

Orlando Sentinel

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SOMETHING ON YOUR MIND?

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FRONT&CENTER HAKAN ÖZOĞLU

Assessing the ISIS crisis in Iraq

Conditions in Iraq have gone sideways, as jihadi militants have seized territory in Iraq's northern Sunni section. This week, President Obama announced he's sending up to 300 military advisers to evaluate the threat posed by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.



To get a sense of the new ISIS crisis, editorial-writer Darryl E. Owens conducted an email interview with Hakan Özoglu, an associate professor of history with Middle Eastern expertise at the University of Central Florida. An excerpt of the discussion follows. A full transcript is available at OrlandoSentinel.com/opinion.

Q: What has triggered this move by ISIS?
A: After the regime change in Iraq in 2003, the balance of power tilted toward the Shia groups. Yet, the ground was not prepared to absorb such a major shift. The U.S. did not calculate well enough how delicate the balance of power was in this land of artificial boundaries without a strong military presence. The power struggle is more visible now to the naked eye, but not new.

Q: How big of a black eye for the U.S. is the breakdown of the Iraqi army?
A: Escalation of violence and threat of a civil war have greatly diminished the credibility of the United States as a superpower, which, the Iraqis think, either failed to carry its promise or on purpose allowed this carnage to take place. Neither interpretation looks good on the U.S. The greatest black eye comes from the fact that both [President George

W.] Bush (Republican) and Obama (Democrat) administrations appear rather incompetent to stabilize the country. More significantly, [that failure] can spill over the entire region as Iran and Turkey get more involved to manipulate the power balance in Iraq.

Q: What purpose will the 300 advisers serve?
A: Obama's decision to send military advisers clearly was not aimed at fixing the problem but manipulating the power struggle that is shifting toward the ISIS forces. I am not very optimistic for any effective reasonable action for the benefit of the locals and for the international community. It looks like the region is going through a political earthquake and the fault lines will produce new big and small rumblings. These political tremors and aftershocks will surely alter the political landscape until the major cracks on the Iraqi political fault line already release their energy.

The best action would be to contain the damage by preventing extremists from ending up on top.

Q: How significant a threat does ISIS pose to Americans, here and overseas?
A: ISIS is a militant group that sees America and the Western nations as its enemy. As such, it is a threat. Groups like the ISIS can damage American interests as its leadership can attract many blind followers. We have already seen what groups like al-Qaida can do in Iraq and Afghanistan. At home, their potential to harm Americans is obviously not as high as abroad — not any greater than that of al-Qaida, for example. Yet, [that potential] certainly exists.

Q: What does the ISIS crisis mean for Syria?
A: It is not just Syria but the entire region that suffers from the instability in Iraq. However, since Syria is already in a

very fragile condition as a failing state, there is more of a power vacuum to be filled in there. I believe that Western governments are now reconsidering their standing on the Assad regime and on Iran as a more effective way of countering ISIS-like threats.

Q: How do you see this turmoil playing out?
A: It is very hard to make predictions as the country is under a very dense fog. Since it is not clear how their interests reconcile with one another, we cannot predict anything for the long run. However, in the short run, the international community is in an agreement that ISIS should not be allowed to gain more ground. I believe more political and military pressure will be applied to keep the balance of power to the detriment of the Sunni extremist groups. A clear winner is not desired in Iraq; yet without which the crisis will continue.

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The Needle

A new survey found that 27 percent of airline passengers don't like making small talk with the person sitting next to them. While the other 73 percent of airline passengers can't take a hint."
— Jimmy Fallon
In Rare Consensus, Sunnis and Shiites Tell Cheney to Shut Up"
— BorowitzReport.com
According to a new report, Yahoo! has more diversity in its staff than Google. Meanwhile, Bing is still just the one guy."
— Seth Meyers



DANA SUMMERS/TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

Letters

Abolish the death penalty

The execution of John Henry, who was put to death on Wednesday, should have been commuted to life imprisonment without possibility of parole. Capital punishment must be abolished in our state. Life imprisonment is the answer — not execution. Too many times, it has been found by DNA evidence, or other means, that prisoners sentenced to death are innocent. Florida is one of two states that does not require unanimous jury recommendations for the death penalty, and Florida leads the nation in the number of condemned death-row inmates who have been exonerated. I am proud to be a Floridian, and it pains me deeply that the state of Florida has wrongfully convicted and sent at least 24 innocent people to death row — more than any other state. I ask Gov. Rick Scott to suspend all executions in order to conduct a thorough, balanced and public investigation into Florida's flawed death penalty. There is too much possibility for errors in the system. We must abolish this system of institutionalized murder.



Henry

Sharon Howard Orlando

Listen to the experts on climate change

In his My Word column, "Climate experts must see big picture," on Thursday, Ronald Kern closes by saying that "the Earth has survived the past and will continue to heal itself." That statement is almost certainly true. However, his implication seems to be that humankind will also adapt just fine, and that may be a stretch. While he doesn't directly say that we — humans of the Industrial Age — have little or no responsibility for climate change, that idea does seem to underlie his commentary. In forming my own opinion of climate change, I prefer to rely on the experts Kern disparages. Who

are we — nonclimatologists — to say that the rise in greenhouse gases over the past 200 years has little or nothing to do with the process of industrialization? That's too much of a coincidence for me. It seems to me that climate-change deniers fall into three groups:
A. It's all part of the great cycle. No real change is happening.
B. Change is happening, but we didn't cause it.
C. Change is happening. Possibly we caused it, but we can do nothing about it.
I guess Kern is a B, because he does at least acknowledge climate change is fact. However, I'm with June 9 My Word columnist Charles E. Marshall on this topic: Let's listen to the experts and not the demagogues.
Steve Saker Longwood

New tests set up students for failure

Sentinel columnist Beth Kasab was certainly right about the over-the-top rhetoric of Josh Katz, with his comments about the toxic culture of our public schools ("The other side of 'toxic' culture in public education," Thursday). However, Katz also has a point about high-stakes testing. A standardized test that can be used to give one snapshot of students' abilities and one picture of a class or a school can be helpful for all involved. It is the amount of time spent on test preparation and the high-stakes use of these test scores as the only or main measure to evaluate students, teachers, administrators and schools that is

ridiculous and unfair. This coming school year, there will be even more end-of-year tests, and the scores will continue to be used to judge the worth of students, teachers and schools. Even worse, a new test that is based on the new Florida Standards must be administered for the first time next spring. Instead of allowing time to evaluate the validity of the test and allowing teachers and students time to become familiar with the standards, the state of Florida is requiring schools to give the new test and rate all those involved based on the results. It is already expected that students will perform poorly. The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test had many problems, even after years of use, so what can we expect of this new test? Setting people up for failure is not a way to encourage them.
Terry Gillam Winter Park

Foes of Obamacare should just move on

It's amazing how long some, who are able to go to a doctor, can whine about the federal law that enables other Americans to also have access to care. Ironically, many who complain the loudest are at the same time receiving government-supported health care (i.e., Medicare). These seniors like to think their Medicare is a different animal because, as they say, they paid for it. On average, a Medicare recipient gets \$3 in benefits for every \$1 that he or she paid in. I like to ask those who are unhappy with Obamacare to identify the American families who do not deserve medical care (except for what is provided in

emergency rooms). Let's be clear on whom we're writing off. This is an important question because some of these people will die because they can't afford to get screened for heart disease or breast, colon or prostate cancer. Also, those who are insured will pay a great deal more for the hospital bills than they would in helping the uninsured get coverage. It would sure be nice if we could make improvements in the law and move on.
Lane Roosa Poinciana

Long live 'Redskins'

I have to take issue with George Diaz's column about the Washington Redskins needing to change their team name ("No more room for 'Redskins' in Washington," Thursday). Unfortunately, we have become a nation of whiners. People who desperately want to be victims. It's almost a necessity to some who feel they can't be whole unless they have something to complain about. The name Redskins was chosen as a symbol of a fierce competitor, a warrior, a proud person, who fought hard. That's what most sports teams aim for in their names: a name meant to strike fear in the heart of the opposition. Real sports fans never considered that as an offensive connotation. But let a small, but vocal group, decide it wants to be a victim and here we go again. What's next? The proud FSU warrior on his horse being banned because of his Indian garb? Or the end of the tomahawk chop? It's time to move on from being a victim. Go, Redskins.
Paul Harris Oviedo