

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: Hello, and welcome back to Student Connections. Well, if you're watching in real time, it's Saturday afternoon. And I'm Karen Foley. I'm at the Open University in Milton Keynes. And we're midway through a really exciting programme of activities. Before we press on with the next discussion, which I know many of you are really looking forward to, I'd just like to go to the Social Media Desk.

[DING]

Oh!

HJ: That's our bell. We know what that means. The mailman's been by. Let's have a little look. Oh, oh, nice big envelope again. Let's have a little look. I think people have been sending stuff in.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, you've got lots of mail.

HJ: We've got lots. Oh, let's-- oh, I love this one. This is Matthew, and he tells us that this is his study buddy. But unfortunately, she's been a little naughty and chewed his books.

[LAUGHTER]

Who else have we got? We've got Star from Sheffield. Aww.

KAREN FOLEY: Right. So it's brilliant that everyone has been sending things in. And we're going to go look at those in just a little minute. If you haven't sent a selfie in, we'd really like to know who you are, what you're doing, and how you're engaging with the conference. So you can send us a selfie to #SCC15, or you can e-mail it to us and it'll go through the World Wide Web into our mailbox right in the studio, and that is connections@open.ac.uk. So we do love hearing from you.

We also know from the chat that there are a lot of new students out there, so welcome to this event. You may be very interested to watch the previous day's activities, which you can do on Catch Up. And also, we've got a special Q&A session for new students. So I'm hoping that you're sending all of your questions in to us-- either on the chat, and HJ and Rachel pick them up, or you can email us those. And that's going to be with Georgina and some associate

lecturers this afternoon.

So we're going to go back the Social Media Desk in a little while, because I would like to introduce Eddie. Eddie, thank you for coming along today. And you have been doing a really interesting Friday Thinker on Facebook yesterday. For those of you who don't know, the Social Sciences faculty have a Facebook page, and every Friday, we have a Friday Thinker who's one of the academics. And you pose a question, and then everyone talks about it. How did that all go?

EDWARD

Great, yeah. It's a really good chance for us, as academics who work here on distance

WASTNIDGE:

learning courses-- which is what they are, so we don't get the same face-to-face interaction.

So yeah, it was a really good chance for us to interact with the students.

And it was good. Lots of really interesting discussion, and it went on and on. I signed off-- well, I signed on about 7:30 in the morning. Signed off about half past 8:00 at night. And you know, it's carried on today, I've heard.

KAREN FOLEY:

I know. You've had loads of discussion, haven't you? What was the question that you put to people, then?

EDWARD

Well, it's a serious subject matter, and it's not one that lends itself very well to political satire.

WASTNIDGE:

But it was-- so forgive me for bringing the tone to a serious level. But it was about what the UK's responses to the so-called Islamic State groups that are operating in Iraq and Syria was. So lots of different input from people who are interested in international politics more broadly, people who are interested in questions of culture and identity. Lots of really interesting input from the students.

And it was my role there to sort of mediate the discussions, see how it goes. And you know, it's a bit of a controversial subject, obviously, so we have to sort of be careful and respectful and know your boundaries and stuff. But everyone was really good, which is a testament to our students, of course.

KAREN FOLEY:

And a testament to the way you handled it. Because I was watching that, and I thought it was so lovely the way that-- like you say, international relations can sound very academic and at quite a high level. But also, it's something that affects us, every man on the street, no matter what you're studying, no matter what level you're studying, the world around you matters. And I think this whole issue now, especially Islamic State, is becoming so close to home for a lot of

people.

So people were talking about different things, and that's what I like about the Friday Thinker, is that you can just drop in at any sort of level. What were some of the sorts of key things that people were saying?

EDWARD

WASTNIDGE:

Well, I mean the question initially put out there-- what should the UK'S responses be? And hopefully, you know, we can talk about that later in the wider thing. But I mean, people were talking really about-- initially, at least, about what different states in the region should be doing, how they should be acting. And then as the discussion went on, it did some good foregrounding for other people who dropped in later, actually. It was quite good the way that worked. And then people did start to really latch on to what the UK itself should be doing there.

And I posed the question as the UK first, because I thought that's a reference point for the majority of our students anyway, to think and engage with the news that's going on at the moment. So people were talking about, you know, should we be doing some kind of more humanitarian type intervention? Some were going for straight-out military options, you know, some very hawkish positions. You know, bomb everyone, troops on the ground, to doing things a little more softly and letting diplomacy come to the fore. So great, great input.

KAREN FOLEY:

Excellent. So could you start talking a bit about what we mean by the Islamic State group? We were talking earlier about how definitions and media-- we don't trust all media. And I know that was one of the topics that came up on the Friday Thinker as well, about what we can and can't trust, what sources of information are accurate. And people had some really good points about that. How would you conceptualise this?

EDWARD

WASTNIDGE:

So, well, the first thing to say is that I'll often refer to them as "the so-called Islamic State group," but we end up saying Islamic State a lot. But you know, I think it's important--

KAREN FOLEY:

You're on tight word counts. It's important.

[LAUGHTER]

EDWARD

WASTNIDGE:

Yeah, well, there's that. There is that. And there's also not wanting to conflate these two things, Islam and the state, with the wider Muslim world. And we shouldn't blur the boundaries between the vast majority of Muslims-- Muslim countries, rather, who see this as complete anathema to them. So it's important that these people who are operating in this group are not representative of the wider Muslim world. So that's why often it'll be prefaced with "the so-

called Islamic State group."

But then there's lots of different acronyms that are used, as well. You know, so we hear ISIS. We hear IS, for the state. We hear ISIL. Daesh, which is the Arabic name, as well, for them. These are all essentially words for the same group.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. How important, then, is this definition idea? How important-- I mean, obviously we don't want to offend people. We don't want to isolate. There are implications. How important is that in this particular field?

EDWARD WASTNIDGE: Well, it's important, I think, to always place it as not the sole representative of the Islamic world. I think that's what's the important thing, because there's so much you know scare-mongering in the media about Islam. And that's really-- a small fringe group, extreme fringe group like this, is not representative and is only a small element of a wider tapestry.

So yeah, I think it's important that people don't jump on it too much, because it just creates a climate of fear. And this is the thing. This is what terror groups try to do. They try and create that kind of climate of fear in order to scare people and then provoke governments into more severe responses, and it spirals out of control. And before you know it, people are saying, well, actually, these guys have got the right idea, and I'll go with them. You know? So it's a very important role that media and commentators play, in terms of shaping the debate, I'd say.

KAREN FOLEY: One of the things that came up on Facebook as well yesterday was this idea about how we conceptualise things in the UK and maybe in the Middle East, and how those definitions might be quite different. And what media sources-- I mean, with the internet and things, you can access a lot more now. Is there much of a difference, then, in terms of how this is conceptualised in the UK, or the Western world, and the East?

EDWARD WASTNIDGE: I think there is. Obviously, the UK focus will often be on the things that are close to home. So some of the ramifications of what's going on at the moment will be the refugee crisis, as we'll perhaps talk about later and people will be all too aware of. It will be about votes in the UK Parliament on whether to take action, that kind of thing. And it will also be on kind of "homegrown terrorists," it's called-- so fighters, UK citizens, who've returned to the UK after fighting for the Islamic State and then carrying out attacks here. So they're the things that will shape the debate in the UK, quite often.

But then in the Middle East, obviously it's much closer to home to them. The conflict, the

theatre of conflict, there is much closer. So there will be, similarly, refugee problems there. I mean, people seem to think that this is a huge influx flood coming to Europe. But you know, there are over two million in Turkey, a million in Lebanon-- but Lebanon is a country of only five or six million, as well. So it's a huge amount of people there. In Jordan, in Iraq, and Iran, as well, they've taken in millions of refugees.

The other thing, as well, which comes out a little bit in the media here, but perhaps not so much in-- or perhaps more so, I should I say, in the regional press in the Middle East, is the kind of sectarian divide, as well, so this kind of Sunni/Shia divide. Because Islamic State represent a very extreme form of Sunni Islam, and they've carried out attacks against Shia Muslims, as well.

And that brings in other states-- Iran, for example, and Saudi Arabia-- and speaks to a wider geopolitical kind of picture which is going on there. So yeah, some different emphases, I guess. But some similar ones, as well.

KAREN FOLEY: What do you think-- the group are discussing whether the idea of calling something Islamic State gives it some sort of authoritarian aspect or makes it sound important, I guess, issues of government, connotations, that sort of thing. What would your take on that be, in terms of how we're defining things?

EDWARD WASTNIDGE: Well, yes, I think for the Islamic State group themselves, that gives them a legitimacy. Because they are taking claim of one of the world's great religions and the notion of a state and applying it to that situation.

I mean, they're unusual. When we think of them in comparison with other terrorist groups, for example, they're different because they have some of the trappings of state power. You know, these legitimating things.

So they have vast kind of currency reserves and things that they can draw on, because they are in charge, in control of oil resources and things like that. They've minted their own coins. And they have quite a strong social media presence, as many people have seen, in terms of attracting people and also showing the destruction they carry out across the region, as well. So Yeah, for them, it's a strong legitimating tool, I think, to say that we are sort of true representatives, but they're only presenting one very narrow, very austere, strict definition of Islam.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. Yeah, no, absolutely. We've been talking earlier today about how the social sciences are so interdisciplinary and how you can't just sort of study one thing without another. And I wanted to talk about the study of international relations and, I guess, how this is a very topical issue now, but obviously there's a massive historical context, as well.

And I know a lot of new students out there may be very interested in how we can study something, what sort of constructs we can have. But before we sort of maybe talk about how we study international relations, could you tell us a bit about the context historically, in terms of how this has happened, and what sorts of issues you might look at as a social scientist?

EDWARD OK, sure. Well, I mean, I'll try and give you the briefest potted history.

WASTNIDGE:

KAREN FOLEY: The history, yes. You've got two minutes. [LAUGHS]

EDWARD So basically, the group was formed out of an al-Qaeda franchise. Most people would probably be aware of al-Qaeda, bin Laden, that association. And there's an al-Qaeda franchise in Iraq, which formed after the US-led invasion there in 2003.

WASTNIDGE:

Now this group was called al-Qaeda in Iraq. They were moderately successful in carrying out attacks against coalition troops in Iraq. Then what happened-- fast forward to 2011-- you had the Arab Spring happening across the Middle East and North Africa. Authoritarian regimes breaking down, being initially, certainly in Tunisia and Egypt, replaced by democratic regimes-- although Egypt swung back.

And what you had, in Syria, you had an uprising as well, along similar lines. You know, popular uprising. This created-- well, essentially resulted in a civil war in Syria, which meant that parts of the Syrian territory are ungovernable by the Syrian regime, the Assad regime. And that allowed the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq to move into Syria as well, and have a basis there, also.

So that's the kind of very quick history of them. And then as I kind of alluded to, they have this very strict interpretation of Islam and Sharia law that they introduced to the cities and places that they govern. Which strikes a climate of fear into many, although some are attracted to that, often from beyond the region.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. You mentioned yesterday in the Facebook discussion as well-- I think Sharon had-- was it Sharon? I can't remember her name. But someone had made a really, really good point

about how sometimes we'll do things, and what's the role of the UK, the response of that? And you were talking about the Iraqi situation as well, and maybe how this hasn't just been sort of something brewing in isolation. But the UK'S relationship with all of this, I guess this is an important area, in terms of what you're studying. So can you say something about that?

EDWARD So in terms of the study of international relations?

WASTNIDGE:

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

EDWARD Would you say, how that's relevant? Well, yeah, I mean, like I said at the start, people will have
WASTNIDGE: the UK as a kind of reference point. And that's good, because when you're studying

international relations and how these kind of things work, one starting point will be how states interact, for example. So you know, the wider geostrategic picture, if you want to use this phrase, is one of competing centres of power in the Middle East. Certain countries perhaps funding and enabling certain groups within the Syrian conflict, for example, or in Iraq, as well.

And the UK has a role because the UK has also acted as a conduit of weapons to some of these regimes, as well. We have a very close relationship with Saudi Arabia, for example, which has its own human rights issues. And yet at the same time, the UK government might admonish, say, Iran or another country for having poor human rights records.

So you know, you can see the kind of self-interest that's prevalent there, and that's a key thing about how states act in the international system, is that they're often governed by self-interest and pursuing those kind of things, be it business deals or be it arms deals or what have you. And that has a massive knock-on effect, because it can really make conflicts a lot worse. So that's one thing that you might focus on as an international relations scholar, as well.

Another thing would be that this is a kind of an example of a non-state actor or a terrorist group, which are hugely important in the study of international politics, as well. You know, it's not just about relations between states. It's about other groups that kind of operate on the blurred boundaries between states and other actors, which are hugely influential, as well.

KAREN FOLEY: No, absolutely. And I'd just like to-- I mean, I know that the chat's been talking a lot about this idea of definitions and things. And we're just going to show a quick widget while I ask you something else. But I'd like you at home to think about-- does what you call something have a massive impact on its status? Do you agree or disagree? So this whole idea we were talking

about a little bit earlier, about how we define things and then what power relations are attached to that.

So have a go at that, and we'll come back to that in just one second. Because I know, Eddie, you're in the middle of a module briefing today, and we need to get you out of here on time. And I just sort of, I guess, wanted to just sort of close up by talking about the UK response to this, which I guess was part of your question on social media, when you talk about how states interact, and of course, how we're studying something and positioned in something from this context. What are your thoughts around that?

EDWARD

WASTNIDGE:

Well, yeah, we had some interesting examples from students about how the UK could play a greater role or a lesser role, with all sorts of views on that. I think the humanitarian angle is something that is very important and came out in our discussions yesterday on Facebook. And the UK is starting to have some response to that. You know, Cameron mentioned about allowing 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years to come, and he was going to go get them straight from the refugee camps on the Syrian borders. So that's an example of how the UK could do something. Although there's problems with that, because what about the rest of the refugees who've come from Europe, who've travel all the way to Calais? You know, are they not going to be allowed in? Where do the differences lie?

And as social scientists, there's so many different things you can explore within that as well, you know, the politics of refugees, the politics of migration. And then it has a European-wide dimension as well. I mean, there's so much here. Stop me if I'm going on too long.

KAREN FOLEY:

No, no, no.

EDWARD

WASTNIDGE:

But kind of the way the EU has responded, as well, to this larger refugee crisis, which is partly related to what we've been talking about. You know, you have a split. You have the Central and Eastern European countries who are very much, you know, we don't want to have any more refugees coming in. Whereas Germany and France-- Germany is going to be allowing nearly a million in. So Europe's supposed to be having one single, unified response, and it's not panning out like that. So yeah, another really interesting thing to look at. And the UK has its own slant on that as well, you know.

So there's so many variables, and there's so many interesting empirical examples that you can take and go to town on, and think of social science concepts and theories that might relate to those as well. So that's what makes it so fascinating.

KAREN FOLEY: No, absolutely. I know we've got a lot of people doing DD103 and DD102 in the chat. And I think it's one of those things that there are so many interesting issues, so many ways of cutting things. And one of the things that I love about the social sciences is that they have these nice frameworks that we can use to sort of, I guess, compartmentalise and figure out ways of looking at these things. And that can again, I guess, help us make sense of these.

So Eddie, thank you so much for that. I mean, we don't have time to have what I would think would be a very long-winded discussion.

EDWARD No, and perhaps that's for the best.

WASTNIDGE:

KAREN FOLEY: Well, yes indeed. But thank you very much for that. And thank you at home for giving us that idea for the widget. I think most of you are in agreement there with that at the minute. So thank you for that.

And in our next discussion, we can also have that widget. So if you've got a question that you'd like to have a vote on, we can chuck that widget up and have a question that we can think about for that. So thank you for all your chat, all your contributions.

We're going to have a very short break now, where we're going to look at a little video about open politics. And then I will be back for some more chat, and we will go to the Social Media Desk. And I'm desperate to see some of these selfies that have come through, so thank you for those. And we'll be back in a few minutes. See you then.

[MUSIC PLAYING]