Interview - Michael Stephens

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Michael Stephens is the Research Fellow for Middle East Studies and Head of Qatar at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). He joined RUSI's London office in September 2010, first in the Nuclear Security Programme before moving to International Security Studies. From March to June 2017 Michael was seconded into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, serving as the Senior Research Analyst for Syria and Lebanon. Michael has twelve years of experience working in the Middle East, and has conducted research across many countries including Turkey, the Levant, Iraq and the Gulf States. His research has focused on Iraqi Kurdistan, and the Kurdish regions of Syria, their social composition and responses to the threat from the Islamic State; Arab Shia identity across the Middle East and its relationship with Iran, which included co-authoring a Whitehall report focusing on regional responses to Iran's nuclear programme (2014). He is also a specialist in Gulf security.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

There are a lot. The Middle East is a fast moving region where things change quite quickly. What is interesting for me is the viability of the state in the Middle East region, and I spend a huge amount of time thinking about that. In the region, you have got a mixture of Republics and Monarchies which speak Arabic, a Persian speaking theocratic democracy, and a democracy which speaks Hebrew. Within that you have got all these systems with their differing collective memories and responses to the legacy of colonialism. You have got multi-ethnic states like Iraq which look like they are fragmenting while you have ethno-centric states like Israel that are quite strong. So, trying to understand why it is that some states are stable and others are not is fascinating to me. It is probably the thing that I will focus on most in the future. The other thing I am very interested in is the status of minorities. There are some very good and brave ethnographers out there who are doing some really good ethnographic work to bring the voices of these minorities to the wider world.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (who) prompted the most significant shifts in our thinking?

I grew up in the UAE, spent some time in Qatar, and then when I was a student I lived in Israel. The thing that really got me into this region was the 2003 Iraq war and the actions of George W Bush. I was very against it. Now I work in my job and I look at the impact of what happened in 2003 on what I do in my day job today with regard to Iran, the fragmentation of the Iraqi state, rise of Kurdish nationalism, rise of Daesh and as somebody who was against the Western imposition of force in Iraq, I now have to sit there and advocate why we need to keep military assets on the ground in Iraq because of various problems (i.e. the rise of Daesh, destabilisation due to clash between Kurds and Iraq, tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, developments in Syria). So, it is incredible that in the fifteen years I have done this about turn. I am not arguing that we should go around invading countries. I have done a 180 in my own head about how our relationship with the region should look.

I am afraid to say that events prompted the most significant shifts in my thinking. That is what drives my thinking. The West can play a constructive role in making sure that the region is stable but we have to acknowledge those things we have done in the past that have made things much, much more difficult for people's everyday life. One of the things I have learnt about policy is that you can get too distracted about what Putin is up to or what Trump is up to and forget about the people in the country you are actually working in. If you can remember that you will always be

doing a better job.

Iraqi Kurdistan has voted overwhelmingly to secede from Iraq in a historic referendum. What are the regional implications of this result?

It has been very clear that there have been a number of powers both in the region and internationally who are against the referendum. These powers are taking measures against the Kurds for going ahead. The regional powers clearly have leverage economically over the Kurdistan region and they are making plenty of statements regarding how they want to strangle Kurdistan economically because of that. Turkey does look like it will close borders. Iran is also discussing this and that is going to cause tension. However, there is not just an economic angle to this, but a security angle as well. There are actors inside Iraq who have very close ties to Iran and who can be mobilised around contested areas like Kirkuk against the Kurdish Peshmerga.

These struggles between Erbil and Baghdad are dragging the international community, including the US and EU, into this. Since we (the US, UK, and EU) are facing a situation where Iran is also backing Baghdad, our interests are aligned with Iranian interests. This is kind of odd because of how the Trump administration is currently attempting to roll back Iranian influence in the region. Therefore, this Kurdistan referendum could really bring competing interests into alignment. What you are seeing now is a basic consensus which does not officially recognise the Kurdish referendum. This puts the West in a conundrum. The US has been against the referendum and their statements have been unusually strong, culminating in their expression of disappointment the day after the referendum.

At the end of the day, Kurdistan is a landlocked region and it must have good relations with its neighbours if it is to survive, trade, sell its resources (i.e. oil and gas), export agricultural goods, import and build the consumer economy it wants to build. So, the Kurdistan Regional Government and President Barzani will have to take Turkish preferences to strangle the Kurdistan region economically into account. Considering the international reactions regarding this issue, it is not clear cut that Kurdistan will be independent anytime soon.

You have stated that the problem concerning the Qatar-Saudi row is that both sides do not want to appear weak while trying to solve the dispute. How entrenched do you think the row is and how can it be resolved?

It is very entrenched and there is a lot of bad blood on both sides. What is interesting about the Gulf states is that many of these individuals and leaders involved in this dispute have relatives in the other country. So, it is not like Britain and France. It is sometimes members of the same tribe or close relatives who are not able to visit each other. As with anything when it is inside the family, it becomes particularly acrimonious. Some cultural taboos have been broken as a result of the split and it is going to be very hard to put the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) back together, especially because people have taken deep-seated personal offence toward how their neighbours have behaved. Therefore, it is less about strategic issues and counter-terrorism than about people feeling betrayed and offended.

The official narrative of the Qatari, Saudi and Emirate governments tend to be a little subject to hyperbole. There are back channels (to resolve the crisis) as well as a huge amount of pressure from Western states to stop this problem, particularly the UK and US since they have entrenched security interests in the region. This crisis is serving nobody's interests and the general opinion of Western states is that this is a problem that did not need to happen. There are good working relationships with all six GCC countries and if there are issues regarding radicalisation or terrorism, we have the mechanisms to discuss that with a particular country, be it Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait or Saudi Arabia. We have good intelligence sharing relationships with these countries as well. Therefore, the fact that this issue has broken out with regard to Qatar funding terrorism is bit of a blow for Western countries. Procedures were in place to deal with the complaints that we might have had about these countries. So, what you are seeing now is that pride is increasingly the driver for the struggle in the Gulf. When you look at policy and what needs to be done, both sides need to talk. They need fair-handed US mediation and not Donald Trump's Twitter account. What you are seeing is the US is beginning take a bit of a load, and both the UK and US have announced large arms deals with Qatar which tell you that there is support there for Qatar, and for the most part disagreement with measures taken against them.

Will the Iran deal survive the Trump presidency? If it survives, will there be any substantial changes to the terms of the deal?

I think it will survive in its current form. Then again with the Trump administration it is difficult to know where we are going to end up with this. Under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), we have an incredibly intrusive inspection requisite mechanism, that we never had before on Iran and that will allow us to monitor Iranian progress in a pretty unprecedented way. Resultantly, EU nations, Russia and China are urging the US to not scrap the deal. I think there is too much pressure on the US to prevent Donald Trump from trashing everything.

Let us say that the US cannot find a deal that is more punitive on the Iranians. What if Iran decides that it is going to keep behaving to the tenets of the deal? In that case, there is going to be a wedge driven in between Europe and the US. Why would European states follow with sanctions if Iran was not cheating on the deal? It would suddenly look very difficult from the American perspective to enforce any sort of multilateral agreement which was more punitive on the Iranians. If the Iranians misbehave, it is a completely different set of calculations. The snapback sanctions come in immediately and then we are back to where we were in 2013 with Iran in a much stronger regional position. Regardless of JCPOA, we have to remember that the major threat was never that Iran would start firing nuclear weapons. They have sub-national interests in the Middle East region. They are expending a lot of blood and treasure on maintaining and expanding their influence through non-state actors, and they are doing very well at that. JCPOA or no JCPOA does not affect this issue. If this deal goes bad, we have to deal with an Iran in 2017/2018 that is in a much stronger position in 2013.

How do you assess Trump's Middle East policy so far? What can we expect from his administration?

Now that his Cabinet is more or less settled, we can make certain assumptions. That will also be based on what happens on October 15th regarding the JCPOA with Iran and whether Iran then responds to that by going back to enrich uranium without inspections. Quite apart from that, the US has clearly prioritised the need to roll Iran back, so here we are talking about Lebanon and its relationship with Hezbollah, Baghdad and the relationship with the Popular Mobilisation Units which are now an integral part of Iraq's Security Forces. Then, there is Iranian activity in Yemen which is slowly escalating and dragging Saudi Arabia into an endless war, which Saudi Arabia clearly cannot win. I am afraid however that the administration's rhetoric has been inconsistent. People over-read into Assad's chemical weapons usage earlier this year and thought that the US is going to use every means at its disposal to strike back against Iranian allies. The cruise missile strike was very interesting because Trump showed that he can do more in the space of a night than Obama could have done in ten months of diplomacy. Then you had a series of air strikes against groups loyal to Assad in eastern Syria by US aircraft, the shooting down of a Syrian MIG by a US aircraft, and it began to look like the US was becoming more hawkish and going to take steps to push back against anything deemed Iranian.

Here is where it becomes interesting and the Kurdistan referendum comes back into play. Both Iran and the US want the same thing in Iraq. They want Iraq to stay as one country. So, if Peshmerga and Iraq security forces come into conflict because of this referendum, it is more likely that both Iran and the US will be on the same side which is to back Baghdad. This is very strange because Iran and the US are at loggerheads on so many issues. Yet this Kurdistan referendum overturns everything we understood.

One of the ways to deter Iran is to have a unified system of Gulf States in the GCC. Since Qatar has reawakened its relationship with Iran, a key American ally is forced, by Saudi actions, to turn to Iran for economic support. Also, Turkey and Qatar have an axis over their relationship with political Islam. Turkey also shares a border with Iran, meaning that it cannot cut ties with Tehran since they import oil and gas from the Iranians. So, the jigsaw pieces that you need to roll the Iranians out of town aren't there. The Turks are not on board, the GCC is not stable and what can Israel do? Israel makes a lot of noise about Iran but it is not the main actor. It is mainly concerning itself with Hezbollah.

How do you see the political and security situation in Syria evolving with ISIS fast losing territory?

There is a scramble for ISIS territory right now. On one side, you have the Assad regime with its Russian and Iranian allies. On the other side, you have the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces with American and Western backing. Essentially what they are both doing is racing down to the Euphrates River to the border with Iraq and gobbling up as much territory as possible. Hence, you are starting to see low-level skirmishes due to a clash of interests.

Moscow's key interest is not Assad gobbling up territory in the East. They want him in power in the areas that matter. The West is not threatening that. What I see is that the Western and the GCC states that were anti-Assad are gradually moving away from that position. Turkey was the first to go because the Kurdish issue became so important that they dropped this request about Assad. They engaged in the Astana process[1] and we now have de-escalation zones which clearly favour Assad. They package up the opposition into these little groups and little isolated territories which will get cleared out at some point. Then there is the issue of Al Qaeda which everybody agrees is a bad thing. If you look at the momentum of the conflict, by the time we get back to the Geneva track, Assad is going to be well out in front. The only people who can stand up to him are the Kurds. They have huge amount of hard power and have a big important friend in the form of the US. Then there are two pockets of opposition groups – Euphrates Shield Force north of Aleppo and the Turkish intrusion into Idlib. The anti-Assad opposition in Idlib would have a Turkish security umbrella to keep them secure.

Assad is basically going to survive no matter what calculation you look at. The Kurds don't threaten Damascus. These two pockets of Turkish influence in the North don't threaten Damascus and there might be some pockets of opposition in the South protected by Jordan. Assad is safe. It will then just be about what kind of Assad-led Syria we see than whether it will happen.

The key question is whether the Kurds want autonomy or not. If the Syrian Kurds, looking at the Iraqi Kurds suddenly get very nationalistic and go against US wishes, this could get quite ugly. Turkey could be dragged into a permanent conflict inside Syria. The US and Russia will both be dragged in. There will have to be a lot of "deconfliction". The US and Russia are acting against a NATO ally in Turkey. The Kurds have signalled that they are ready to talk to Damascus. Damascus has also signalled that it is ready to talk to the Kurds. However, with Syria, there is always a military option for any issue.

What is the most important advice that you would give to scholars studying the Middle East region?

Travel widely across the Middle East region, learn the languages, spend time with the people, and get all sorts of different perspectives. All the countries that I have been to in the Middle East, and I have been to twenty of them, never have only one narrative. There is always a minority group that has something to say – a version that is not the government's narrative – which you need to be hearing. One of the dangerous things in this job is that people go to one country in the Middle East and they are told what is happening and then they come back and think that that is how the Middle East is. Often, when you go to another country the narrative is totally different. Or, it could just be some other region within the same country. Or even someone of a different religion living in the same city. When I lived in Jerusalem, you had people living two blocks from each other, and depending on whether they were religious or secular, they just thought about the world in a different way. So, always be prepared to talk to as many people as you can. Be aware that some of these states, unfortunately, are relatively unstable and young. Violence is often an option that people use to solve political problems.

It can be very frustrating. However, understanding the intersection of how the post-World War One colonial order is coming apart is really important. The world built by Sykes-Picot, the Treaty of Lausanne and the Treaty of Sevres is coming apart. The US, which oversaw how the region developed post World War II, is no longer the only player in town. And so you have got to marry the macro with the micro. You have got to be able to sit on the ground in the middle of the desert chatting away about local concerns and then understand how Obama's policies of strategic balancing to East Asia is affecting the person on the ground. If you are going to do this job properly, you have got to do both, and understand how one affects the other.

[1] The Astana process, chaired by Russia, Iran and Turkey, is complementary to the Geneva one, with both aiming to work in tandem to ensure a peaceful solution to the conflict in Syria.

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