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Schorn Covers World Conflicts at Vermillion Rotary Luncheon

By Sarah Wetzel for the Plain Talk Feb 9, 2024

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University of South Dakota political science professor Tim Schorn spoke at the Vermillion Rotary meeting on Jan. 17, sharing information and insight into some world conflicts currently taking place.

Schorn's "short list" of conflicts included Russia/Ukraine, Israel/Hamas, Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenia/Azerbaijan) and Houthis v the World.

Schorn focused mainly on the Israel/Hamas conflict.

"Israel/Hamas will likely continue and expand into a larger Israel-Palestine conflict moving from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank," Schorn predicted.

According to Schorn, a lot of light can be shed on the Israel/Hamas conflict by considering the history of the region.

"We see a lot of turmoil over the last century and that turmoil is rooted a lot in changing demographics, control of territory and I would argue religion is a very distant third," he said. "It's really about demographics and territory and that has continued through to today. Who is going to control the territory and what do the demographics look like."

Schorn shared how 150 years ago there were over half a million Arabs living in the Israel/Palestine region and about 25,000 Jews. The 1870's brought the establishment of new Jewish settlements.

"That started a process of more and more Jewish people arriving in their biblical homeland," he said. "Initially no big deal, wasn't a threat to the existent demographic balance. Over time that started to change."

Now, Schorn said, an area that 150 years ago held 600,000 people is now somewhere around the 14

million mark and the population is only going to increase.

"In the West Bank with a corrupt, ineffective, inefficient, unpopular Palestine Authority, we also have Israeli settlers and those Israeli settlers are now seeing [this conflict] as an opportunity to make their move against the Palestinians who live there and to expand the settlements and to push for annexation which will cause further conflict," he said. "I would not plan my vacation in that area anytime soon."

Turning attention to the Gaza strip, the area which is approximately one-third the size of Clay County houses 2.3 million people. In contrast, Clay County contains an estimated 15,280.

"If we were to put the same population density in Clay County, we would have to have over 7 million people living in Clay County," Schorn said. "Population density in Gaza matters because it is an area for the most part without infrastructure, without superstructure, with an incredibly high unemployment rate and a poverty rate that is well over 50%."

Extremism often rises from political oppression, high rates of poverty and exclusion and lack of opportunity, he said. This is the case in Gaza.

According to Schorn, Hamas was formed from an extreme wing of the Old Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s by Sheikh Yassin. Empowered by the Israelis to control the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), they soon realized that he was not their man and removed him.

"But by that time Hamas had already been created," he said. "The divide between Hamas and the PLO had already been created and the extremism was fed in the

Gaza strip furthering the divide and we have the Gaza strip today which is a hotbed of extremism.”

Schorn himself has visited the areas that were attacked by Hamas on Oct. 7, has friends on both sides and finds the situation very disheartening.

At the time of his visit, he missed an opportunity to meet one of the founders of Hamas, an opportunity he would probably not take now.

“It was an opportunity I had hoped to see kind of, all right, what is it that you want, what is it that you are hoping for, what is it that is feeding your extremism?” Schorn said. “I knew the answers, but I wanted to hear it from them. I didn’t get to.”

He said the Gaza population has increasingly been cut off from the rest of the world with its population growing, opportunities shrinking and extremism increasing as well.

“What happened on Oct. 7 was only slightly surprising to me because I expected things to blow up at some point,” Schorn said. “The Israeli response, not a surprise at all.”

When Schorn visited Israel he was able to see public bomb shelters. Houses were required to have them as well as safe rooms.

“One of the things we learned on Oct. 7 is that safe rooms might be good for protecting you from falling debris,” he said. “Some of them might be capable of protecting you from chemical weapons. They will not protect you from people attacking.”

Schorn said the Israeli expectation is to eliminate Hamas.

“They are not going to,” he said. “Hamas will live to fight another day and in 20 years its membership will be back to what it is now and we can expect another generational catastrophe in 20 years or less because we’re not addressing the underlying issues...The longer this continues, the greater likelihood that Hamas gains further support in places like the West Bank and elsewhere.”

According to Schorn, when you look at what both sides have to face, it’s not surprising to see the more radical elements of both sides gaining power, gaining authority, gaining the upper hand.

“Nothing gives me any bit of optimism or hope for the future,” he said. “Sadly, my optimism and hope dissipated about 20 years ago.”

Schorn says he hopes for a cease-fire which would help address the humanitarian concerns in Gaza which hasn’t been getting the necessary food.

“One of the plans of the Israeli government is to change the Gazan agricultural land into buffer zones which will then make Gaza even less self-sufficient,” he said. “That means that any humanitarian aid will have to pick up the slack to provide food for what’s being lost out.”

According to Schorn, out of the 23-24,000 Gazans who have been killed, probably 80-90% of those have been civilians and so he would support negotiations to bring about the end of that and the return of the Israeli hostages.

“The problem is there’s no one to negotiate with now,” he said. “We know some of the hostages have been released. We don’t know how many more of them are still present or alive. We know some of them were killed in the bombing. We know some of them were killed by Hamas. We know some of them were killed by the Israelis. With each passing day there are probably fewer hostages to be returned.”

Schorn said civilian support of Hamas in Gaza is complicated.

“Yes, because one of the things that Hamas did provide was healthcare, public security, education,” Schorn said. “What they didn’t necessarily like was the extremism, the religious orthodoxy of Hamas. Also given the choice between Hamas and the Palestine Authority, no one was particularly happy with their choices because the Palestine authority is not particularly useful.”

As it is, the people of Gaza are stuck quite literally.

“Gazans are not allowed to leave Gaza,” he said. “Israelis won’t let them out and the Egyptians won’t let them out and then the Israelis have pressured the Egyptians not to let them out. Gazans can’t go anywhere and they haven’t been able to go anywhere for a decade.”

Another conflict that has flown under the radar, according to Schorn, is the complete ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

“When we look at Armenia and Azerbaijan we see two Soviet republics,” Schorn said. “Armenia is primarily Christian, about three million people. Azerbaijan is primarily Muslim with 10 million people.”

In the latest military move by Azerbaijan, he said, most of the Armenians living in an enclave within

Azerbaijan were forced to leave. The Armenian enclave had been shrinking over the last 10 years from 150,000 to fewer than 20,000.

Schorn says it's unlikely Armenians will respond in kind to the Azerbaijan enclave within Armenia which has about 481,000 people.

"They don't have the power," he said. "Chances are Azerbaijan is going to create a route to that and further cleanse part of the Armenian population. Will we notice? Probably not. And so this is one of the conflicts that happened that we weren't paying attention to and will probably continue over the next few months to a year."

According to Schorn, the Armenians that are fighting now are the same group involved in the massacre that took place in Turkey at the end of WWI.

"One of the first genocides of the 20th century was the Ottoman Turks and the new Turks deciding they need to remove the Armenians because they're Christian and they might side with the Russians against them," he said. "Turkey tends to just not care about them anymore but yes, they are the same people."

Another conflict Schorn covered is Houthis, or Shia residents of Yemen, versus the World.

"[Houthis are] unhappy because they helped to overthrow a rather oppressive government and rather than gaining support they gained the enmity of the gulf states and us," Schorn said. "Then they looked for somebody to help them so they've been getting weapons now from Iran and their latest attacks have been on shipping and against Israel as part of a solidarity program with the Palestinians."

He said the Yemen revolution in 2011 encouraged all sorts of outsiders to get involved including the gulf states who are primarily Sunni.

"So you can guess who they were targeting," Schorn said. "The U.S. supported the Gulf States so you can guess who we were targeting. Iran we blamed for being involved but wasn't, but once we kept blaming them they decided, 'well, if we're going to get blamed for it we might just as well get involved' and so they did and perhaps North Korea who never misses an

opportunity to make some hard currency off of weapons. Problem is their ships were stopped so the hard currency will not be arriving."

He said Houthis have control over most of Yemen but during the course of the revolution and international response, a significant part of Yemen has been destroyed.

"So what happens next is probably increased starvation and increased instability," Schorn said. "If the gulf states had just stayed out, Yemen would probably be fairly calm by now. Houthis at this point view themselves as having nothing to lose and so are probably not going to stop anytime soon for whatever reason they have decided to carry out the attacks on the shipping and on Israel."

He also spoke about the Russia/Ukraine conflict, noting it is now ,essentially, at an impasse and the president of Ukraine apparently mentioned last week that he would be willing to engage in negotiations.

"If Russia continues to just bomb anything that is standing in Ukraine, it's not going to regain them any territory but it will continue to destroy the infrastructure and superstructure of Ukraine which is probably why Zelinsky is willing to negotiate at this point," Schorn said. "That and the fact that it's kind of falling off the agenda of many of the countries who were supporting Ukraine. We're kind of at a point where it's just going to be where it is now for the foreseeable future."

In closing, Schorn shared an anonymous quote.

"No matter how bad things are, they can always get worse, and they will," he said, quoting simply "Cynical Political Science Professor."

For anyone wanting to hear more detail on these conflicts or bring questions, Schorn said he will be discussing them with the Osher Lifelong Institute in April.

"Any more questions come to Olli," Schorn said. "At the library 3-5 p.m., I think it's the last two Mondays of April and there will be even more depression. Now you know what my students go through."