CR

INTERVIEW

A Whole Government Effort

By Sean David Hobbs

A Whole Government Effort

By Sean David Hobbs

In reaffirming the U.S. role in the Middle East, anti-terrorism expert Gerald Feierstein explains that it is not enough to just fight violent networks; leaders must also address the root causes of extremism

Ambassador Gerald Feierstein, 68, retired from the State Department in 2016 as the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs. His knowledge of the Middle East and North Africa is extensive, having served with distinction in Saudi Arabia, Oman, Lebanon, Israel, Tunisia, and finally in Yemen from 2010 to 2013, where he was the United States ambassador.

In Feierstein's forty-one-year career, he played a leading role as one of the State Department's top anti-terrorism authorities. The strategies and programs to combat violent extremism that Feierstein created have since been replicated in a number of conflict zones. In these policies, Feierstein has sought to construct groups of local and regional leaders to liaise with American forces and political leaders in order to stem the spread of terrorist networks both militarily and financially.

Yet, Feierstein's message focuses on the need to address the root causes of terrorism in an effort to understand why people join the ranks of terror organizations. He believes it is the collective responsibility of the United States, other global powers, and Middle Eastern policymakers to support long-term social programs that further those ends.

Cairo Review Senior Editor Sean David Hobbs spoke with Feierstein on June 4, 2019.

Δ Gerald Feierstein, Washington D.C., Oct. 2016. *Photograph by Scott Zuke*

CR: *In 2012, when you were the United States ambassador to Yemen, Al-Qaeda put a ransom on your head. From what I understand, this is a rare thing to happen to any U.S. public servant, let alone one as high ranking as you were.*

GF: It was two kilos of gold.

CR: *Yes. So, how did that ransom come about and affect your life at the time? And since then has it ever been resolved?*

GF: I think that the offer to kill me was really a reflection of the success that we were having in combating Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula [AQAP]. We had a number of successes. Of course, Al-Qaeda had tried to establish its caliphate in the Abyan governorate; we were working with the Yemenis and we were able to push them out of Zinjibar and the other territories that they were trying to control. We had successfully targeted and eliminated a number of senior AQAP officials in Yemen, including Anwar Al-Awlaki, who was a major figure, as well as a number of others.

So we were, you know, having a good deal of success in the fight against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and violent extremism in Yemen, and I think that I was identified with U.S. government policies and the programs that we were pursuing. I was fortunate as I had a great security team, both American and Yemeni, and I never felt that my security was under any threat. And no, today it does not affect my life.

CR: *In your career as a diplomat, you were a leader in counterterrorism, which goes to a deeper question. That is, what*

is terrorism in its essence? What is the definition that you use?

GF: That is something that many people have tried to address over the years without a great deal of success. There is no agreed definition of what terrorism is. I think, broadly speaking, the consensus would be that terrorism would be the use of violence against civilian populations or civilian targets in order to achieve a political objective.

CR: *So, these violent actions are primarily perpetrated by anti-state or non-statist organizations? is terrorism affiliated with the state, or not?*

GF: Historically, of course, terrorism would not be [affiliated with the state], that is, terrorists are non-state actors. Now, however, we seem to be in the process of changing that narrative a little bit. With the Trump administration's designation of the IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] as a terrorist organization, that, you know, kind of blurs the line about whether or not you're going to start identifying state-owned or controlled organizations also as terrorists. But historically, the line has been drawn at terrorists being non-state actors.

CR: *What are the effective ways, in your experience, to counter terrorists?*

GF: It takes concerted work—what we would call a whole government effort. For the most part, when people talk about counterterrorism and counter-extremism, they're really talking primarily about kinetic action. They're talking about the use of military force, special operations, drones, whatever, as a way of defeating terrorism. But while there is a rationale for the use of kinetic force to combat terrorism, that in and of itself won't succeed in achieving that objective. Really what you need is a more comprehensive effort that addresses what historically have been called the root causes [of terrorism]. We have to deal not only with the violent extremist groups, eliminating the leadership—and to be perfectly clear, I have no problem with the operations that we've conducted over the years to basically take out that senior tier of extremist groups, which diminishes the capabilities of terrorist organizations to mount operations—but also address the social, economic, and political frustrations that drive people to join terrorist organizations in the first place.

It is important to help states that house terrorist groups such as Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the states of the Sahel [the area of central Africa from Mauritania through Sudan], so that they can build institutions and take on the responsibility of combating and defeating terrorist groups.

CR: *Do you believe that although Barack Obama's use of drone attacks was effective, there needs to be a careful study of discontent on the ground and its root causes. Is this a correct assessment of your view?*

GF: Yeah, that's correct. However, it was not Obama who started the drone campaign. Particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan, it started with Bush. Obama continued it and in some ways expanded it, and of course, Trump has also expanded it. So [the use of drones] with the use of

special ops to target extremist groups has gone across three administrations now.

Anyhow, fundamentally you are correct. In my view, kinetic force will only take us so far. It will only help states limit the capacity of extremist groups to target, to plan, to train, to do all of those things. But unless we address the legitimate grievances of populations, there is no way to defeat an ideology that leads people to associate with extremism.

CR: *What programs are effective at mitigating and dealing with the underlying causes of terrorism? Are these underlying causes shared across the region?*

GF: One of the problems that we've encountered is that implementing the kind of programs that can address deeper social issues is a long-term process that is generally connected with the concept of nation-building. But nation-building has become a dirty word in the United States, and many in America have decided that we don't want to be a part of politics and make long-term investments in other countries.

Yet, if we are not in that business, then we will not be able to achieve our aims. It is only by helping foreign governments build their security capacity, both in law enforcement and in the military, and also supporting foreign countries in reforming their education and health care systems, and even more importantly, perhaps, ensuring that new generations have jobs, that we can confront the social issues behind terrorism.

Eighteen to twenty-five-year-old young men who have no hope, no future, nothing to look forward to, and are angry and frustrated will ultimately be motivated to take on violent roles—to see that as a solution. When I was in Pakistan in 2009–10, the Pakistani Taliban were able to take over the Swat Valley, which is just north of Islamabad.

How did these guys succeed? How did they build a following? How did they get people to associate with them? Because Swat was not historically a place that had been a hotbed of Sunni fundamentalism or extremism. It was because the Pakistani Taliban instituted sharia justice in Swat, which was a quick justice to address the people's legal issues. The Taliban also provided young men with the money that they needed in order to pay the dowry to get married. They addressed issues of rents for shopkeepers who had been priced out by greedy landlords and got rent reduced. The Taliban in Pakistan did things that actually made people's lives better, even though they [the people of Swat] did not associate with the Taliban cause. Some of the extreme notions that the Pakistani Taliban had about gender issues, about women's education, were alien to the people in Swat. But the locals liked the fact that the Taliban were doing things that addressed their grievances. And for that reason, they were willing to accept things with which they did not agree.

CR: *What are the direct programs that Americans could be doing in these countries?*

GF: Through our own programming, whether it is through USAID or through the World Bank or UN programs, we

can certainly help build institutions that allow these governments to address these issues. I think tackling corruption is an important point.

The question is whether we're willing to put the resources into solving the problem that requires them. Unfortunately, the dynamic that you have in the United States right now is that we're not willing to make this investment. We would much rather invest in guns. What we're doing is a short-term band-aid approach to what is actually a long-term problem. We are not doing anything that builds credibility or capacity or legitimacy to solve the long-term problem.

CR: *If we imagine that you are a doctor and Yemen is your patient, what would you recommend in terms of creating a more effective roadmap toward peace?*

GF: I was there in Yemen during the Arab Spring, and one of the things that we worked on quite aggressively with other partners in the international community as well as the Yemenis themselves was to try to build a more coherent, more capable military force in Yemen that could provide security for the country, a security force that could address some of the ungoverned space issues. The other component was that we tried to help the political transition. We worked to assist the Yemenis in building a more open, more tolerant, and more democratic society where the government would address some of the divisions between the north and the south, between the Houthis and the rest of society.

During this process, of course, we had our own programs, as did many others—the UNDP [United Nations Development Programme], the World Bank, and many of the European donors—trying to address issues related to education and health care. The goal was to build up [national] capability and to provide young Yemenis with the skills that they needed in order to compete in a modern global economy.

CR: *From the far left of the American political spectrum, people have said we shouldn't be involved abroad at all, because everything we do will create a power dynamic based on U.S. corporate power and wealth. From the far right, however, there is the Rand Paul libertarian group, who say that any kind of investment will ultimately hurt the people of the United States. What is your response to these critiques?*

GF: Of course, the United States has done good around the world. Look at how Southeast Asian nations are now stable, prosperous societies. This owes a lot to the engagement of the United States over a period of decades. So clearly, the idea that we make things worse simply is not true. It is not to say that we are perfect. It is not to say that everything that we have done is absolutely wonderful and that we have been successful everywhere. No, we have failed. We have made mistakes.

However, overall, I would say that we have been a force for good, and more importantly, we have been, over the years, the country that brings the international community together. And even today, even with all of the uncertainty, chaos, and unhappiness with many U.S. policies, the fact of the matter is that the international community still waits for

the United States to move and still looks to the United States for leadership. And often, even though other governments have the capability and the interest, they do not have that same convening power that the United States has.

In response to the Rand Paul libertarian far-right view, the United States does well when the world does well. And if we're not engaged in making the world a better place, if we're not trying to help find solutions to some world problems, then those problems will be allowed to fester and come back and hurt the United States.

CR: *What would be the elements of a successful peacebuilding strategy in the region?*

GF: If you're looking for what elements are going to stabilize these societies and allow them to move away from violence, then I would say one needs to address the demographics. These are young societies, that is, the youth population is very high. Young societies by definition are unstable and are more prone to chaos. How do you engage the youth? How do you give them positive horizons, a positive sense of themselves and their futures and what they can accomplish? All of these are issues that are feeding instability into the region.

I would say that the governance issue and the Arab Spring didn't resolve the deeper conflicts in many of these societies. The Arab Spring itself did not answer the questions of young people. People like to think that the Arab Spring had a particular starting point and a particular ending point. But my view is that the Arab Spring is an event in a continuum. We have not seen the end of the Arab Spring. It's going to continue to come back; it's going to continue to press societies for change, and we need to try to channel those demands for change into peaceful political routes and not allow them to become violent and destabilizing.

CR: *If we pivot toward the issue of economic development, and actually reconstruction, what are the main bodies that are going to be active in the economic reconstruction of, for example, Syria, Libya, and Yemen?*

GF: Each of them brings different challenges to the table. Libya, based on its oil economy, has the potential to be very prosperous. What Libya needs is stability and reasonable governance that would allow people to come and develop and rebuild what has been damaged and move forward from there. The Libyan model, the Libya challenge, is relatively straightforward. They need help building institutions because when [Muammar] Qaddafi fell and the band aid of the Qaddafi state was ripped away from Libya, there was nothing there. He had never invested in or built institutions. There was no capacity within Libyan society to become self-governing. And that is a big reason why you have the conflict now. Libyans also have to have the wherewithal to be able to take on a lot of the responsibility themselves.

Syria is a different set of issues. In Syria there is a government that, even if it succeeds in ending this current conflict and putting down the insurrection, the reality is that the [Bashar] Al-Assad

regime has no legitimacy. It will never have legitimacy. And so, the challenge in Syria is that even though there are institutions of state, these are no longer credible institutions. What is needed in Syria then is an attempt to change the governance in order to allow those institutions to come forward again and to work again, and to allow the international community to come in.

Western European countries have an interest in helping to stabilize Syria because they have a huge Syrian refugee population that they'd like to see go home. The IFIs, the international financial institutions—the World Bank, the IMF, the UNDP—will have a role to play as well in trying to reconstruct, but all of it is contingent on there being some kind of change in Damascus that would allow a government with legitimacy in the eyes of the Syrian people, as well as the international community, to come forward and again organize that kind of reconstruction project.

In Yemen, frankly speaking, the reality is that the international community is not going to step forward and help. In Yemen, primarily the neighbors—the Saudis, the Emiratis, and the Kuwaitis—will take the lead on reconstruction. And there are two components to what the Gulf states can do to help Yemen. One is to help with reconstruction, that is, repairing what's been damaged over these last few years, and then to try to help build new infrastructure that would allow Yemen to build a prosperous economy.

The other part of what the Gulf states can do is allow Yemen to participate more fully in what is fundamentally a prosperous region. Yemen's neighbors are among the wealthiest states per capita in the world. There is a capacity within the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] states to really help bring Yemen into their regional economic zone and integrate Yemen's economy [into it] more fully. This would allow the kind of investment and development in Yemen that would address many of these economic challenges.

Where the international community can play an important role, again, is helping Yemen build the institutions that can sustain the kind of development investment that can provide the assurance to foreign investors that their investment in Yemen is going to be safe and secure. That will build the legal infrastructure that allows these developments to take place, and that more broadly helps to build a trade-capable workforce in Yemen that can take on many of these investment opportunities.

CR: *Can you discuss what roles the European Union, China, and Russia play in the region, and the ways in which the United States can pair with, or contend with, these different powers? What are the larger diplomatic maneuverings that go into geopolitical decisions made by Moscow, Beijing, Washington, or Brussels?*

GF: China is going to have a big role. There is no question that in terms of economic foreign investment in this part of the world, the Chinese are going to be major players. You look at the Belt and Road Initiative that goes up the Red Sea and certainly affects Yemen. The Chinese are already involved in looking at investments in Syria. Libya may not play

such a large role in Chinese planning in the region, but nonetheless, the Chinese are going to be major players in any kind of economic development in the Middle East for many years to come. And therefore, it is important for the United States to have some kind of capability to maintain a dialogue with the Chinese and to find areas where they can work together and cooperate with one another in order to achieve those objectives.

Politically, the Chinese are less significant. The Chinese until now have been reluctant to really get involved in the political issues of the Middle East. They did work with us, just as an aside, closely in Yemen as part of the P5 [China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States] approach.

So, we had the P5 working very well together. The Chinese were a full partner in that. But generally speaking, historically they have not been as deeply involved in the political or the security components of the region.

The Russians, in my view, are basically opportunistic. The Russians are looking for places where they can be involved, where they can demonstrate that they're still a great power and that they still need to be given a seat at the table whenever issues are being discussed. They're more of a negative force than a positive force, frankly. Economically, they're not serious players in the way that the Chinese or the European Union [EU] certainly are. You know, they look for places where they [can] insert themselves, but they do not have the capacity to maintain a sustained regional impact the way the United States, the EU, or the Chinese might be able to.

The EU definitely is going to be our major partner in terms of many of our peace activities in the Middle East and North Africa. They are going to be particularly interested in what happens in Syria, precisely because of this huge Syrian refugee issue that they have. They're going to be interested in what happens in Libya because of its proximity and the fact that Libya has acted as a funnel for economic migration from Africa into the EU. And of course, historically the EU states have been the main customers for Libyan energy, and so they are going to be important players in Libya as well.

CR: *In your former role as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, did you see the so-called Obama pivot to the East? Was that real? Is it happening under President Trump? Was, and is, such a pivot necessary in terms of American engagement in the Middle East and North Africa and in East Asia?*

GF: Barack Obama articulated this idea that U.S. political and economic interests were shifting toward East Asia. The Trans-Pacific Partnership that the Obama administration negotiated was a fundamental example of this change in the nature of U.S. economic and political ties with our key partners in the Asian region.

I think that the desire of the Obama administration to make that pivot was real, yet the pivot was less significant because the fact of the matter is that, no matter how much the Obama administration and the Trump administration today want to reduce

U.S. engagement in the Middle East, the reality is that the Middle East remains a critically important region for U.S. national security and foreign policy concerns.

Therefore, we will remain engaged at an important and major level for many years to come. Now what I would say though is that there are repercussions in the region from Obama's statement, and across the region, particularly in the Gulf, many policymakers concluded that the United States' interest was declining and that U.S. engagement was declining.

These same policymakers saw American commitment to the region within the context of the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action], and saw that the United States was no longer the guarantor of their political and security interests, that we were leaving and that what we wanted to accomplish before we left was to change the nature of our relationship with Iran at their expense.

That's one reason why we saw the Gulf states react to the JCPOA so negatively and to the Obama administration negatively. This is also why Gulf state leaders welcomed the Trump administration. But the reality is that the Trump administration—even though Donald Trump articulates a strong U.S. commitment to remain engaged in the region—would like to reduce the U.S. profile and withdraw the U.S. military from the region, and ultimately do a lot of things that will make the United States a less reliable partner.

Therefore, what we've seen, again particularly from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, is their decision that they need to take on more of the responsibility themselves for safeguarding their own political interests, their own security interests, and to become much less responsive to the United States.

We see now that leaders in the Gulf have become much more self-assertive in saying these are our interests; these are our policies; and these are the things that we are going to do. They are also asserting more of their own autonomy in Yemen, in Libya, in the Horn of Africa, and in the Red Sea. Gulf leaders and policymakers are strengthening relations with Egypt and Sudan. Basically, now with this rhetoric of a pivot away from the region, the region's most wealthy Persian Gulf nations are much less inclined to accept American leadership, and more inclined to say this is our policy; this is what our interests are; this is the direction that we're going to go in.

CR: *So, were Obama and John Kerry wrong for pushing the nuclear agreement with Iran, as it has hurt U.S. standing with the United States' traditional allies?*

GF: Barack Obama was correct in identifying the nuclear issue as the primary threat to the region and making the decision, along with the other P5 colleagues and the Germans, that we should negotiate an agreement to take that nuclear issue off the table. But the reality is that for the Gulf states, their number one concern about Iranian behavior was not even around the Iranians getting a nuclear bomb. What concerned our Gulf allies was the Iranian ballistic missile program,

Tehran's intervention in internal affairs of neighbors, and the Iranians' support for terrorism.

And those were areas where Barack Obama said we're not going to change our position. Obama was clear that the United States would only negotiate regarding the nuclear portfolio, the nuclear file, and that we would not negotiate on these other things.

Obama stressed that we will maintain our strong sanctions regime against the Iranians as long as the Iranians do not address these other issues. But after the JCPOA was signed, what the Gulf states saw instead was that there were a number of players in the Obama administration who really did not agree with Obama's approach and wanted to see whether the JCPOA might be a vehicle that would allow policymakers in the U.S. to open a new door with the Iranians and restore diplomatic relations—at least to have the capacity to work with Iranians on areas where we had mutual interests.

The Gulf states saw this development as a betrayal of what the Obama administration had promised them when it was negotiating the JCPOA. Gulf leaders also believed that the Obama administration was going to negotiate with the Iranians at their expense, and that the United States was going to achieve some kind of a reconciliation with Iran that would harm the interests of the Gulf states. So, in this context, I think the Obama administration is legitimately criticized.

CR: *To what extent do President Obama and his administration deserve criticism for us not getting involved in Syria, specifically because of the experience of Iraq? Was this a correct decision?*

GF: Both Barack Obama and Donald Trump came to the same conclusion: the American people do not want to see U.S. military forces involved in another conflict in the Middle East. Both Obama and Trump have pursued a policy, which is basically that we are not going to get drawn into another conflict.

Now personally, I think that the Obama administration is justifiably criticized for the way they managed the Syrian conflict. I think that they could have done more to support the moderate Sunni forces. They could have done more to try to press for regime change in Damascus. And of course, the main critique of Obama is his statement about chemical weapons being a red line, and then when the red line was clearly crossed, not doing anything. Obama's inaction opened the door for the Russians to come in and basically protect Al-Assad and prevent the regime change that would have potentially resolved the Syrian conflict.

But the reality is that Obama probably correctly read the American public. At the time, we did not want to get involved in another ground war in the Middle East. And I think that Trump is probably correctly reading the American public in saying now that we still do not want to see another war in the Middle East.

ESSAYS