

# Transcript of Robin Wright Internet Talk Show

October 29, 2008

Center for Instructional Innovation  
Western Washington University

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**Kathleen Young:** Good Morning. I am Kathleen Young from the Anthropology Department at Western Washington University and it's my honor to be here with Robin Wright, who is the author of her most recent book, Dreams and Shadows: the Future of the Middle East. She spoke last night and generated many questions and we have questions from students coming in and questions that we have from last night that we didn't have a chance to put to her. I'd like to open with a few remarks: thank you for coming.

**Robin Wright:** Thank you for having me.

**Kathleen Young:** I found your book to be exceptional. It reminded me of some of the works of Samantha Power, David Rife (?), both of whom won Pulitzer prizes for their work. I'm so impressed because you managed to do what I think is nearly impossible and that is to have both a broad perspective and at the same time include human details. So it's as if you're both an anthropologist, a political scientist and a journalist all at the same time. But I think that one of the most pressing questions for me is how you do this as a woman because, in the United States, we probably have an inaccurate or limited perspective about women in the Middle East and you're traveling as a woman, and as an American woman, in an area where you embody the very idea that some people will find controversial, a western woman traveling and wanted to know from both the ground up and from the top down and yet translate that for an American audience.

So, I'm interested in how you managed somehow to explain to the general public, most of whom are like me – who know very little, we know we have an inadequate knowledge, and yet at the same time you are able to inform us about the current politic. How do you manage to do that? You must speak several languages. What brought you to this?

**Robin Wright:** I wish I spoke more languages than I do. I've gotten by largely on English and French. When I lived in the Middle East I got to understand a good bit of Arabic, but I never took a lesson, I don't know how to conjugate verbs. I mean it's, if I had one piece of advice for students, I would say learn two languages: one Latin-based (French, Spanish, Italian), but also one that's unusual and will expose you to a different culture, a different way to construct a sentence and a different way to construct a thought - whether it's Chinese or Japanese or Urdu or Arabic - something that will expose a young person to another culture and prepare them for globalization. It's the one thing I'd change if I had to do my life over.

I think as a woman, you know, I've seen a tremendous transition. When I went to Africa as a foreign correspondent, there were 106 in the foreign press core and there were two females. Today you'd find very large numbers among foreign correspondents are women, but it's taken a long time. You know, I think sometimes, and I tell students this, that the only limits in our lives and either the ones we put on ourselves or we accept or allow others to put on us and I just keep pestering – and I'm quite persistent when it comes to something that I think I need to do or want to do – it's getting access to a senior official, it may take a long time, but perseverance always pays off, whether you're male or female.

**Kathleen Young:** Last night you said that you're not one to see the glass as half full or half empty, but is there even water in the glass? Yet you manage to take an optimistic tone and I'm wondering how you deal with such crushing material personally. Because it must be so difficult to continue on when you have confronted death and hatred and the vile nature of humans and what they're capable of. How do you manage to avoid compassion fatigue?

**Robin Wright:** Oh, that's a very good question, actually, and I think I've probably suffered from it a lot. As an historian though, I look not just at where we stand today or at any point in time. I get the, I fortunate enough to be trained to take the long view, to see the bigger picture, to understand that today is a step on a road to a broader transition. And so, I'm not, even though I'm pessimistic by nature, I tend to think that we have crossed a threshold in the Middle East, that there is, seven years after 9/11, that there is an anti-jihadist movement where people are frustrated, disillusioned, and angered by the use of extremist tactics and violence and have begun looking for alternatives. They're not getting it from their governments and they're often having to take initiatives on their own with no support financially or institutionally, and that's what really inspires me. It's only a beginning.

Transitions are really historic phenomena that take decades, sometimes generations. And of course we want, as we saw dramatically with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the very sudden collapse of the Soviet Union, for things to happen overnight. (5:50) But as we've learned, in the case of the Soviet Union, a generation later we still have a former communist in power with Vladimir Putin as Primer Minister and former President. And he illustrates in many ways how long it takes to get from a system that's no longer acceptable to something that is either truly democratic or truly represents political change.

**Kathleen Young:** That was one of the things that I hadn't thought of before your book, that young people with access to cell phones that take pictures and video are able to record their lives and express that, get that out, and bring attention to situations in their own country and that just the witnessing by the rest of the world, although perhaps only witnessing, but still it brings kind of an awareness and education that we wouldn't have otherwise.

**Robin Wright:** Well, I think there's an intersection today of demographics and technology. The demographics is the story of the Middle East. Seventy percent of young people in the region are under 30. In countries like Iran, 70% are under the age of 25 and in Iran they vote at the age of 16 so that's actually a very powerful political block. Then you have the access to – whether it's the internet, computers, satellite television bringing pictures of the outside world, foreign news programs – and so people have a sense of what's happening elsewhere. It's no longer – state control of media is much more difficult when people get, you know, a greater sense of the world. Then those two factors, I think, are coming together and generating a new dynamic that's changing society. It's changing politics in lots of different ways, not just in the ways that we would like to see.

**Kathleen Young:** That's so good because it seems that it might have the potential to undermine not just fanaticism, but a kind of identity that is just so strong that students may be able to shift identities so they're not just this one national or ethno-religious identity, but they may find that they can have multiple identities and that that may be indeed a cause for change.

**Robin Wright:** Well, let me add two things. First of all, the real danger is that while the Middle East has the largest young population in the world, proportionately, it also has the highest youth unemployment. One out of three young people in the Middle East is unemployed and so while many want change, want political openings, want a greater stake in society, in their political systems, the fact is when governments can't provide education, housing, a sense of a job, a sense of hope for the future, that they are increasingly liable to be recruited by extremist groups.

So there's, you know, there's lots of different dynamics competing for their attention. But I do think that we make a mistake when we talk about trying to produce change that will be secular, will be - it will emulate us. That in many part of the Middle East we are going to find people becoming more Islamic in the years ahead. Now that doesn't mean more Islamist or more extremist, but that people will turn to their faith as a means of defining what values they want in a different system, be it economic or political. And that's not necessarily a bad thing.

**Kathleen Young:** Oh, no.

**Robin Wright:** I often think that, you know, Islam may be the solution to Islamism. In other words the kind of private practice of a faith is a counterweight to the use of extremism and violence to produce change. So we need to be a little bit more sophisticated in understanding the role of Islam at this pivotal time in the Middle East and in South Asia.

**Kathleen Young:** And I think the US would be very supportive of people praying, of people having that devotion and ritual five times a day that brings about a kind of loving kindness for the rest of the world and acceptance as well as a challenge to change the self. I think that's really an important point for us to stress. Thank you.

**Robin Wright:** Well, you're more optimistic than I am because I think that most Americans, even seven years after 9/11, still are so afraid of Islam and still, frankly, so ignorant of Islam that there is kind of a blind, stereotypical belief that anything Islamic is threatening, dangerous, is against American long-term interests. And [they] don't understand that Islam is part of a single religious tradition that began with Judaism, continued through Christianity; that Muslims revere Abraham and Moses and Jesus as part of a single religious tradition; that the Qur'an mentions the birth of Jesus, and the Virgin Mary; that Allah is not a different God, it's simply the Arabic word for God. And so Christians who live in Egypt, and ten percent of Egypt's population is Christian, worship Allah because it's the Arabic word for God, not a different God.

**Kathleen Young:** That's why I appreciate your book, because it educates on that level as well as bringing in both the politic and the personal stories. I think it's a real gift to be able to interweave all of those processes together. I could chat with you all day, but I have some questions sent in by students and people who were at the talk last night:

How could an American president help anti-Jihadists gain traction and eventual victory over extremists? Well, I think you've spoken about that a little bit already.

**Robin Wright:** Well, I think there are a couple of things that a new administration could do. First of all, I think the United States gives a significant amount in foreign aid. We give less than any other rich country, but it's still an important part of our national budget. It's a percentage of a percent, you know, it's a tiny amount, but it can make a difference in a lot of these societies. Unfortunately, in many Muslim countries, a lot of our aid goes not to build new schools or provide health facilities, to vaccinate children. It goes for development of security forces. And it also goes to countries that are on our State Department list of human rights violators and that we would be very smart if we set up a standard for American aid.

So that we said, 'Alright,' (let's take Egypt) 'Egypt, you want more foreign aid? You want to continue the huge amount of foreign aid that we provide? Then you must meet certain standards, whether it's free press or allowing non-government institutions to be established.' The Egyptians, who receive one of the three or four largest amounts of US aid and have since the late 1970s, refuse to allow American money to go to any non-government organization that isn't approved by the government. And that, then, forces us to give to groups that back a President whose been in power since 1981, has never appointed a Vice President, whose grooming his son to become his political heir, and whose one of the great autocrats of the region. He, in the last presidential election, he opened up the vote for the first time and, as soon as the election was over, promptly arrested his leading opponent, who remains in jail today. And we're giving aid to this government.

So I think there are ways that we can use tools that already exist to make a difference.

**Kathleen Young:** It must be disillusioning to see and to know that the US gives money for military aid to countries which have such egregious human rights abuses and in turn may sell that to even what we're calling our enemies. How do you speak to that?

**Robin Wright:** Well, they're my tax dollars too, so I feel a vested interest. What we will say is in giving this aid is that we're trying to train security forces, be it police or army, in order to make them understand human rights and make them meet, you know, the military standards of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That's not always how they're used. Many of the autocrats use their security forces really to help sustain power and to make sure the people know that they're the ones with the might that, if anybody challenges them, will be used. And the Egyptians again, as an example, have repeatedly used their police and their security forces to put down public protests asking for more open political systems, protesting human rights abuse. And it's, and it's sad.

**Kathleen Young:** It is. I know. And you witnessed that.

How is it feasible for people of the Middle East to achieve political unity when there is no separation between politics and culture and religion?

**Robin Wright:** Well, I think we... I'm not sure there's anything attainable in terms of unity. These are, in the Arab world, there are 22 different countries and then you throw in Iran, which is not Arab. We often forget that they're Persians, very different and they have their own tensions. And there's Israel as well. There are different kinds of players in the Middle East and the fact is every country in the region has a whole lot of minorities. There are Jewish Kurds, as well as Christian Kurds. There are lots of different Christians among many of these countries. The Palestinians have, whether it's Quakers or Anglicans or Greek Orthodox or Catholics, about a quarter of the Palestinians are Christian.

So when we talk about unity of faith and state, we have to remember that there are – there's not just one state, there's not just - I mean there are many states out there and each state has a population with many religions.

Look, Islam is the only major monotheistic religion that offers a set of rules by which to govern a society as well as a set of spiritual beliefs. So at a time when the Autocrats have outlawed or exiled or imprisoned or, in some cases, executed opposition forces – the traditional leftists or nationalists or liberals or democrats – that Islam often becomes the chief idiom of political opposition and that's not different from any other part of the world.

As I tried to mention last night the, whether it's the Dalai Lama leading the protest against Chinese repression in Tibet or the Archbishop of Cape Town leading the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa when Nelson Mandela was imprisoned or our own American experience in the role, you know, many of the early founders were religious refugees looking for freedom of religion, that it is often religion that leads people to engage in change, that offers them that set of values. Benjamin Franklin said, "Rebellion

to tyrants is obedience to God.” And you don’t have to be a profound religious person to understand that in times of crisis, when there isn’t something else, a church, a synagogue, a mosque or a temple provides the infrastructure. It provides the values to look for something different.

**Kathleen Young:** And I would imagine, too, if one doesn’t have access to the resources necessary for survival with a high unemployment rate and the fear that religion would give a solace, a comfort and a means of devotion that would be sustaining; especially if everywhere it just seems like there’s ugliness and corruption.

**Robin Wright:** Oh, absolutely. And that is a real problem. Corruption, again, in many of the regimes that are our friends, our political friends, is stunning. Again, in Egypt, which I keep going back to because it’s the largest Arab population in the world – it accounts for, I think, about a third of all Arabs and it’s also been the intellectual heart of the Arab world - this is a place where something called Bakshish (the bribe) is a part of everyday life. It’s true also in Iran. Oh, it’s true across the board, but where it’s really rampant are the places like Iran. You know, you pay, everything has its own little additional, it’s almost like a tax, that you pay addition at every level. Not just once for something, but as it works its way through the system.

**Kathleen Young:** What is your opinion on how to challenge the Taliban in Pakistan in regions like Waziristan and others that are extremely mountainous and barely transversable by foot, let alone vehicles?

I think there’s an underlying premise here that we’re looking at this as is only our military power will be effective in areas where that’s simply impossible because it’s so diverse and so difficult to get to all of these outlying areas with especially all of these different cultures and groups. How do you- what do you see about this situation?

**Robin Wright:** Well, Waziristan is the narrow strip along the Pakistan border with Afghanistan where the Taliban and al-Qaida have many of its forces. And you’re right; the topography makes it incredibly difficult to achieve a military victory in the traditional sense. You can go after individuals, you can try to weaken them, you can try to go after their arms supply so they don’t have the weaponry to wage war. But to eliminate them completely is going to be very, very difficult.

I think that there’s a lot of talk now about different ideas. One is, Joe Biden I think has talked about this as a proposal – and I’m not taking sides – I’m just saying he’s one who has given some attention to the issue of using foreign aid to try to build up schools, build clinics in some of these lawless areas that have not received aid from the Pakistani government and to create a different kind of culture there so that they don’t excluded and they don’t feel they’ve turned to militants.

The other idea that’s been talked about, literally in the past week, is should there be discussions with the Taliban. Now the Taliban is like many opposition groups. It’s like the old PLO used to be. There are different wings. It’s true in Hamas among the

Palestinians as well. There are those who are willing to engage in negotiations and there are others, on the other extreme, who believe in only using violence, that you cannot negotiate or find compromise. And part of the idea is to find those willing to negotiate and see if you can find some arrangement that will end the kind of challenges that we face. But even if some do, among the Taliban, engage in negotiations, there are those who may not. This is a problem for us long term. The Soviets were in Afghanistan, a conflict now has spread into Pakistan for ten years. And we've been there for seven with only a third the same number of troops and the chances we'll be out within ten years are almost nil.

**Kathleen Young:** Out within ten years following the script we're already following, is that what you're saying?

**Robin Wright:** Right

**Kathleen Young:** We'd need some radical change in the way we conduct ourselves in Afghanistan.

**Robin Wright:** I'm always hesitant to use the word radical.

**Kathleen Young:** Oh, yes. I'm sorry. \*laughter\* The image it conjures up is so emotionally laden.

**Robin Wright:** But I suspect that a new administration – whoever wins – will probably begin rethinking a strategy or at least some of our tactics because we haven't been as successful. And in the early days of the conflict, we could go into Waziristan; we could go in with our troops. Today that's not possible because Pakistanis don't want foreign troops. And we can understand that, I mean what if Canadians were concerned about some anti-Canadian movement in Vermont and crossed the border, we'd be up in arms. And we all have to be a little sensitive to the idea of foreign forces going into another country unless they're invited.

**Kathleen Young:** 'What would a healthy relationship between Afghanistan and the United States look like,' is a question here.

**Robin Wright:** What would a healthy relationship?

**Kathleen Young:** Between Afghanistan and the United States.

**Robin Wright:** Well, we have very friendly relations with President Karzai. The problem is President Karzai of Afghanistan is more the Mayor of Kabul than the President of the country. This is a nation that has never had strong central government. It's always been tribal fiefdoms. War lords, in their communities, have prevailed and tragically, in the aftermath of our, you know, helping push the Taliban out of power, the war lords reemerged as the power in many of their regions. And they're not particularly interested in seeing a strong central Afghan state as well. I think the kind of best case scenario,

being realistic about the challenges we face, would we try to eradicate the poppy crop with now accounts for 75% of the world's heroine. It would be bringing, you know, security throughout Afghanistan, limiting the Taliban's influence, curtailing its military leverage.

It's not likely that in my lifetime we will see a strong central state. So the issue isn't really the kind of relations that we have with Kabul. It's really the future of Afghanistan and preventing it from imploding into a fail state again.

**Kathleen Young:** Yes, allowing it to have its heterogeneity and not assuming that it's all going to be the same throughout Afghanistan. I think that's really an important point.

What about Africa? What is the US role in the poorest continent, the site of the world's most violence?

**Robin Wright:** Good question. I spent seven years of my life there during some of the really interesting moments: the anti-apartheid movement, I did half-a-dozen wars in Africa. You know, the tragedy, I think, of the United States when it comes to foreign policy is we do one issue at a time. We don't have a long attention span and we kind of focus on one thing. First it was Afghanistan; now it's Iraq. It's likely to become Iran under a new administration.

My concern is there are a lot of parts of the world that have just basically been forgotten, and Africa is the top of the list. And it happens time and time and time again, every new administration – Democrat or Republican – comes in and says, 'we're going to pay more attention to Africa and we're concerned about whether it's the poor level of education, the rise of HIV/AIDS, whatever.' And then not much happens. I mean it's striking to me that Condoleezza Rice has not made any tour of Africa the way Colin Powell did very early on when he was Secretary of State. And she's gone to the Sudan; she's gone to North Africa, but she hasn't paid much attention to the rest of Africa. And this is an enormous amount of people who are the poorest in the world suffering in ways where little tiny bits of aid to help build schools.

I mean, the key to development, the key to security, and the key to the future in all developing societies anywhere in the world is education. It gives people the tools to bring development themselves and not to have to rely always, perpetually, on foreign aid. So we would make a very wise investment now in helping educate a generation so that they can increasingly assume responsibility for development in their own countries.

**Kathleen Young:** Yes, and it's not easy. I think sometimes we here in the west assume that education is available at some level and actually it's very dangerous and risky to be an educated woman in many of the countries that you've talked about.

**Robin Wright:** Well, in Africa many more matriarchal societies and you find the women who run the markets, I'm always surprised – not surprised, but always struck – by how many women are really dynamic political players. When you think of, in Kenya, a

wonderful environmentalist named Wangari Maathai who won the Nobel Peace Prize. And her project was simply, you know, putting trees in place, bringing back an ecological environment that was on the verge of being destroyed and in the process giving a whole generation of women jobs. And they got into things, not just trees but, you know, butterflies and flowers and all kinds of really productive activities that change societies as well as the environment in the process.

**Kathleen Young:** The one individual can make this kind of difference.

**Robin Wright:** Sure, you know, with very little resources and we don't invest enough in these kinds of individuals. That's one of the reasons I went to the Middle East: to take a look for who are the next Nelson Mandela's, who are the next Lek Valenca's??., who are the next Wangori Maathai's, who are changing societies and that we ought to be paying more attention to.

**Kathleen Young:** What is your opinion of the US arming-back to the Middle East-the Lebanese military?

**Robin Wright:** Well, we've done this before. When I lived in Lebanon for five years we tried it in the early 1980s. And we didn't do very well. In the end the army collapsed into different sectarian factions. Things are different today. I think that you find, in Lebanon, the majority of people who do want peace, who understand they have to live together; that, despite the sporadic violence, you have not seen the county implode into a civil war as it did between 1975 and 1990—15 years that this tiny little county was killing each other.

And so I'm, know you, if we want to invest in a force that will allow the state to be stronger in a country where militias have prevailed now for more than 30 years, you know, I understand why we give attention to that issue. Is it the right proportion of aid? That you can debate in a lot of different ways. We've given, I think, over a billion dollars this year—and this is a country that is 1,000 square miles smaller than Connecticut. So, whereas you think of, you know, big countries in Africa where we should be spending some of that money to aid, but you also want a strong Lebanese state that isn't dominated by Syria. So, again, you get into bigger strategic and region issues. It's never as simple as saying, 'Oh, let's just take this military money and give it to that education program.' It's also seeing the bigger picture that complicates it.

**Kathleen Young:** What avenues, if any, are there for Iranian citizens to participate in politics? Do you see movement toward a democratic, constitutional form of government in the foreseeable future in Iran?

**Robin Wright:** Well, it depends on what the questioner means about foreseeable future \*laughter\*. Are we talking in the next year or are we talking in the next generation?

Look, I think Iran has the potential to be a leading light down the road. This is a country that has struggled for more than a century to evolve into a democratic system. They

threw out the monarchy in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, formed the first constitutional parliament. Then an illiterate—semi-literate—army colonel seized power and crowned himself Shaw. So there was a monarchy brought back to power. In 1953 Iranians voted out the Shaw's government and put in a nationalist causing the Shaw, the first Shaw's son, to flee to Rome. We were very unhappy about that in the United States—the administration at the time—as well as were the British because the new government nationalized oil. So the CIA and British Intelligence organized a movement and a nation-wide protest that forced the new government to leave power and allowed the Shaw to come back. This is not something I talk about. This is recorded in lots of books and literatures.

**Kathleen Young:** We both lived through it.

**Robin Wright:** And so, Iranians tried democratic evolution twice and failed, once because of the intervention of foreign powers. And so, in 1979, they went one step further and engaged in revolution. What Iranians really wanted was democracy. The clerics, the theocrats, manipulated the system for the first couple of years and forced out all the other secular players, crafted an Islamic constitution and basically hijacked the revolution. At the end of the day, the majority of Iranians today really do want an open political system, free and fair elections, and to allow people who are of all political parties to be allowed to run for office. The system is deeply manipulated by the theocrats. They disqualify thousands of candidates for parliament, people who are running for the presidency, and this is one of the great tragedies. We went through a period of reform in Iran from 1997 to 2005 that failed. We now have a real hard-liner in power.

But the pendulum does swing in Iran. And—again because of the extraordinary number of young people, the activism of women, the technology—I think that at some point down the road we are going to see the pendulum begin to swing back. But the problem with transitions, as I said, is a pendulum that keeps swinging back. Now the road is never straight, it always experiments with both sides. And so, we're in for some tough times. I think that President Ahmadinejad is in deep political trouble because of the economy. And, when he faces reelection next June, depending on what happens between now and then, he, I think, could face a pretty tough contest.

**Kathleen Young:** Could be significant change then.

**Robin Wright:** Well, if he loses there could be. It depends on who is allowed to run by the council of guardians. There are lots of factors, but I think that the majority of young people particularly aren't happy. The regime has made it very difficult for a lot of them to protest as they did in the late 1990s, in part by saying students won't be given permission or won't get acceptance into colleges or they'll go to jail. There are lots of young people who are in prison in Iran because of their efforts to challenge the regime... peacefully. 35:26.

**Kathleen Young:** Why is it so difficult in the US, and I suppose around the world, to have an objective discussion in the US about Palestinian Statehood? And I'm going to add to that question from my own self here if I may. You stress that you don't want to take sides as an objective journalist and yet you, by whatever you say, will be seen by someone as taking sides.

**Robin Wright:** Not on this question. I think we've reached a point in the Arab-Israeli conflict where we know that the two-state solution is the likely outcome. It's the preferred outcome of the majority of people on both sides of the divide—the Palestinians and the Israelis. Ariel Sharon, who proposed it, was the one who recognized the one state solution wasn't really viable for Israel because of the demographics and recognized that a two state solution was preferable. I don't think either side thinks it's an ideal solution. You'll have a West Bank and Gaza that are physically separated, not terribly viable as a state even if they have an interconnecting highway. I mean there are huge problems with security and everything else. But the majority of Palestinians still want, you know, a two-state solution and say that they will coexist peacefully.

Now, there are still extremist groups. Either Hamas—which has actually run for office and has come from the underground—but then there's Islamic Jihad which is still underground and still only engaging in extremism and terrorist tactics. There are huge problems. But when it comes to, you know, a Palestinian state, the Clinton administration was the first to kind of talk about a two-state solution as a formal, you know, giving it a sense of formal US recognition. And President Bush has kind of put it out there and said that this will be the basis. So we have both Democrats and Republicans backing the ideas of the both the Israelis and Palestinians.

So I don't think it's taking sides to say that's the idea that has the greatest currency. Is it going to be a problem to get there? Huge.

**Kathleen Young:** I guess what I'm meaning is that some would argue that the Palestinians have been so degraded and so decimated as a culture and a people that—and so brutalized in this situation, not even having access to water and to jobs and generations in refugee camps—that the infrastructure as well as—I mean people will want this. But how do we separate what has happened to them from what is good for the United States in a two-state solution in this area.

**Robin Wright:** It's not just what's good the United States. It's what both sides have been talking about now in direct talks for more than a year. So it's not just what's in the US interest. Look, neither side has clean hands, neither the Arabs—the Palestinians—or the Israelis. Many Israelis have been killed by suicide, you know, attacks just for getting on a bus and the bus is blown up. A number of children, total innocents in a conflict, have died. Yes, the Palestinians live a very, very difficult existence—more difficult, arguably, than any other part of the Arab world. What's striking is that their own Arab brothers haven't done very much in providing the kind of aid that would help them through these various crises. The Iranians give—ironically who are not Arabs—have provided, whether it's weaponry or, you know, funds to groups like Hamas to help the government

get through the economic squeeze. But, you know, how much do the Saudis give to help the Palestinians with education and development and so forth? Something, but not, you know, not the kind of wealth or the kind of aid that a wealthy country like Saudi Arabia could.

**Kathleen Young:** And why do you think that is?

**Robin Wright:** Oh, I think that there's, you know, the Palestinians are in many ways the Arabs' most qualified, best educated, the ones who could make the transition to democracy more easily. They're, as I said, the best educated, most familiar with ideas from the outside world. I think there's a lot of jealousy among Arabs about the Palestinians who in many cases, particularly while in exile, have gone to some of these countries—Saudi Arabia and Kuwait—and run their civil service, run their hotels, built—you know—started the construction companies that offered them development that have been, whether it's the intellectual or the business, centers in so many societies. The Palestinians is one of the real tragedies in the Arab world.

**Kathleen Young:** Just for my own background, I hear that the Pan-Islamic movement is partly—draws people to it in part because of the situation of the Palestinians. I would read that that's what Osama bin Laden used to speak about, the situation of the Palestinians. And then the mass rapes of the Bosnian Muslim women and the genocide. So, it appears that there is a kind of pan-Islamic identification with, among, practitioners of Islam from all these different states and yet still there is this identity that something about the Palestinian tragedy that is used politically by so many different people to so many different ends.

**Robin Wright:** I don't think there's a pan-Islamic movement.\

**Kathleen Young:** No?

**Robin Wright:** I think we make a terrible mistake in creating stereotypes about, you know, over a billion people all being part of a single identity or a single culture or a single idea.

**Kathleen Young:** Oh, yes.

**Robin Wright:** Islam is practiced in many, many different ways, among different sectarian groups—Shiites, Sunnis, Aluites??, you know, the list goes on. That there is nothing, no central movement or idea. Yes, there is the growth of Islam as, as I said, the idiom of political opposition, but always within a state or a neighborhood or a city there is sympathy for what happened to the Bosnian women and, you know, the tragic loss of life, the rape of women, all of these issues, what's happening in Chechnya, in Russia. There are lots of tragedies in the same way we feel sympathy, you know, as well for Bosnian women. It's not just an Islamic thing. The United States became involved with NATO in forcing the Serbian government because of its outrageous treatment of Serbs versus the Bosnians and trying to rectify that situation. It's not just something that

Muslims somewhere in the world identify with. There is in the Arab world, particularly, a concern about the Palestinians. And yes, at the same time, leaders have used the Palestinians as a pretext for their own actions. I get back to Egypt where you'll find the leadership often invokes the conflict with Israel as a means of justifying all the defense spending it does to reinforce troops they end up using not against Israel, but against their own people.

So, yea, absolutely the Palestinian issue is manipulated for the gain of political leaders in the region. But as I said I think we make a big mistake in lumping all Muslims in the world together in the same way most Muslims would never lump all Christians into one category. And I think once we begin doing that we get into, you know, the kind of issues we dealt with in the crusades a millennia ago.

**Kathleen Young:** Which I have to ask you about the role of the Christian right in the Middle East because in the US we wonder what is going on that there would be a sense of prophecy that the world must end and there must a nuclear war in order to have the rapture and Israel is a huge part of that.

**Robin Wright:** To be honest I don't cover much of the Christian right in the Middle East.

**Kathleen Young:** You've never come across it?

**Robin Wright:** Oh, I've come across it, but I'm not well versed enough to speak on a subject. I actually will tell someone when I don't know something.

**Kathleen Young:** Well, there is so much you do know. That's another question that I wanted to discuss that was brought up last night, too, is you mentioned that newspapers are going under all around the world. Especially, it seems to me, our coverage of international news has been somewhat minimal in the United States. It's my own personal sadness about that. And yet if newspapers go under to the extent that they seem to be threatened, how will we get this information? How will we know about? We're already so confused and ignorant about the Middle East. How will we have access to the kind of information that journalists like you provide?

**Robin Wright:** Well, it's not the journalists. It's not that newspapers are going under it's just that they're becoming smaller. One of the news stories today was that the Christian Science Monitor, which provided some of the best foreign coverage—it's not really a religious publication at all—it's one of the five best newspapers in the United States, and it's decided to stop printing a newspaper on a daily basis. It'll do once a week and everything else will be available on the web. And that's a real shift and we may find that happening more and more. The crisis for newspapers is, even before the economic crisis we're all facing, newspapers, because of the internet, had found that their subscriptions were going down. People were not taking out ads because why pay \$99 for a three day ad to sell your car when you can put it on craigslist for free?

And so there are alternatives for advertising, for getting a message across, but also for news. And you can still get some of your news on newspapers on the web or the hard pieces of paper, but just not as much of it from those sources and I think that's a real tragedy because newspapers at least have standards. Even for all their flaws, and some of them are not as objective as others, they do have kind of an accepted code of conduct and a certain ethics apply. When you get out into the web, particularly among blogs, some blogs are fabulous, but there are a lot of blogs that perpetuate myths, that are not based on experience, and will write about issues to put forward a personal agenda rather than try to provide objective information.

And so, we as readers have to be more knowledgeable about where we go for news, about understanding what we read, not falling victim to conventional wisdom—being able to still think outside the box, and that's going to be harder. We'll have more news but it's going to be harder to figure out what to trust.

**Kathleen Young:** And, speaking of what to trust, what do you think about Jazeera as a network? I've found useful information there and yet across the States so many people think of it as just a source of hateful propaganda against the US and I wonder if they've really looked at Al-Jazeera. What do you think?

**Robin Wright:** Look, Al-Jazeera has a lot of different kinds of programming. It has news and it has its own opinion makers and some of whom are very controversial. Al-Jazeera, when it started, did get a reputation for being kind of anti-American and, because it broadcast bin Laden's tapes verbatim, it has since, under pressure in part from the west particularly the United States, has introduced its own code of conduct. And it's agreed not to publish bin Laden's messages verbatim because of the concern that there may be an underlying message buried in what he says. Take every third letter or something like that, some kind of direction or instructions that are buried within a tape.

You know, I was very struck by the fact that Al-Jazeera get 24 hour coverage to Lebanon's efforts—peaceful efforts—to get Syria to end its 29 year military occupation. When a quarter of Lebanon's population turned out on the streets of Beirut to demand Syria's withdrawal, Al-Jazeera gave 24 hour coverage. When there were pro-democracy protests in Egypt where protestors were arrested by police and so forth, Al-Jazeera was out there. Al-Jazeera is very unpopular in many autocratic Arab regimes because it tries to cover the movements of change as well. So, Al-Jazeera gives coverage to a lot of things. But I grant you there are many people in Al-Jazeera when it comes to the talk programs who are very controversial and certainly would not be seen as neutrals or fair-minded.

**Kathleen Young:** And the last question is: What is your opinion of US attempts to develop a satellite news channel to beam information to the Middle East?

**Robin Wright:** Well, we have both radio and television stations, Al Hurra and Al Sawa—very controversial. And in part because it is seen as trying to impose our views on the people on the region. That's why Al Jazeera had appeal—it was the equivalent of CNN.

Finally, in Arabic, people could learn news that was important to them in a language that they spoke and with wider coverage. And now there are dozens and dozens of cable channels and satellite televisions—Al Jazeera is no longer the only one—and they cover the political spectrum when it comes to the ideas that they portray. Some more radical than Al Jazeera, some less radical. So, we have to be careful how much we are seen as pushing ideas on others. *The Voice of America*, a radio program, has been broadcasting into the Middle East and to other parts of the world in their language for a long time. *Voice of America* has far greater credibility. It tries to cover news neutrally. That is the strongest foreign news outlet that we have. And I think there are lots of questions about the political agenda of Al Hurra and Al Sawa and are they trying to push a specific kind of message that reflects the views of a certain political sector in the United States rather than the broader values and give, you know, free coverage—and fair coverage—to all ideas and to all events both in the region and the United States.

**Kathleen Young:** That's what I think is so exceptional about your work is that you seem to be able to do that and reach people like me who are so uninformed. What lasting words would you have for Western Washington University?

**Robin Wright:** You know, I say to the students to prepare yourself for the rest of your life. Learn about, you know, the rest of the world. Our globalization has taken off everywhere, we're so focused on the war on terror that we don't get what's happening elsewhere in the world and how people are integrating and getting to know each other and interacting. We're withdrawing rather than engaging.

And the other thing is, that their lifetimes will be defined most of all by what happens in the Islamic world. And that Islamic world includes the United States. Islam, in two years, will be the second largest religion in this county and we can't make the mistake of the Europeans and marginalize Muslims in a way that they become alienated and radicalized and that we must understand our own Muslim identity—not just whether we're Jews or Christians or, whatever our ethnic identity or our gender, we need to kind of reach out and also understand that part of the world and embrace it because that's what makes America so great.

**Kathleen Young:** Very profound. Thank you!

**Robin Wright:** Thank you.