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TRANSCRIPT

Babel: Translating the Middle East

“Babel Special: Jon Alterman's Next Chapter”

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FEATURING

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Will Todman: Part of what I want to understand today is how you got into this and how your views on the region and on the role of think tanks have changed over the course of your career. You didn't necessarily have a very straightforward pathway into a think tank because you started by doing a PhD in history, and then you chose to go from that into policy-focused work. Can you talk to us about that decision? Why did you want to make that shift?

Jon Alterman: Before I got the PhD in history, I worked on Capitol Hill for two years for Senator Moynihan doing foreign policy and defense. It struck me at the time that the world is divided between "substance people" and "process people". Substance people go and accrue wisdom, and process people deploy that wisdom and have very wide-ranging skills and can use them in different circumstances. There was a foreign policy advisor for Senator Ted Kennedy who struck me as the ultimate process person. Whether it was South Africa sanctions or funding for some of the wars in Central America or anything else, he understood the people, he understood the processes. He got stuff done.

Congressman Gerry Connolly was also then a staffer. He was also amazing at process. I said, that's not really where my strength is. I'd like my strength to be about being a substance person and being one of those people who accrues wisdom over time. The preeminent way to become a substance person is to get a PhD, but even when I was doing my PhD, I was much more policy-oriented than most people in my program. There was a professor, Peter Sluglett, a British professor with a wry sense of humor who used to sometimes call me "Senator" because I wasn't like most other historians. I was interested in thinking about how governments have engaged with problems.

My dissertation was about Egypt and American foreign assistance in the early 1950s, which was partly about how the United States grappled with anti-communism, how it thought about what development was, what kinds of disciplines were involved in development, and why the Egyptians thought about those problems and the kinds of conflicts that came out of it. So, in some ways, things started off and stayed in a policy track, which went back to my undergraduate major in public policy.

Will Todman: I want to come back to the State Department piece, but I want you to put your historian's hat on for a minute first. What was the field like at that time when you were entering? And what were the types of people who were filling those roles?

Jon Alterman: Well, one thing that happened when I was in graduate school is the Oslo Accords were signed and you really seemed like you were moving to a very different place in the Arab-Israeli conflict. There was a great deal of optimism that we had reached a breakthrough moment. Toward the undergraduate school, there seemed to be a lot of movement on Iran. With President Khatami, there was a sense that this very long period of tension with Iran may be ending, and that the Iranian revolution had essentially run out of steam. There was a battle inside history departments about what constitutes good history. And in many ways, things that involve governments were falling out of favor. Political history was really losing. And there was a theoretical bent in the field that the Harvard History Department didn't really have. In some ways, the Harvard History Department was a sort of an odd man out in the academic study of history.

But I think more broadly, in the Middle East field, there was a sense that we had been working our way through a lot of the traditional problems in the region—certainly the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was one of the first things that happened when I was up at Harvard. But I think there was more optimism, partly in this post-Cold War world, that we were going to be able to reach escape velocity, and in many ways, the Middle East was going to become a more normal region in the world than it had been for the previous several decades.

Will Todman: And this was not that much after *The End of History* and that sort of discussion, right?

Jon Alterman: Yep. I helped Senator Moynihan write his response to *The End of History* essay. I never agreed with it for the same reasons that I don't agree with it now—it seemed to me that authoritarianism has a lot more momentum than Frank Fukuyama gave it credit for in 1989.

Will Todman: How has the region changed? How would you characterize it today?

Jon Alterman: Partly the Gulf is a very different and a remarkably self-confident place in a way it had not been before. There's a lot less self-confidence in the Levant, which for so long had considered itself to be the civilized center of the Middle East. The difficulty in actually escaping some of these conflicts has made some people in the Middle East less intent to fight them, because it seems a little bit hopeless. I certainly get a sense from Iran that younger people are feeling like there's no way to get rid of this bad government. Iraqis are much less optimistic than they were after the immediate fall of Saddam.

There's a lot of nihilism all over, and in many ways the Gaza war has reinforced this sense that there's really no solution to all of these problems. And for some people, I've been surprised that people say, "Well, I just don't want to fight this anymore, because there's no solution to it." And the extent to which that endures, the extent to which some of these issues come back, a lot depends on what follows Mahmoud Abbas. But Abbas has sort of frittered away a lot of the passion that a lot of people throughout the region had for the Palestinian cause. Yasser Arafat had been very good at nurturing that over time.

Where that goes is a little bit surprising to me, because the notion 25 years ago, when I did a book on new media in the Arab world, was that it gave an immediacy that the Arab-Israeli conflict never had before. People were seeing in their living rooms what this conflict really looked like. And there was a sense that this was going to prompt people to be more passionate. And in fact, 20 years, 25 years of seeing things seems to have numbed people to this issue in a way that I find a little bit surprising. It's not what people expected 25 years ago.

Will Todman: We've sort of transitioned from this optimism to more of a pessimism and a numbness, as you're saying, about the region. How does that change how the region is studied today? What trends do you see there?

Jon Alterman: First, there's certainly optimism in the Gulf that wasn't there before, and it's much more homegrown. You have a lot more people from the region who are on the front lines and are making decisions. That's a very different mood than there was. What I see in the academic study of the region, and it's true of academic studies more broadly, is it's just gotten so much narrower. So much of the academic work doesn't transcend barriers, often doesn't transcend states. It feels like it is more and more focused on smaller and smaller issues that don't necessarily have a bearing on the kinds of decisions that people are making. And academics need to appeal to their disciplinary audiences.

And so, in many ways, the people who make tenure are not experts on an individual situation, they're experts on a discipline or an approach. That's driven a lot of the academic work to not be so helpful, let's say, in understanding the kinds of choices that people make, whether in government or outside of government. It feels like it's intended for a peer audience, but not for a regional audience and not for other audiences. A lot of the academic work that people do on the region isn't valued by the people in the region, because it doesn't really address the kinds of questions they're interested in, in ways they think are relevant.

Will Todman: You mentioned earlier your time in the State Department. And we're talking about the early 2000s, right? I wonder how that shaped your views on what it means to be in this policymaking ecosystem. How did that change how you think about the role of government on Middle East policy?

Jon Alterman: The State Department was a bastion of circumspection about the wisdom of attacking Iraq. I certainly knew everybody who had written a book about Iraq in English at the time. I could gather them all around my dining room table. It's a tiny handful of people. For a lot of people in the State Department, the overwhelming sense of uncertainty was there. But there also was the view coming from the White House and elsewhere that 9/11 was a generational challenge and it required a much bolder response than the State Department was able to generate. And in some ways, there was a sense that the people who had the boldness of vision and the commitment to win the Cold War were now going to push back the age of terrorism. And it wasn't clear we weren't entering an age of mass-catastrophe terrorism.

So the State Department is a little bit of a weird place to be in that and was always cautious of being marginalized in the broader governmental process. But it seemed to me that what the State Department really needed was to have people help frame issues. I really thought that second-guessing people in government or talking about how I do my past or future jobs in government differently from the people who actually had them isn't really helpful, it's mostly annoying. And so the question is, what can I know that they're curious about? How do I take random things I know from random conversations I've had and put them into a package that gives people a framework and understanding that they can then apply as they get more timely information than I have access to, or more secret information than I have access to? How can you help guide people to make better choices? How do you tell them what they don't know?

One of the places where I really tried to do this, and have been doing it for a long time, is on China-Middle East issues, which was not an obvious issue when I started doing it shortly after I came to CSIS. But it struck me that there's a lot to understand, and if you can frame it and give people a sort of sense of orientation of how to think about it, you can really add what the system is bad at doing. The system is good at

making incremental decisions, it's bad at framing things afresh. And it seemed to me that one of the things we could do is frame things.

To me, the attraction of being in a think tank space is how you can look at issues that are otherwise neglected and bring attention to them in constructive ways that help people solve problems. I've never wanted to just do Arab-Israeli issues, Iran issues, Iraq issues, the sort of known categories with the known parameters. To me, there's always been more attraction in finding areas that people don't understand are important, and framing them, making them memorable, helping people think about them in ways that guide them toward better decisions, more creative decisions, maybe some unexpected outcomes that can make things better.

Will Todman: You have certainly pushed me a lot throughout my time here with my writing to really think about how I'm framing something and to frame it in a memorable way. It sounds like this is something that you think continues to be a key role for think tanks.

Jon Alterman: Realistically, the information stream that we get outside of government can't compare to the information stream that people get inside of government. Certainly, when I read the Senior Executive Intelligence Brief, which was a top-secret document that you had to read in a special room and was the summary of all the most important intelligence items of the day—if you had a choice between reading that or The New York Times, you should choose The New York Times, because it's very rare that things in the brief wouldn't be in The New York Times within a day or two. But The New York Times put it in a way that was memorable.

Journalists know that you start with a lead, and you have to grab somebody's attention. The goal of journalists is to have the reader take away the information. The goal of writing the Senior Executive Intelligence Brief is to say everything in such an exquisitely correct way that nobody can tell you had the intelligence wrong. It's not written in a way that has the most important stuff at the top that tells you where the breaking news is. It's written to be correct. I think there are a number of documents that came out in the 9/11 Commission Report that highlight the way a lot of government information is handled.

What we should be doing in think tanks is thinking about storytelling skills. As you know, I've worked on storytelling skills for policy

audiences. I've worked to produce things that are intended to draw the audience in. What we have in the think tank world is the freedom to say, "I want this to be the takeaway." How do I build a product that gets my audience's attention and has them remember what I want them to remember? Often people aren't going to remember data points. It's hard to remember data points. It's easy to remember framing, especially when it's in the context of stories.

Out of that framing, that's where you're adding value. Sometimes the framing is the title. If somebody can remember the title of what you wrote, sometimes everything falls from that. Again, the advantage that we have in the think tank world is we're so free in what we do and how we do it. To think about how do I have the desired impact? How do I choose information that has the desired impact? A week later, what do you want somebody to remember you said? Because the reality is a week later, people barely remember the big topic you talked about, let alone what your takeaway was. And if they don't remember the takeaway, what are we doing?

Will Todman: But if you surprised them, if you intrigued them, then they're much more likely to remember. That has only become more important with the saturation of the media landscape.

Jon Alterman: And this is a huge change since I started. When we started the newsletter in the Middle East program, it was relatively new. We had a format that was two pages of PDF that was all laid out. I had Senators who were delighted, because they said you can actually take something away. It's only two pages. And you learn something and it was pointed and it was sharp. I currently get about 250 emails a day, and that's not to mention all the social media stuff and the scrolling and all the things that go on. We're competing with sleep. There is no end of information you can gather, which I think puts an even greater premium on how do you frame, how do you pick and choose? You're making a difference in this space. Because to just be part of a cacophony doesn't contribute.

Will Todman: What else has changed in the role that think tanks play in Washington, D.C., in this policy making ecosystem, apart from the information saturation piece? How do you view think tanks having a different role today to when you joined CSIS?

Jon Alterman: One of the most dramatic changes is there used to be a much more personal element to it, and that's partly because of so much going on in the Middle East space and partly because of COVID. For young people starting, they don't know everybody. I had a one-year postdoc at the Washington Institute. By the end of the year, I really did know everybody in the Middle East space in Washington. I had met them. I had seen them. I had seen them at conferences. I had meals with them. I just knew everybody. Now it's much, much harder. It's much more depersonalized. It's harder to gather people.

I also think that there's a way in which COVID interrupted a pattern of folks in government engaging with non-governmental folks. It used to be much more common to bring people in. The small number of visitors to the State Department now compared to 10 or 15 years ago is shocking to me. It used to be quite a process set up with a whole bunch of clerks, and they would get you in and get you out. Now they've made it so cumbersome, partly for security reasons, partly for whatever reason, that there's a lot less interchange. I don't think that's good.

There was a lot to be gained from having trusted relationships. Ultimately, much of the impact I've had has been from having a one-on-one conversation with somebody. Realistically, the number of people having one-on-one conversations inside of government, outside of government has decreased significantly over the last 10 years, maybe more. Some of that is because of political polarization, and people don't want to talk to people that they don't know they agree with to start with. But I think there's a depersonalization that has accompanied the rise of smartphones and other kinds of things that there's just, “Oh yeah, I saw you wrote something about that.” But do you remember what I wrote about? It's different from sitting down and having a conversation and actively listening. People's listening skills have declined.

Will Todman: Talking about people's listening skills, why did you want to launch a podcast? How did the idea for Babel come about?

Jon Alterman: It wasn't an incredibly deliberate idea. I was talking to some people. I was talking to some friends at the UAE embassy who were interested in the idea and said, “I love podcasts.” And we didn't have a strategic plan. We got a little bit of advice about how to do a podcast. We've changed the format a little bit over time. We did some miniseries. We had no idea how to do a miniseries. And then we did them.

It's really been one of the most rewarding things I've done at CSIS, partly because it allows me to model curiosity, which I think is so important—a task to really be curious about the world and to think about ways to elicit interesting answers from people. It's been fun thinking about guests. It's been fun thinking about how to approach the interviews I've done. It's been fun being surprised at what I heard. And again, ultimately, there's so much you get from really engaging with people. Both the interviews and then the Tabletop conversations we had are ultimately about the best kind of exchange: respectful, curious conversations with people who have different perspectives.

My goal always was that a listener would come away and say, "You know, that topic is so much more interesting than I ever thought it would be," because I believe the ideal way to see the world is a world full of curiosities and interesting things that bear more inquiry. And Babel has just been this remarkable vehicle for me to indulge my own curiosity to talk to people I never would have talked to otherwise. I've spoken to old friends who've had remarkable experiences and if you want to help people be the stars that they often are, you give them an opportunity to really show how their interesting, unique perspectives bear in the world.

Will Todman: I'm not going to ask you to name drop, but I think both you and I have been surprised by some of the people who've told us that they've listened across the years. It's been really fun to have the chance to look into everything from Turkish soap operas in the Middle East, to Captagon, to some of the hot topics of the day.

Jon Alterman: Again, this fits into my goal of not just doing what people know they're interested in, but having an ear open to things that people might not understand they are as interesting as they are, or somebody with a unique perspective that can really help inform in a surprising way. The Middle East is a really interesting place, a complex place. It is understood not only in the United States, but especially in Washington, in a much narrower perspective than I think makes sense to people in the region. I don't want guests to tell Washington about Washington.

What is outside an ecosystem helps people understand something with a little more texture, a little more nuance, and creates curiosity. Creating curiosity gets people to explore more, gets people to be open-minded. That's where you get solutions from, not from having two people repeating opposite talking points that could have been written 20 years ago. One of the frustrations I have about Middle East studies is people have been using talking points for decades.

Will Todman: Some of the people who I think have told both you and me that they listen to the podcast are students and those who are earlier on in their career. And you have thousands of applications you've looked at. I have probably also looked at thousands. I wonder what advice you have for those who now are considering entering a career in Middle East policy, particularly those who are intrigued by the idea of a think tank, but who are probably quite nervous about the shifts underway in the ecosystem in Washington, D.C. and what their future career might look like. What advice would you have for them?

Jon Alterman: One is to engage with reality. A lot of people come out of undergraduate or even graduate degrees, and they've stuck within the categories that people have given them. The most interesting things I've learned in the Middle East have been from random conversations from getting off the well-beaten path. It's sometimes when you're on the beaten path, something random gives you credibility or authenticity and you can get somebody who's on the beaten path to say something interesting. Sometimes it's having a conversation just randomly where you learn something and you can bring it back and it helps inform something else about the region that isn't commonly known. There's an indispensability in my mind of having a genuine encounter with the region and it being intellectually uncomfortable; seeking out things that don't make sense.

You want things that don't make sense and then you want to struggle to have them make sense. That process of going from “it doesn't make sense” to “it makes sense” is like athletic training. You get better at it. It's that muscle of finding things that don't make sense, making sense of them, finding things that don't make sense, making sense of them. That's a lot of what education should be about and a lot of what being in the think tank space should be about. The other thing is there is still no substitute for expressing yourself clearly. I don't know exactly how to teach it. I try to teach it to the extent I can.

For applications I read, sometimes people are just really good at expressing themselves. Sometimes you feel people are probably good at expressing themselves, but they're wrapped up in jargon because they need to demonstrate to somebody that they know the jargon. Then there's some people where the jargon is just a distraction. They can't figure out what they're really trying to say. Being able to speak clearly and write clearly remains an invaluable skill. I don't know how it's being taught outside of the Middle East program. I certainly tried to teach people inside the Middle East program, as you know.

Will Todman: I do indeed.

Jon Alterman: Clarity of thought is important, and part of that is coming up with a good metaphor, coming up with good framing, coming up with a lead that grabs people's attention, not making people wonder where you're going. There's a lot involved. What people are ultimately looking at for me and colleagues is they want somebody to really be a guide to take them by the hand and tell them how to understand something. They don't want to wonder where it is going. You have to give them confidence that you're taking them on a journey and it's going to end up in a good place.

Will Todman: A few years ago, you wrote a document that contains a lot of advice for people who are applying for jobs in this. A lot of people have said how helpful that is. We'll put it in the show notes for this. It includes the more specific pieces of advice from some of the mistakes that people have made. Sometimes people do shoot themselves in the foot in unfortunate ways. So if you are applying, that's something then please do check.

Jon Alterman: I actually only edited that document. There was a very talented Research Associate who had been through 450 applications and was so frustrated that really talented people took themselves out of the running by telling folks at CSIS how much they wanted to work at the Carnegie Endowment or something like that. Or people who said, “You know, I witnessed the Arab Spring because they were passing through Cairo Airport in January 2011.” I think I'd love to help people be as successful as they can be. The think tank world is a small and idiosyncratic world. It's hard to focus only on the think tank space and have a successful career. But again, what I like about the think tank space is there aren't a lot of rules for how you create value. And there's constant pressure. How do you add value? And I think if you're going to have pressure, that's a good pressure to have. How do you add value? It's interesting.

Will Todman: Definitely. So after 22 years, you are moving on from the Middle East program and expanding your portfolio as you focus on your role as the Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy. What is next? What lies ahead for you?

Jon Alterman: We're finishing up some work on the Hostage Commission that's coming out in the next few weeks. And then, I've been working on projects that have to do with thinking about the global south, middle powers. It grows partly out of my China-Middle East work that I've been doing for almost 20 years. It grows partly out of what I've seen in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which increasingly are countries that see themselves not merely with regional roles, but with global roles. I have long been interested in understanding how India sees the world. We commissioned some internal papers. Brazil is in an interesting place. And I think there's there is something going on in the world where the superpowers are still there and still matter, and the G7 is still the dominant economic and political force. But the level of its dominance is diminishing.

There are growing middle powers that share some interests in how the world should and will operate and differ in some ways in how the world should and will operate. There's certainly China and Russia trying to shape how the middle powers treat those kinds of issues. What strikes me is that you can rue the decline of the current rules-based architecture, whatever you want to call it. That all feels passive to me. The real issue is when does any of this matter? If the United States isn't playing that role, if other countries are playing different roles, what are the genuine economic consequences? What are the peace and security consequences? I was talking to somebody earlier today who said Sudan may be a model for what we see, where you have 10 countries that are each playing proxy wars in Sudan, including some middle powers. Is that a future condition? And does it matter if that's a future condition? What does it affect? This is the challenge for foreign policy, for global security going forward. What kind of world might we move into? How should we want it to evolve? And how are we going to account for many of these countries'—often formerly colonial powers, now with quite robust economies—capacity to exercise foreign policy?

It's not going to change everything, but it will change some things. What will it change? What should we want it to change? What do we do about it? It's rooted in the Middle East, obviously, because a lot of these countries are from the Middle East, but it goes beyond the Middle East. And it looks at issues like the Gulf relationships with India and with Russia and with China. How is the way they think about this different from a country like Brazil? Where does Turkey fit in? And will Turkey fit in? I'm not sure Turkey fits in. Does South Africa matter? I think that there's something going on that is going to be very consequential, not

because there's going to be a rival that will overwhelm the United States, but the system is going to change, partly because of what the United States wants to do, what the American people want to do, partly because of what the Russians and Chinese do.

How does Europe evolve in that? And will Europe get more distance from the United States and be an independent actor and be a sort of a fourth power because of this? Will some of these countries want Europe to be a fourth power? I think those are the kinds of issues that we really need to pay much more attention to. I'm not comfortable people have paid enough attention to it. It's all related to the Middle East because there's so much happening in the Middle East, but it's not limited to the Middle East. And certainly, it's not the traditional security problems in the Middle East, in many ways, spent the last 30 years trying to untangle.

Will Todman: Well, that's a lot to take on, but we really look forward to watching you wrestle with those thorny, difficult problems and helping understand where we're going with all of this. I'm going to take the liberty of saying on behalf of myself and then anyone else who's listening: Thank you for your leadership of the Middle East program. Thank you for creating Babel as this platform for all these different voices. And as you said, for leading with curiosity and for helping model where curiosity can take you. Thank you so much.

Jon Alterman: Will, it's been a delight, not only to talk to you today, but a delight to work alongside you. In the Middle East program, I still fondly remember you were hired for six months, nine years ago. And it's been a delight working with you to flesh out Babel in terms of the format, in terms of the guests. It's really been a collective effort of a lot of people, some of whom are listeners have heard and many of whom they haven't heard. It has been a delightful effort to share the passion that everybody in the Middle East program has had for the region and to do what we can to make the place better, to help guide more understanding. And as I look back on my time, the regularity of Babel and the challenge of keeping Babel interesting has certainly been one of the highlights of my time leading the Middle East program. So thank you.

Will Todman: Thank you so much, Jon.

Jon Alterman: Thanks, Will. Thank you.

(END.)