

# Global Journalist: Middle East matrix and the role U.S. plays

**Abstract:** In this June 19, 2003 episode of Global Journalist, host Byron Scott and four journalists from Iraq, Egypt, Turkey and Palestine discuss about the Middle East matrix from these countries' perspectives, the role the U.S. is playing and potential solutions that can improve international relations.

**Host:** Byron Scott

**Guests:**

- [Patrick Cockburn](#)
- [Amir Ahmed](#)
- [Semih Idiz](#)
- Khaled Abu Aker

**Producers:** [Yusef Kalyango](#), Sarah Cayton

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**Mentioned:** Middle East, Palestine, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, United States, Israel, Palestinian-Israeli Conflict, Arab, Bush administration, solution

**Runtime:** 28:30

**Byron Scott** 0:10

Good evening and welcome to Global Journalist. This is Byron Scott sitting in for Stuart Loory, and welcome you to the show that insists that even Americans are interested in the matters of international and foreign affairs. This show is brought to you over KBIA with the cooperation of the Missouri School of Journalism, the International Press Institute in Vienna, and it's also available to you on the worldwide web at [kbia.org](http://kbia.org) or [globaljournalist.org](http://globaljournalist.org). Our participants this evening are all going to discuss the Middle East matrix, and not the movie but the real situation in a complicated Middle East. Our guests are Patrick Cockburn, a freelance journalist and Middle East analyst talking to us by satellite phone from north of Baghdad, the author of Saddam Hussein: An American Obsession, coauthor with his brother of a recently published book. Patrick, welcome. Amir Ahmed, an Egyptian journalist and editor based in the United States. Amir, we're glad to have you with us. Semih Idiz, columnist and freelancer, and from Ankara, Turkey, a columnist for the evening newspaper there. Semih, good to have you back. And another, another former guest Khaled Abu Aker, editor of [amin.org](http://amin.org), a Palestinian journalist, producer, correspondent, talking to us from Jerusalem. Khaled, again, welcome to the program. Patrick, we'll start with you since you're sitting by the side of the road north of Baghdad talking on your satellite phone. Let's begin by laying out the pieces of the puzzle a little bit. What are some of the components that are going to make stories for us in the immediate future, from your perspective and from your point there and, in Iraq?

**Patrick Cockburn** 1:54

The stories that are going to be, if I understood you were right, they're gonna be big. Well, I think Iraq will remain not only a big story, but the story dominating everything for the rest of this year and beyond. Because the war isn't really, is I suppose the big war is over, but a war still goes on. Nothing has really settled in Iraq. Three American soldiers were shot today, shot there today in Baghdad, there's a mood of uncertainty all over the country. There's no sign here about what exactly the future will be. So I think this is going to remain pretty much the dominant story with dominating American politics from the dominating certainly British politics for the foreseeable future.

**Byron Scott** 2:39

Most of the Bush and Blair administrations are being asked why we didn't anticipate some of these things. Do you think that's a fair question?

**Patrick Cockburn** 2:50

I think it's a very fair question, with complicated answers perhaps that many articles have been written about the, um, sorry people are just approaching me here, but I think it's okay. The, I'd say it's a complicated question. The answer is some people did anticipate that there will be tremendous problems when Saddam fell because Iraq was much more than Saddam. Why exactly, The Pentagon didn't pay any attention to these is a very interesting question. And the question people are paying the price for now. This will certainly go along being written about broadcast about, and in Britain in particular, this has enormous effects on the political career of Tony Blair, notably the failure to find weapons of mass destruction so far, and the continuing turmoil within Iraq.

**Byron Scott** 3:45

Let's move on to Amir Ahmed, as I said, an Egyptian journalist, an editor, currently based in the United States. Amir, what is your perspective?

**Amir Ahmed** 3:55

As for the components for the Middle East. Obviously, I think Iraq, of course, will remain the big story for years to come. And also, as the United States kind of changes the balance of power in the Gulf region, based on what happens politically in Iraq. But again, also the Palestinian-Israeli conflicts both, of course, remain as it's been for the last more than 54 years or 55 years as the major story, and as the peace process continues, or not continue, this will, will be a source of a lot of reports coming out of the Middle East. The third story that I think is going to be a big story in this year, especially as Iran with what's going on, with the student protests in the last few days, actually a week, and also the pressures the United States is putting on Iran as far as its nuclear program and verification. It's not producing any nuclear weapons, was using it to produce nuclear weapons. I think those are gonna be the major stories out of the Middle East for the, for this year and years to come as well.

**Byron Scott** 5:02

Okay, let's see if we can get perhaps a somewhat different rank ordering from Khaled Abu Aker, in Jerusalem. But what are the components of the Middle East stories coming up?

**Khaled Abu Aker** 5:13

Of course, as a Palestinian I can say the main problem is the Palestinian problem. We have witnessed many crisis, many problems that were resolved in many places, except the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Of course, many people like paying a heavy price. As a result, everybody is looking for a solution for the problem. I believe there is a need for a real American

role in order to intervene in order to pressure the Israeli government so that they can have some offers in order for the Palestinian leadership to accept and to resume the peace process itself. There is something known as the roadmap, now that everybody's looking at and trying to work in order for the process to work. But it's not enough to have a plan and say, let's start implementing it. You need to impose pressure on both parties, and not only on the Palestinian side, of course. I know as a Palestinian, the taking into account, the different developments around the world, especially in Iran, that the Palestinians are weak that the Palestinians are the party that will pay the price. But if we are looking for a just a comprehensive solution for the conflict, you should take into account the Palestinian demands. And, of course, when we talk about an American involvement that we are witnessing right now, we need not just to see visits from President Bush or secretary of state to the region, bringing leaders together. We need an initiative that convince the public in our part of the world that things are moving. When you come and impose things, it might work for one month or one year, but later things will explode again. So the priority, I believe, is for the conflict in our part of the world to be resolved.

**Byron Scott** 7:20

Let's get the perspective from perhaps the edge of the conflict. Turkey, which sits on the cusp of Europe and the cusp of the Middle East and Asia; Semih Idiz, from Ankara. Semih, what are the components of the Middle East matrix right now?

**Semih Idiz** 7:35

Well, I think the previous speakers have put it very much in perspective, obviously, Iraq, Iraq is going to be the immediately big story or even we can maybe even push Iran to the foreground there. And the Middle East will continue to be the big background story and that's obviously will last for quite a while. So therefore, perhaps I can bring in a new angle and say that the most important side story in the region will continue to be Turkey because you know, Turkey was written about excessively and profusely during the Iraq crisis. It surprised everybody with its parliamentary decision; it brought in a new element as far as the Middle East was concerned, because most Arab countries used to assume the Turks just go blindly after America and equally blindly after Israel. Well, that proved not to be the case. And it's set new ways of thinking in motion in the Middle East. And the new perspective on Turkey now, given that Turkey is also playing for the European Union, and may even get a date out of the European Union for negotiations at the end of next year. And given all those related reforms that are happening in Turkey at the moment, it is interesting because the European Union, in a sense is also extending towards the Middle East. It already has done so with the natural gas projects that are, ironically, nobody speaks very much about it, but that are connecting Iran and Europe through Turkey and Greece. So, I think that the big side story as far as the Middle East will continue to be Turkey while obviously the big stories will be the ones that our friends mentioned already.

**Byron Scott** 9:05

And all of these things and in, to us puzzling motion all at once. Let me sort of pull on some of those threads and, and talk about some of the other things that perhaps we haven't mentioned yet. Amir Ahmed, what about the role, the new role of Egypt as a mediator in the, in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict?

**Amir Ahmed** 9:29

Well, Egypt historically, it's has played a big role, of course in the Middle East, right after the, during the independence of all the Arab countries from Britain, friends and others, Egypt dominated the political ground in the Middle East and it did lead in the 1950s and '60s, the movement of Arabism, pan-Arab movement to, to unite all Arabs politically, but that's failed

under Gamal Abdel Nasser during the '60s, but as far as now, I think Egypt is has been playing since the, the signing of the Israel, the agreement, peace agreement, between Israel and Egypt. That kind of took a little bit from the role of Egypt as compared to, compare it to the 1960s. And I don't think it's going to be any bigger in the future. It's the other player, the Arab countries, they've also been trying to play a big role. Qatar, for example, it hosted the United States basis, you know, during the war in Iraq, and so other there are other players who are trying to kind of get the attention of the super powers of the world. And Egypt will still have a role but it's not going to be I don't think it's going to be a major role. It's going to be called upon if there is a problem, for example, We're it kind of involves Egypt, for example, with the Gaza Strip and Hamas. It's kind of, you know, Egypt has a little role to play with trying to mediate between Hamas and the Palestinian Prime Minister. But as far as a huge role in terms of what it used to be in the '60s, I don't think it's going to be back in those days.

**Byron Scott** 11:22

I should interject here that we've lost Patrick Cockburn on the satellite phone from, from Iraq. We may or may not be able to get him back. I doubt it since he is, he warned us that he was moving into a zone where it would be more difficult for him to call us at the moment. But let me, let me talk a little bit about this whole pleasing, this pleasing the superpowers that Amir brought up. Semih what, what do you see that as, as the component, and then the Iraq War, Turkey, Turkey had what we viewed here as a very difficult time where they first refused and then accepted American participation during the during the invasion of Iraq. What, what is the what is the view in Turkey about this whole question of pleasing the big boys?

**Semih Idiz** 12:27

Well, the whole view in Turkey is that you can only please the big boys if there's some kind of international legitimacy to it. You will recall in 1992, when the first coalition was assembled Turkey was in it, although it was very careful not to participate in that in militarily because you know, it has to live with these neighbors in the region at the end of the day. So Turkey with its actions show that if there is no international legitimacy, you don't really have to go with the big boys. Although you may anger the big boys and may even have to have a price to pay for that. Now, the reason why Turkey was cautious and all this is precisely what Patrick Cockburn was talking about, things are not going according to plan in Iraq, and the chances that they will go according to plan in Iraq, are incredibly slim. And I think that if I was an Iraqi, one of the first things I would be worried about, is that the whole debate is now being transferred into a domestic debate about who lied to the public and who didn't in America and in England, this means that the focus is going to move away from Iraq, a certain mess exists there at the moment, and maybe some people will be blamed, maybe some people will lose their political power, and then the next government will come in those countries and move ahead and Iraq will be stuck where it is. And I think that Turkey's position, original position is unfortunately, I regret the status, unfortunately, being vindicated by developments on the ground.

**Byron Scott** 13:55

Okay. Let's hold that point for just a moment. We're going to take a short break. Remind you this is Global Journalist on KBIA.

We're back. This is Byron Scott sitting in for Stuart Loory, and again, this is Global Journalist on KBIA, and reminding you that you can listen to this show later if you'd like on the worldwide web at [kbia.org](http://kbia.org) or [globaljournalist.org](http://globaljournalist.org). We're back discussing the Middle East matrix with now three journalists from the region. Khaled Abu Aker from Jerusalem, you brought up this whole question we were discussing for the, before the break, originally about how outside forces the

big boys as we're referring to are really critical to the solution of some of these problems, particularly in near context – the current intifada. Could you, could you talk to us a little more about that.

**Khaled Abu Aker** 14:51

The problem that whenever there are some regional problems and an American involvement in this problem, and then you see the United States interested in solving the conflict. I think there are mixed messages here. That's why the Palestinians in general, whom I interview every day and speak to, whether they are officials or ordinary people, they have lot of doubt. When you talk about double standards in the American policy, this is clear for many Palestinians every day whether it is related to the treatment. The Israelis are being ... the American policy toward Israel or whether it is related to issues that are related to the conflict itself. Therefore, we have seen some encouraging signs that President Bush is serious and want to solve the problem. But there are many people who are doubtful that the statement of presentable shame to satisfy the Arab world after what happened in Iraq and to send some messages that are serious. But until the moment the involvement itself is not the involvement the Palestinians wanted to see from a superpower like the United States. Now, when you talk about a plan that is presented, and they are working on implementing this, of course, the Palestinians are talking about a just solution that will last in the region. When I talk about a just solution – it means a solution that will be acceptable by the parties and mainly being viewed by the Palestinians as a solution that is acceptable, related to the future of the Palestinian state, related to the border, related to the relations between this newly born state and its neighbors. But when you look at what is proposed by Israel, and what Israeli officials are talking about, you see something totally different that makes the Palestinians more skeptical that what is being mentioned in the United States and by President Bush can be a solution that will last forever. This temporary solution will not bring peace to the region itself. We have on the other side Israeli Government whom known to the whole world with its extreme positions. And there are no signals from such a government that they are going to change their attitude. The Palestinians are close to, you know, they are trying to solve their problems internally, instead of using the violence that leads to a civil war they're trying to reach to solution for the conflict internal Palestinian dialogue that leads to an agreement on a truce with Israelis. Seizing all the military activities but whenever the Palestinians internally as close to reach to a such a deal, you see a strike from the Israeli army that aims to escalate in order ...

**Byron Scott** 18:16

Let me interrupt here. I welcome these, these kinds of statements, but I want us to continue to have our discussion night.

**Khaled Abu Aker** 18:24

OK. I'm sorry if I moved to another subject.

**Byron Scott** 18:27

No, no, I can. No, we're on the same subject. And, and I think one of the things that you're saying about here is, is that there is a delicate balance between putting out a roadmap and, and, and responsibility, and I think this is one of the things that concerns us here in the United States and that we're seeing in Iraq. We saw before in Afghanistan, if you dictate the terms, then it seems to me that we found that you also have long-term responsibility for making sure that the new system works. And this, again, is the subject of debate here. Amir Ahmed, what do, what do, what are you saying in regard to that, this, this whole question of continuing Western responsibility for problems in the Middle East?

**Amir Ahmed** 19:17

It has to be, obviously the United States and Britain have been both involved with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, at least in resolving it, or one or the other, supporting, you know, one or both sides since they began. And we haven't seen a concrete solution to the problem. So obviously, something is not being done right. The responsibility has to be continued in the right way. And in saying that what I mean is basically what my colleague call it said that the taken into account both sides' concerns, the security concern, of course is very is a priority, but also for both sides, there has to be more of bringing in the Palestinian issues on the table and really discussing it in terms of not just in the statehood solution, because you may have a statehood at the end, but it may not be represented well by the people because it's so many international interferences in the region. So a just solution, as my colleague mentioned, is very vital. And it's a, it's a responsibility that the United States and whatever international party that needs to be involved to find a solution to this problem needs to take into account.

**Byron Scott** 20:40

As difficult as it may seem, with all of the conflict already in the region. Let's look over the horizon. Not so very far to the current situation in Iran where street demonstrations have taken place in the major cities and where as Semih mentioned earlier, there are questions having to do with, with the movement of raw materials such as, such as natural gas. Are we going to be, do you think fighting a war either, either political or physical in Iran anytime in the near future, either ourselves here in the United States or, or here any of the European Union states Semih that you talked about, what is your feeling?

**Semih Idiz** 21:35

Well, I think the European Union space although they did issue a strong statement, I think this week to Iran about the International Atomic Energy, A atomic agency, energy's found, agency's found the findings. Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei did say that Iran was short on some aspects of the monitoring thing. But I think most Europeans have this innate fear that America is somehow going to carry this more to Iran. Also, they took a start initially, when you read America started mentioning Syria, but for some reason Syria has dropped off the radar for the moment and installed Iran now. There's a feeling in Turkey that is shared, I think, by many European countries, and definitely by the public in Europe and in Turkey, that America is leaving a trail of half finished business behind it, whether it's Afghanistan, Iraq, and if it moves on to Iran next, and then if that doesn't finish, whatever the outcome may be, then Syria, and I think this is what we're fearing, at the moment. I mean, I've mentioned this in other programs, perhaps even though we talked with you before, that so this part of the world, America does appear like an elephant in a China shop, going in and destroying things that may somehow have to be changed or toppled. But the way we're doing it, I think that this region is going to sort of be picking up the pieces for decades to come. And I think in view of this, the Israeli government at the moment, not all Israelis, I have very very wise and intelligent Israeli friends, but I think the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon and the hardliners see that this is going to be the case that the American project for the region is well nigh impossible. And that therefore the roadmap is only a formality you have to go through at the moment to appease the some of President Bush's publicity people. But if you get serious, as was the case with the attack on the Hamas leader, which could have happened a year ago, under the same argument, but for some strange and mysterious reason, it happened on that very critical day. And again, we had all of a sudden, an escalation in violence, as our friends mentioned, and the roadmap was again in the background. So I think that there are cynical, there's a lot of cynical planning (unintelligence) the region, I think that the biggest fear by Europeans and by Turkey as regional power is that things are just going to end up in one big mess this trail of unfinished business, and that Israel calculating this very cynically is pursuing minimum engagement to the positive factor game at the moment. But

with real intent of not really really pulling back the settlements or anything like that just doing it as far as some of the very outpost outlying settlements are done for show sake. I share the Palestinian sentiments that unless the Arab people are convinced that America is not playing a double standard game here, I don't think that America's intervention will, will amount to very much in the end.

**Byron Scott** 24:26

What about this theory of, of the highly distractible American elephant. Khaled, how, what is the view from Palestine?

**Khaled Abu Aker** 24:37

You know, when you talk about the United States playing that kind of police role in the region. You see what is going on in Iraq, instead of gaining friends, they are gaining more enemies. They are pushing to the corner more people to resist, to resist them as we hear just minutes ago, three more American soldiers being killed. So the feeling itself of the American drone in the region is a kind of strange feeling that the Americans suddenly are talking about solving the problem of the Palestinians, just to use it for their own publicity, in order to shut down any voices in the Arab world, that the Americans are (unintelligence), that they have interest in the natural resources of Iraq, etc. So I think there is a need for more efforts in order to work on the U.S. image in the Arab world. We heard about a new initiative for democracy, but it is not the way to do that in the Arab world. You need to have a clear policy related to the Arab issues that convince the Arab public that you are serious.

**Byron Scott** 26:07

In the minute we have. We have remaining I want to ask Amir Ahmed about, about some of these approaches. Is there a Middle Eastern policy as you see, what are the some of the dangers that have been outlined by Khaled and Semih?

**Amir Ahmed** 26:24

Well, one thing that I don't think we've stressed here in our discussion is that we talked about the involvement of international, for example, United States in the region, but the thing is, a lot of the responsibility also lies on the Arab people. The thing is, the disunity among the Arabs, the if you will, backstabbing politically, among Arab leaders has really put solving the Palestinian conflict, Israeli-Palestinian conflict hasn't found basically a solution immediate solution. There needs to be more responsible leadership among the Arabs I think, in order to actually solve the problem, leaders will actually search for true solutions among their own people before they come on the table and discuss and negotiate.

**Byron Scott** 27:19

I think we've just turned another corner in the matrix. And unfortunately, we're also out of time and I want to thank of our participants, Patrick Cockburn from The Independent of London, their correspondent who spoke to us at the early in the show from north of Baghdad. Amir Ahmed, Egyptian journalist and editor based in the United States. Semih Idiz from Ankara, Turkey, and Khaled Abu Aker, Palestinian journalist speaking to us from Jerusalem. Gentlemen, thank you all and I wish we could go on now for another hour. Thank you for your participation. Special thanks tonight for our coproducer, Yusef Kalyango and Sarah Catan (ph?), our sound engineer and electronic genius Pat Akers. This is Byron Scott from Global Journalist, wishing you all a good evening.