

More chaos than control

'PROGRESSIVE VOICES' LECTURE TACKLES THE MIDDLE EAST

By Lance Shearer
Citizen Correspondent

The title of the talk was "Controlling Chaos in the Middle East." As the speaker, Dr. Jean-Marc Oppenheim, quickly made clear, there is much more chaos than there is control in the Middle East, and simply getting a handle on what is happening there today, let alone all the players and the historical background, is a tall order.

Oppenheim gave his lecture on Wednesday, Feb. 24, as part of the "Progressive Voices Speak Out" lecture series, held at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Greater Naples. Raised Jewish in Egypt and France, a Fulbright scholar with a doctoral degree from Columbia University, he has written and lectured extensively on the Middle East, including as a fellow at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Columbia and Fordham.

Oppenheim was the first to admit that understanding the chaos in the region, much less controlling it, is a heavy lift. He led off his talk with a letter to the editor in an English newspaper, laying out how many of the parties are fighting each other in one instance, yet allied against a mutual enemy in another area of conflict, a situation that rises time and again. To further clarify — or rather muddy — the waters, he showed a chart of the various countries and groups, labeled the "complete idiot's guide to understanding the Middle East," that resembled a dream catcher, or the maze of laser beams guarding the treasure in adventure movie.

The situation today goes back to the "Arab Spring" in 2011, and before that to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 that kicked the hornet's nest and took a region of repressive but relatively stable regimes, and led to increased influence for Al Qaeda and eventually ISIS. Before that, the Middle East was fundamentally destabilized during the colonial era of

World War I and before, when European powers cut it up into sovereign states with little regard for the intricate web of tribal, sectarian and ethnic loyalties that still cause conflict today. It was such a random map drawing, for instance, that separated ethnic Kurds across international borders in Iraq, Syria and Turkey, a division that is still causing bloodshed today.

The U.S. further became a target of Islamic extremists when it participated with Arab governments, including Egypt and Syria, in "rendition," turning terrorism suspects to those countries where they were tortured and in some cases "disposed of," as part of our country's "Global War on Terror," said Oppenheim. Interestingly, with all the alliances, enemies and players, Israel barely came up at all. After over an hour of exposition, Oppenheim was asked, "How do we defeat ISIS, or is it undefeatable?" There is no simple or easy answer, he said.

"It will take a coordinated effort, by regional powers and the major powers," who now are working at tangled cross purposes, unfortunately. Syria, he said, "will never be put back together," along with perhaps Yemen and Lebanon. "The Middle East is critical, but we can't do it ourselves," said Oppenheim.

Dealing with Islamic extremism is a major focus of this year's Progressive Voices lectures. Oppenheim's talk followed another by Jim Kenney, executive director of Common Ground, an adult study center focusing on the world's great religious, philosophical and spiritual traditions, who spoke Feb. 17 on "Islam in Europe: Fears and Realities." He was followed by Dr. James Morrow, who gave a lecture entitled "Foreign Policy and the 2016 Election: ISIS, Russia, China and Europe" on Wednesday, March 2.

On Wednesday, March 9, Rev. Dr. Brent A. Smith will speak, taking as his subject of "The End of Religion is a Beginning." Smith is a graduate of the University of Chicago Divinity School and a professor



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Dr. Jean-Marc Oppenheim spoke on "Controlling Chaos in the Middle East," part of the Progressive Voices Speak Out lecture series at the Unitarian Universalist sanctuary off Pine Ridge Road.

in the religious studies program at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. This new conversation changes what is meant by the concept of "religion," he says, as well as all concepts that have been related to "religion," like "belief," "dogma/doctrine" and even "secular," "irreligious" and "not religious."

Progressive Voices Speak Out's 2016 winter program concludes on March 16 with "Ethics, Survival and Climate Risk Management," presented by Dr. Jan W.

Dash, physicist, managing editor of "Climate Portal," and an official NGO observer at the recent Paris Climate Conference.

All lectures are at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Greater Naples at 6340 Napa Way, just south of Pine Ridge Road, on Wednesday evening, with a \$15 suggested donation including complimentary wine and refreshments, with reception at 6:30 p.m. and lecture beginning at 7. For more information, call 239-455-6553.



Above: César Ibáñez, left, and César Ramírez, both 3 years old, contribute money toward the Give Where You Live Collier fundraising drive as Grace Place CEO Tim Ferguson looks on.



Above: Families benefiting from the food pantry at Grace Place pose for a photo during the Give Where You Live Collier drive. The families raised about \$1,000 toward the campaign.

Giving of themselves

GRACE PLACE BENEFICIARIES CONTRIBUTE TO GIVE WHERE YOU LIVE DRIVE

By Alexi C. Cardona
Staff

There is pride in giving back. That's what the families who benefit from Grace Place's food pantry demonstrated when they contributed about \$1,000 to the organization's Give Where You Live Collier donations.

"We've never engaged our families in fundraising drives because we always felt like they need every penny they have," said Barbara Evans, the organization's chief development officer. "We never gave thought to the fact that they would want to give. It wasn't required, but they were proud to do it."

Give Where You Live Collier, an online fundraiser organized by the Community Foundation of Collier County and

the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation, beat its goal of \$3 million during its second annual drive on Monday and Tuesday. In just 24 hours, the drive raised more than \$4.1 million for 40 organizations in Collier County. Last year, the drive raised \$1.8 million.

"We're ecstatic that we more than doubled what we raised last year," said Eileen Connolly-Keesler, president and CEO of the Community Foundation. "What's more important is that these nonprofits will be able to do and the services they'll be able to provide. That's why we do Give Where You Live, to give them that extra bump they may not have otherwise."

The Grace Place families filled a 5-gallon water jug in support of the drive. The organization's staff had each person that wanted to donate write their name on a

paper star and pin the star to a wall in one of their buildings.

"They're our 'Grace Place Superstars,'" Evans said.

Grace Place raised \$308,390 and will receive a portion of a \$400,000 matching fund. Evans said \$40,000 will go into the organization's capital fund, which finances construction projects. The balance will go to the annual fund to run and expand programs. The matching fund portion may go to the organization's endowment upon approval of the board.

For organizations that cater to children and families in Collier County, this drive provides significant help in sustaining and expanding vital programs.

Friends of Foster Children Forever, an organization that provides services to children in the foster care system, will focus on providing tutoring and academic mentoring with the \$46,150 the organization raised.

"When a child is in the foster care system and moves from home to home, they are also sometimes moving from school to school," said Jane Billings, the nonprofit's executive director. "Their education can fall apart. We want to provide academic mentoring while the child is in foster care and even after they're reunified with their family so they can develop belief in themselves and what they can achieve."

Billings said it costs about \$300,000 a year for the organization to run the academic mentoring program.

The Shelter for Abused Women and Children raised \$26,345. Cyndi Fields, the shelter's director of development, said the fundraiser will help them continue offering services like a 24-hour crisis line and a safe place for women, children and pets to turn to in times of trouble.

"We will use it to do what we do each and every day, and that's critically important," Fields said.