was to shame his government and he was far more effective than any extremist movement. For a decade Osama Bin Laden had been hiding on the Afghan-Pakistan border trying to undermine governments in the region and in 30 days the Tunisians ousted President Ben Ali who had been in power for 23 years. In 18 days, the Egyptians ousted Hosni Mubarak and all the while Bin Laden and Ayman al–Zawahiri, his lieutenant, now successor, were becoming increasingly passé. So, I think that what this all means for extremism and violence, Al–Qaeda, and its affiliates, is that they look increasingly passé.

The message in the region is, the young, who are defining politics more than their elders, want laptops, not rifles. They are saying about extremism, you haven't provided in the decade or in the past three decades, the basic things that address our daily concerns. Is it healthcare, is it education, is it employment? And the extremists can't do that, and so the young are looking for an alternative. I'll add one caveat and I know you want to do questions.

Hoge: Much more time to talk.

Wright: Alright, then I'll say two things.

Hoge: Nobody in this audience will object if you keep talking, I can tell.

Wright: And off I go – the politics is one part of the story. The other part of it is the culture of change, and I do almost half the book on that, because I think that shows you the depth, the scope, the longevity of what we're seeing and it plays out, and Warren alluded to this, in hip-hop. Rap is today the rhythm of resistance, and it plays the same role that hip-hop did in the United States when it emerged in the South Bronx, rejecting gang violence, still angry, still with a message, but not wanting to do it through violence and that's the message of the rappers in the region, whether it's taking on Bin Laden and the extremists, whether it's taking on the autocrats, and the thing that's so fascinating in looking at the inner connection of politics and culture.

Let's go back to Tunisia, where a month before the young street vendor set himself on fire, a twenty-one year–old rapper, who goes by the name El Général, posted a song on Facebook. Now hip-hop was illegal in Tunisia, couldn't be recorded, couldn't be performed on state-controlled media. No business would record these guys, so he put his song on Facebook and the song was scathing, said things that no politician had said in twenty-three years against Ben Ali and talked about how people were eating off garbage, that the regime had not provided basic things like education, that the police were in it for profit, not for principle, and that there were no constitutional guarantees that were being fulfilled. It was a bold, blunt, angry song, and he put it on Facebook and twenty percent of Tunisians are on Facebook. I mean, there are lots of arguments about what role did social media play, but 20% in a society like that, and then it gets picked up and played for others and this was a month before Bouazizi set himself on fire.

After Bouazizi's self-immolation, the people who started marching from this remote town, and then it picked up steam and it moved across Tunisia until it hit the capital, sang El Général's song and then it was sung in Egypt, and then Bahrain, and so you see the way that the two interact and it plays out in lots of other cultural aspects.

One of my favorite examples or the simplest example is among playwrights. Who would have thought, you know, playwrights would play a role in political change. There are a number of playwrights who have written pieces with Jihad in the title, but a different kind of Jihad. One of my favorites is by an Egyptian called *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes*. And it's a parody about stereotypes of Muslims. Another of my favorites is one called, by an Indian Muslim, called *Till Jihad Do Us Part*, a play on marital vows and it's a romantic comedy about the challenge to be a good partner, a good spouse. Again both of them are trying to take the idea of jihad and put it back in its original context and that is to be a good Muslim. That's what jihad literally means and to reclaim it from the extremists.

There's another documentary, again by an Indian Muslim, called *A Jihad for Love*, and the documentary went to twelve countries and you can actually get this on Netflix, which is how I got it. It records the lives of young Muslims who want to be observant, don't want to leave their faith, and yet are gay or lesbian and the challenges they face in really difficult societies: Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and it's very moving, but again, it's reclaiming the idea of jihad, whether it's through gender identity or your marital or family situation, your job, and it's redefining this – taking it back from the extremists.

Another one of my chapters is, and I want to read you one tiny thing from my chapter on Muslim comedians. Who would have thought comedy would be a tool to reject extremism and it is in wonderful ways. This is a joke, I don't tell jokes very well, so I have to read this one. The bottom line is the counter–Jihad literally can be quite funny. This is by an Iranian-born comedian. He gets up on stage and he says, you know, one guy can really mess it up for the rest of us. Look at the Christmas day bomber, the guy who tried to blow up the Northwest flight from Amsterdam to Detroit, this Abu Abu Mustapha Boo Boo or whatever his name. This guy was crazy. Any man would back me up. After all, where was the bomb? – right, in his underwear. I mean, really, any normal man would surely question that assumption. So he switches to a Middle East accent and he assumes the role of a normal hijacker in his final conversation with his terror masters. "Uh, excuse me, I have one, uh, one last question for you. You say my reward in heaven is going to be seventy-two virgins, so do you think maybe we can put the bomb someplace else? I mean, I really think I'm gonna need my penis." So, you know, this is not the kind of thing we think of. So my final point –

Hoge: Before your final point, I'm going to play editor and ask you to do two more things.

Wright: Yes.

Hoge: Two more stories.

Wright: Oh.

Hoge: The story, because your portraits are terrific and so persuasive, one of them is Hissa Hilal.

Wright: Yes.

Hoge: That's a great story.

Wright: Yes.

Hoge: And the other one is Dalia Ziada.

Wright: Dalia Ziada.

Hoge: If you could just tell those two before you get to what your final point is.

Wright: Yes, you're well organized. You're a good editor. Dalia Ziada is maybe my favorite character in the book because it tells you how long this trend has been coming.

At the age of eight she became an activist and it was after her mother came to her and said, put on your best party dress, we're going for a special commemoration, and Dalia put on her dress and she went off and was circumcised. And in Egypt – she's an Egyptian – over 80%, some say 90%, of women, both Christian and Muslim are circumcised. Female genital mutilation, and it's not a Muslim thing, it is, you know, a kind of geographic phenomena. Regional, more African than – or that part of Africa - than the Middle East.

And she was so angry about this, so traumatized that she started, within her own family, arguing with her father and her uncles to make sure this didn't happen to her sister and cousins and she failed time and time again until she came to the last cousin and she went to her uncle and said, "If you do this to her, I'm going to cut off her finger." And her uncle said, "Why would you do that to her? It will maim her for life." And Dalia said, "Duh". And she thought she'd failed and her uncle called her the next day and said, "You convinced me," and she decided that if she could do this, change one person's life, that maybe she could do this for others. So she started, first of all, being active on the issue of female genital mutilation and then when she got to college she heard about a book, comic book, called *The Montgomery Story*, which is about Martin Luther King's walk to freedom and she decided to translate this.

She was a young blogger at that point and she translated it into Arabic. In the back of the comic book it has instructions about civil disobedience, what to do, tangible things, and so she passed this around in Arabic to her blogger friends from Morocco to Yemen and then she decided, you know, 'I don't think Egyptians really know what a human right is, we talk about them, but in terms of specific'. So she launched the first Arab human rights film festival and the government in Egypt tried to stop her time and again – the censorship board initially said, "No, no, you can't do this". So she went to the censorship board and waited for the director, rode up on the elevator with him, pleaded her case over and over and over and he finally said okay. Then, of course, the theatre where she was supposed to show the film festival lost its permit mysteriously timed just to the film festival. So she talked to a lot of her friends and they hired a Nile Tourist River Boat Cruiser and they went down and the minute it left the dock she showed her film.

And she has now held three film festivals and it has bred a new group of Egyptians who are making human rights films, including one that's just a minute long and it shows budding flowers, one quickly after another, and each one is quickly snipped. In the background you hear a young girl screaming. In one

minute, you get it and it's a very moving documentary, and there are others, if you're interested, I can tell you about them.
You know, Dalia was at Tahrir Square every night and what's so interesting about her is she wears a hijab, she is traditional, she's lower middle-class and she epitomizes, there's a microcosm of the trend. You know, I say to all my friends in the diplomatic service, I think there's a diplomat here tonight with apologies, throw out your rolodex, this is a different generation of activists. They don't fit the ilk of the traditional elites who were well educated or well connected or, you know, had some money. This is a different, very different generation and Dalia we get on Skype quite often, she texts me from Tahrir Square saying, "Oh, you know, we've got 10,000 today and we're going to camp out tomorrow," and so forth and we got on Skype a couple weeks ago and she pronounced – well, she's 29 now, she's running for Parliament – and she said, you know, "I'm going to be the first female president of Egypt". Well, she won't be, but you know, the mere fact that she's decided to run for Parliament, you know, she's the leader of the women's branch of a new party called the Justice Party; so this really dynamic group.

And again, some women in there, Hissa, a shorter story. She is a Saudi. She wears what's known as the niqab, which is all black, all it shows are the two slits of the eyes; she even wears gloves. She's a mother of four; the fourth child is autistic and she entered something called the Million's Poet, which is the American Idol of the Persian Gulf and they have three judges, the audience votes, but it's also very, you know, Gulfy in that the audience is separated – men on one side, women on the other. But Hissa was selected among thousands of applicants, to be one of the forty-eight finalists to compete in poetry in the Gulf.

You know, singing and dance are kind of verboten publicly, so poetry is the alternative and it's a serious contest. I mean, this is broadcast throughout the Arab world, the first two prizes are both over a million dollars, the third prize is $800,000. So, you know, this is serious stuff and she got up, most of the poets talk about, you know, desert life and the scent of flowers and the passion of sports and so forth, and she got up and her poem was entitled *The Chaos of Radical Fatwas*, and it was an astounding poem that criticized the clerics for their radicalism and criticized the people for not doing more to counter them. She got the judges' highest points - you can see it on YouTube actually, with a translated version - and the audience kept interrupting her to applaud throughout. This resonated, and she was in the final six. She ended up coming in third, but the mere fact that these ideas are out there and a woman making them who wears niqab, embraces a traditional life, believes in her faith and yet has become the voice in many ways.

So my final point, and I promise then to let somebody else speak, is that I've portrayed the kind of hopeful side of this and I do think that the one thing we don't recognize, how profound this moment is in changing, it's the most important change I think of the early 21st century. I think what's happening in the region and the debt crisis are the two top stories that define today, but what's happened in the Islamic world has been coming for a while and is as important to our security, and those are the two issues that will define the next decade. But I am really, really, really, really worried, because I think that people, the message is not just that we want free elections and a fair press, accountability, justice, and so forth, but that they also want a sense of the future and the challenge is going to be providing not just the political rights, but the economic spoils.

And this is where my concern is that, in part because of the debt crisis that no one in the world is in a position really to help. There's a story today, and I've forgotten, excuse me, of whether it was in the *Times* or the *Post* about how –

Hoge: In the *Times*. (laughter)

Wright: Sorry, of course, how foreign aid is going to take a huge hit or a significant hit as a result of our debt crisis. And we're already, of the twenty-four wealthiest countries, the most miserly when it comes proportionately to our aide to these countries.

And we make the mistake of, when it comes to Egypt, which accounts for one–quarter of the Arab world's population, giving $1.3 billion dollars to the military, which is not doing so well in giving anything to its people, and a couple hundred million to civil society groups, development and so forth.

And we're unwilling to even think about a little bit of change to, at least, signify, particularly to the military, that we're not thrilled that they haven't lifted martial law or moved on some of their other political promises, because we're going to look like we're on the wrong side of history increasingly, besides the fact that it's really the civil society groups and the new democrats that need help.

So my great fear is that this wonderful moment in history, in the world's most volatile region where, you know, people are trying to look for alternative means of expression, will get derailed, diverted, undermined by the fact that the new democratically-elected governments can deliver and I don't think anything's going to happen on the peace process for the next couple of years. It's not like that there is some alternative that can generate momentum, that can keep this going and so I think what we're seeing is the beginning of the beginning. I'm very worried about what comes next.

Hoge: Thank you. I'm still stuck on that line, rap is the rhythm of resistance. That has a good, that has a good lilt to it, you know, I can set that to music.

Wright: Yes. Yes.

Hoge: Robin, you have gotten almost uniformly wonderful reviews for this book as it deserves. All reviewers have to say "but", okay. And the "but" in several serious reviews, reviewers who find the book has enormous worth, particularly the portraits that you've been demonstrating tonight, have wondered if you're a little credulous.

Basically what they've said is, I remember one of them said, you don't give enough space to movements like Hamas, Hezbollah, Muqtada al–Sadr in Iraq, who unlike Al–Qaeda, do have social programs and so they do have a movement, you know, a formula to put forward which might attract followers. You must have thought about these critiques, what is your response to that?

Wright: I love this story because the reviewer – I wrote him a letter and I said, you know, I always appreciate hearing what any reviewer has to say, but the fact is in my last book I went to see the head of Hezbollah, the heads of Hamas in both Gaza and Damascus, all the top leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, and several of the senior clerics in Iran. I already wrote that book and I sent him a copy.

So, I mean, look, it makes me address an issue of what comes next and I do say this in the book, that the two trends of the next decade will often, to us in the

West, look like a bit of a contradiction because there will be this pressing desire for greater political rights and, you know, the idea of justice; this is something new in the region and that's why the trial of Hosni Mubarak is so important, that it signals to leaders throughout the region, "ha, ha, ha," you may be held to account as well. So it almost doesn't matter what, you know, the sentence is. The mere fact that he's being tried, he's behind the same cage he put thousands and thousands of people with his sons and others.

But the other half of the trend is that the next decade will often look more Islamic, but it's a different kind of Islam than what we've seen before. Today Islam is a means to an end, not the end goal in itself. No majority wants to replicate Iran, wants an Islamic republic, but Islam will be the milieu often of groups, even those that are secular, they will want - in the same way that Judeo-Christian values define, you know, Western governments and their goals - Islam to be a strong reference point when it comes to writing constitutions. Remember the Egyptian constitution already says that all laws have to be compatible with Islam, so will the new constitution, especially when you see the growing number of women who wear hijab.

My friend Dalia does and forty years ago the majority of women in Egypt didn't wear a scarf, today they do. Today, however, they're colorful, they're fashionable, they wear them in lots of different ways. One of the vogue ways of wearing them now is something they call the Spanish wrap, which has a big bun here and it's modeled on the flamenco dancers, that the hijab is in many cases about creating a space in which women can feel that they can go out and do whatever it is, that it's an issue of protection, kind of the psychology, they won't be harassed and they can be much more active, whether it is in getting an education, looking for a job, or protesting at Tahrir Square.

But it will confuse us, particularly I think many Americans- not this audience- I grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, I'm a Mid-westerner and I, you know, often go back and I'm concerned about the, kind of the fear that is still so great, a decade after 9/11 and maybe even greater than it was in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. So, I do address this point about Islam and I do think that we will often confuse Islam as a reference point in the next decade and as a result our policy, you know, we may often look for people as our friends who don't wear hijab or who don't, you know, who are in no way affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood or anything that has Islam in the title, even if it's Islam and, you know, Justice and Development Party like in Turkey.

I do think that Turkey is, in many ways, the model. For many Arabs it's the most powerful country, most important country in the Islamic world today and helps create a model. It was really interesting to see Prime Minister Erdogan do his revolution tour in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya at the same time Prime Minister Cameron and President Sarkozy were going to Libya. You know, after NATO having forked out so much and been so critical in the ouster of Gaddafi and who did everybody welcome in Libya: Erdogan.

Hoge: Also, Turks and Arabs have not always been friends.

Wright: Yes.

Hoge: It's funny, I was about to ask you one question with three countries in the same question, one of them was Turkey, and this is exploiting, not so much you as the author of a wonderful book, but you as an absolute genuine proven expert on the Middle East. The three countries are, I mean, Turkey, you've pretty much

answered, I was going to say, what do you think – where do you think he's going – but more important, Iran, you're a real expert on Iran.

Iran is a country with a highly educated, enormous youth population, very Internet savvy with a leader in that crazy eight-person leadership there who seems to be somewhat on the losing end of things right now and yet they successfully repressed that response. The Arab Spring – it's a Persian Spring in their case – seems not to have reached there. What's your assessment of where that's going?

And the second country I wanted to ask you about is Syria. By the time you wrote this book, the Arab Spring had not really reached Syria and I think a lot of us never imagined it would to the extent it has so far.

Give me your good journalistic assessment both of the situation in Iran and the situation in Syria, and then we'll go to the floor.

Wright: Okay, look, let me take the last one. Syria, to me, is the most critical right now. Yes, Egypt is the kind of traditional, heart and soul of the Arab world, but Syria, because it affects so many other places, so many regional issues. I mean, it borders Turkey, a NATO ally, Iraq, where we've had thousands of troops, and worry about, you know, what comes next: Jordan, Israel, Lebanon. The regional dynamics will be so affected by what happens in Syria. You know, I was the one who did the interview with King Abdullah where he first used that term, the Shia crescent and, you know, that's another element, you know, if you break up Syria – and then what happens in terms of sectarian issues, Shia Sunni in the region, the peace process. Everything will be affected by Syria. I think we've gotten to the point in Syria where President Assad cannot survive politically, that the King of Saudi Arabia has taken a very decisive position in saying that Assad is no longer the credible, legitimate leader –

Hoge: The President of Turkey said the same thing.

Wright: And almost, it's like ninety-eight percent there, you know, but yes, but the King of Saudi Arabia was the first to do it and this is a guy who – the King of Saudi Arabia has a mother of Syrian stock – he was the one who always was the outreach guy on Syria and the Saudis have engaged in checkbook diplomacy for probably tens of millions, maybe hundreds, maybe more into the Syrian ruling family anyway, to get them to go along on certain issues and so the King, for him to be the one to do this is really important.

Absolutely Turkey, again, the most important country, increasingly it's like Turkey increases exponentially every month in terms of its importance. Then, the European Union, which buys ninety-five percent of Syrian oil, $7 to $8 million dollars a day and Syria only has a reserve of about $13 billion and so actually this makes a difference and the *Financial Times* reported - and I'm sure the *New York Times* did too - that there wasn't a single major shipment of oil from a Syrian port the whole month of September, that banks are not issuing letters of credit, so it's not just who's buying, but that nobody wants to get involved in the oil transactions.

So the regime is actually quite vulnerable and it made a mistake in the '90s, because when it found oil and it, I mean, started really exporting oil, it failed to develop other parts of its economy and it became increasingly oil dependent to generate income and so it's far more vulnerable than if it had played it smart

economically and then, of course, the United States and the United Nations having taken very important positions and the United Nations getting out there. As a foreign correspondent the first word you learn in every language is slowly, slowly, *shway, shway* in Arabic, in making pronouncement, but keeping count of the death toll reminding people how many they can verify have died, so that you see an emerging global position. And that's why I think nobody knows how long, how bumpy it will be and the Syrians are clearly trying to emulate the Iranians, allegedly with Iranian help, because the Iranians did it.

They quashed what was an astounding turnout, in twelve major cities, many towns across Iran, lasted for six months, despite the fact that in the midst of it or even early on, there were thousands arrested, there were Stalinesque trials, there were widespread reports of and poignant stories of both men and women being raped in prison and yet nothing, you know, stopped them for six months.

Now, I think that if you look at the history of revolutions, they eat themselves up and this one's no exception, that what's – even though the Reform movement has been undermined right now – we all know that millions turned out and it's an issue of how do you find alternative means of expression? But the leader, the regime had to arrest the prime minister, presidential candidate, but he had been prime minister for eight years; this is not some, you know, outlandish reformer and the former speaker of Parliament for four years, that it's eating its own and that now the Supreme Leader who put his own reputation on the line, for the first time, in backing President Ahmadinejad's re–election, put the reputation of the Islamic Republic, the whole system of rule on the line in supporting President Ahmadinejad, and the two men are going at each other.

I mean, there have even been reports of – or speculation about could Ahmadinejad actually stay in power through his presidential term and the regime – the Supreme Leader and his folks are trying to discredit all those in the inner circle and charging them with things like sorcery, you know, this is really bizarre and these are conservatives and hardliners going after each other. So, you know, we don't have a lot of patience and, you know, we globally think, oh well, they got rid of Hasni Mubarak in 18 days, it's just not going to happen that quickly in a lot of other places and there will be phases and it will be a roller coaster and we'll wonder. But this is where I often worry about what actions the outside world takes on Iran, because it'll destroy itself. In Farsi slowly, slowly is *yavash, yavash*, and we just don't have the patience. It will happen.

Hoge: I'm going to break my promise of going to the floor because last week I went down the road where Robin was speaking, and I asked her a question, and it got such an interesting answer that I want to rehearse it again. It was about Saudi Arabia. This was the day after King Abdullah had said that women, in 2015, could participate in elections – of course they still won't be able to drive to the voting booth – but I asked Robin, I said, the Saudis have, with extraordinary amounts of money, to some extent bought off the potential rage of their young people, and you came back with a formula that was really intriguing, linked to what the falling oil price would mean to the Saudi ability to keep doing that. Could you just –

Wright: Yes, there's two factoids actually. One, in terms of the political dynamics and they're really interesting numbers and the first set of numbers if the average age in Saudi Arabia is twenty-five. The average age of a Cabinet Minister in Saudi Arabia is sixty-five. The King is eighty-seven. His Heir Apparent is eighty-three and he's not well, to put it mildy, and the third in line is seventy-eight. We're not talking about a generation gap, we're talking about three generations and this is

where the regime is responding, whether it's the women's vote or the injection of $136 billion this year to buy out its people. So, there may not be a Tahrir Square moment or even a Tahrir Square in Saudi Arabia, but it's under the same pressures and the problem for us is that we're supporting the Saudis, the Saudis are supporting Salafis in the region, these new kind of groups that make the Muslim Brotherhood look moderate and the Salafis want a system of rule that, you know, is kind of hard line and is anti–American.

What's wrong with this picture? Now, the more interesting statistic is who's paying for this. Saudi Arabia, a decade ago, could break even when the price of oil was $23. Last year they could break even, no profit, but break even when the price was $68. This year, because of the injection of all this money in job creation, debt forgiveness, home loans, sport and literary clubs for the young and so forth, in a population of, you know, they don't like to say, but 25 million people or less that were actually Saudis, and $136 billion dollars, that the price of oil to break even is $86. If this continues without any big injections, in four years the price of oil to break even, no profit, will have to be $110 a barrel and who's going to be paying that, we are.

So, you know, this is where we think it's over there, it's over there, but Saudi Arabia and what it does – really important to us – and when it comes to U.S. policy one of the core issues is that we are willing to say to a certain number of countries across North Africa into the Levant with Syria and dirt poor Yemen, yes, yes, yes, we want democracy. And it gets to the Gulf countries and we're not, you know, we turn the other way when Saudi Arabia sends a thousand troops to Bahrain to put down a democratic uprising and we commend the King for giving a vote to women for councils that are half elected, half appointed, so there's no majority which could ever challenge an absolute monarch in four years, of something he promised to do at the last election and didn't, and he's eighty-seven and the prospects of him being around in four years are pretty limited, so we actually need to care a lot more about what happens in Saudi Arabia.

Hoge: Good. I'd love to take some questions. If you raise your hand, I'll call on you. In the front row, first in the front row, and the second row and then we'll go, actually we'll take the two questions back to back, okay. Would you speak first – would you wait for the microphone and let me tell you – yes, and, but the other thing I wanted to tell you is we are now streaming, right now this is being streamed live, so hold that steady –

Wright: Don't swear.

Hoge: Don't gesticulate with that hand.

Ken Johnson: No pressure, Warren. No pressure at all. No pressure at all.

Hoge: Gesticulate with the other hand and hold the microphone close to your mouth and please introduce yourself. Thank you.

Johnson: Okay, Ken Johnson, Devconia, an international development firm focused on Sub–Saharan Africa. First of all I'd like to thank you very much for sharing your perspective on the Arab Spring. My question is more general. Do you see a schism between say the counter–Jihad in North Africa vis–à–vis Sub–Saharan Africa? I say that in terms of the bombings in Nigeria. Most recently the United Nation's headquarters was bombed in Abuja. Just today we see a bombing in Mogadishu. So my question is, is that maybe just, you know, a random event or

do you see a schism between the counter–Jihad in the north versus Sub–Saharan Africa?

Hoge: Hold that question and we'll go to the woman right behind, and we'll take both questions at once, thank you.

Carole Robbins: Hi, I'm Carole Robbins with J Street. I have a question for you about the funds that have been frozen, both Mubarak and Gaddafi. When will those funds be released to whom and how? Is anyone reporting on this?

Hoge: Want to answer those two?

Wright: Sure. In terms of the schism, it's an interesting question. I mean, I think that I spent seven years of my life doing Sub–Saharan Africa and my sense is that the counter–Jihad is happening across the Islamic world, that it's not just in the Arab world. I mean Nigeria has very feisty elections, but it's not the end of extremism. There will continue – look, whether it's Al–Qaeda and its affiliate that in every country you have, particularly a failed state like Somalia, you know, you have to kind of separate that from, I think, what's happening. Somalia and Nigeria are very, very different places; there are local issues, local tensions, you know, the division between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria has been a flashpoint for how long.

But I am struck by wherever I have found Muslim societies that they are distancing themselves increasingly, but most importantly actively, imaginatively, creatively from extremist trends. It's not absolute, a long way to go, probably will never be eliminated. An Egyptian put it very well to me, she said, when I asked her, you know, how long these groups were going to be around, what their future was, and she said, you know, I think a lot of them are increasingly like the Ku Klux Klan, it still exists, but it's, you know, on the margins and that was the direction she – and I think that's true in most societies, not all.

Hoge: I'm going to get to your question, but I just want to build on your question a second, Robin, to say, only fifteen percent of the world's Muslim population are Arabs, and some of the most successful Muslim societies by, I think, our Western lights, are places like, well Turkey, but more distant places like Indonesia, Malaysia, how do those countries play into this and do you find in your reporting there's any resonance among young Arabs in the success of those societies?

Wright: Oh absolutely and they will tell you often, you know, the five largest Muslim countries are not in the Arab world and they include many democracies. I mean, there have been five in the Islamic world; there have been five heads of state who were women. And so women will say, look, you know, it's not Islam and it is not against women being heads of state and Bangladesh has had two women who've, you know, they've kind of played political tag back and forth. Indonesia, you know, has had a woman leader and –

Hoge: India, another big Muslim country.

Wright: Well, India is one of the five largest Muslim countries, 164 million people, even though they're a minority. There are more Muslims in Russia than there are in Libya and Jordan combined. There are growing Muslim populations among the Aborigines and in Trinidad and Tobago, so, you know, we keep thinking about the kind of over there and one of things I think that's really important, especially in this air of globalization, is that we need to understand that Islam is part of our own identity as well. It's the fastest growing religion here and we don't want to

make the mistake that the Europeans have in marginalizing and therefore radicalizing some of them because they feel marginalized.

I had a young research assistant for this book whose father is Jewish, her mother is Christian, and she had a particular interest, in the aftermath of 9/11, seeing what it was like to be a Muslim in America – it's long after 9/11, it's 2009 – and she went to the University of Connecticut. She'd grown up in Storrs and so she knew both town and gown. And she, with an Egyptian student, she did the prayers in the morning, put on a hijab and she went to the places that she had frequented and she found that no one would look her in the eye and she wrote a really beautiful piece, or moving piece, about this experience, and it was a little bit like, for my generation, *Black Like Me*, where a white man dyed his skin and went around to see what it was like living as a Black, and she found that the only place that she was welcome was at the end of the day when she went to a mosque where no one knew her, but she was embraced. It's kind of a diversion from the question, but it's about the common experience and this is where – that the challenge for us is very much in our own individual dealing with this trend.

Now someone asked me about Mubarak and Libya.

Hoge: I think, about funds.

Wright: A limited amount of the funds frozen for Muammar Gaddafi, and I don't remember the figures off the top of my head, maybe 200 million or something, or maybe it was over a billion, I think it's over a billion, was freed and there are $33 to $36 billion dollars of Gaddafi's money frozen here and I think that's one of the issues, but, you know, the legalities, as Warren knows better than anybody, of lifting sanctions, resolutions and all of this stuff, you know, you can't do it like that. You may be able to impose it much faster than you can lift it and there are legalisms that you have to go through.

Hoge: Okay, I have, I think a couple again. We'll start here in the front row and then the gentleman there in the pink shirt afterwards and we'll do two questions again together.

Sorosh Roshan: Good evening and thank you. My name is Dr. Sorosh Roshan and I'm from Iran and a few months ago I was in Iran. I have many questions that I wish I could ask you. Would you tell us what do you think was the reason of the failure of uprising against the election fraud? Secondly, how the question of nuclear energy as it's played by the government is affecting the social development in Iran and in relation with the world community. And many more after you're finished with the audience I will have. I would love to speak with you.

Hoge: There's a microphone coming to you right now.

Daniel Ommundsen: Good evening, my name Daniel Ommundsen. I'm a Norwegian student. I would like to ask you just in relationship to Israel, could you do a future possible scenario in terms of the relationship between Egypt, Syria and Israel? Thank you.

Wright: Okay, on Iran, the reason the uprising failed. Well, the government used extraordinary force and, you know, the kids are still trying. There are all kinds of – occasionally there are these – they've figured out these wonderful new tactics. They're still trying to adapt. They're not the millions turning out in the street, but they do these kind of – what do they call them? Flash mobs, is that right? Flash mobs, you know, isn't that the term here? The flash mobs, yes okay. So what

they do is they'll do a fifteen minute demonstration and they'll take cell phone videos and then what they do is they have two sets of cars lined up. The first one to take them after 15 minutes to the next spot and the second to block the security forces from getting close to them and it's very interesting.

My Egyptian friends were very inspired by what happened in Iran in 2009 and they talked about, 'listen, if it could happen in Iran, you know, it can happen anywhere'. They really were inspired – and then my Iranian friends said after the Tunisia and Egyptian uprisings how impressed they were with what was happening in the Arab world - and so they've tried again and that's when you saw these flash mobs tactics beginning. They still try to adapt. I don't think we can say that the Persian Spring, or whatever you want to call it, is over. It's struggling to redefine itself, struggling to find a way, but it's not over. You know, again, I get back to his issue of time.

On the nuclear energy issue, I'm not sure what you mean by how is it affecting social development. I'll say simply that clearly the nuclear issue is what absorbs the world. Iran says it wants nuclear energy. It has a right to nuclear energy. It is a signatory to the non–proliferation treaty. What mischief it's up to, you know, the international community is of the belief that it's not telling the truth about everything, how much it's lying no one knows. The one thing that concerns me about the nuclear issue, that I'll point out, relative to the uprising and that is that I think that if Iran has had a nuclear program which it's, you know, acknowledged in various forms, or weapons program or whatever, that for most of the time it was related to defense issues. This is a region where five of the nine nuclear powers are, where Iran, and I covered that war, the Iran–Iraq war down on the front lines in Mashhad you know, they paid – it was the grizzliest modern Middle East war, 123,000 people died, over a million casualties, just in Iran.

And that there are defense issues that the Persians, you know, feel very vulnerable, the use of chemical weapons against them repeatedly, the UN verified it, and the world did nothing and so that, I think, any nuclear ambitions would be related up until 2009 to defense. I think 2009 may have been a turning point in that the nuclear program suddenly became a way with the regime under siege, could look at it from the political benefits, and if it could develop a nuclear capability, maybe not a weapon, but at least a capability, that it could then say to its people, you see, we brought back Persian greatness and it is the Islamic regime that did it, that they think of this as a tool to prove the credibility, legitimacy of a regime that's been largely discredited among so many of its people.

Hoge: We're almost out of time. Happily, our Norwegian friend asked you a question, which –

Wright: Oh, so sorry, about Israel.

Hoge: I'm sure you can answer very succinctly.

Wright: Sorry.

Hoge: Which is the situation of Israel, Palestine and Syria.

Wright: Yes, yes, yes.

Hoge: A couple of sentences, and we're out of here.

Wright: Yes. Look, my concern about Israel, generally, is that I think in the same way the U.S. was slow off the mark, and is still, you know, has made some important concessions, but hasn't done enough, still kind of judged as hypocritical in its application of democratic principles, but Israel hasn't figured out a way yet to deal with these emerging democratic systems and they're not democratic yet, but trying to be.

Syria is one that I think the Israelis have really struggled with. You know, what might be the alternatives that Assad suddenly looks a little bit more appealing, because at least you knew who you were dealing with, you knew what the parameters of a deal might be and suddenly the ideas of an alternative, might it be a Sunni regime that might have more Islamic tenets, that might merge with Sunni regimes elsewhere, The Alawites as a minority, always vulnerable, were a little bit easier to deal with in odd ways and I think the Israelis haven't figured that out yet either and that they're – as much as they don't like Assad, never trust the Assad dynasty, that there are actually worst alternatives out there.

And this is really difficult period, I think, particularly because you don't have any movement on Arab-Israeli peace and the fact that Israel, for the first nine months of the uprisings, has not been an issue, neither is the United States, the Arab-Israeli conflict. And now we're beginning to see a shift as, because of what happened at the United Nations and the focus on, you know, voting for a Palestinian state and the fact that the Palestinians actually used peaceful means. This is not a war, this is, you know, civil disobedience going to the world's, you know, most legitimate international institution and asking for recognition. That suddenly the phenomena could intersect in a way and kind of get us back to the Middle East being defined, again, by the Arab-Israeli conflict and kind of shifting the focus of what's happening of both the people in the region and of us.

Hoge: Please stay. Please drink wine. Please go visit the balcony. Please buy books, and Robin will be here to talk to any of you that come up. Thank you so much, Robin.