David Ignatius, the celebrated associate editor and columnist at the Washington Post, visited the Columbia Global Centers, Middle East in Amman last month to speak about US foreign policy and the crisis in the region.

Ignatius has spent around 35 years covering the region and is also the author of Body of Lies, a spy thriller set in Jordan. In an interview with Venture, Ignatius shared his views on the current crisis in Iraq and Syria, the United States’ role in the conflict and what the future could hold for the wider Middle East.

After Jordan joined the coalition against Islamic State militants (also known as ISIS) recently, many Jordanians have become concerned about whether the conflict could cross the border. Do you think there is reason for people here to worry?

It is true that just over the border Anbar province is effectively controlled by ISIS and if Jordan wasn’t worried about that then they should be. Whether ISIS has got roots in Jordan—which would make it an internal threat as opposed to an external threat—I don’t know.

What role, if any, do you think US policy in the Middle East has played in the emergence of ISIS militants?

I think ISIS arose because of a polarizing government in Iraq led by Nouri al-Maliki, and I wish the United States had moved more quickly to get him out and get a more inclusive Iraqi government in place. I think one thing the administration did right was to refuse to provide military support to Iraq unless it made changes in its government. But the mistakes that led to the rise of ISIS were first this adversary wants the United States to do to start bombing, and to make this America’s new war in the Middle East? I think Obama was correct to think that doing nothing was unacceptable and would be dangerous—for US allies like Jordan and also for the United States—so I wish the government had moved earlier to see this danger rising, and had done more in all sorts of ways, but particularly in pulling back from supporting al-Maliki.

Many are warning that the conflict could take years to resolve. What economic impact do you think it could have on the region?

The economic impact could be devastating if the Middle East becomes a no go zone for business and investment. Consider the case of Egypt: The Egyptian economy is just getting by on subsidies from Saudi Arabia and the UAE because it doesn’t look like a stable place to do business. If the region heads in that direction, it’s just going to be a downward cycle of increasing poverty and radicalization. It would be a very unpleasant future and I hope it doesn’t happen.

What do you think needs to be done to resolve the crisis in the region?

I think we need to spend less money and attention on military solutions and more on people’s solutions. I don’t think that poverty per se causes people to join these extremist groups. A lot of extremists—Osama Bin Laden being the most obvious example—can have enormous wealth and decide to act on their rage. But I think the kinds of ideas that I was hearing people at this little organization [Hedayah] in Abu Dhabi talk about, involving the reform of education, de-radicalizing prisoners and dealing with them in a more humane way, and getting police forces to talk to the community around the world, rather than beating people over the heads. These are the kind of ideas that in the long-run are going to make a difference. The idea that there is a military solution to this problem obviously is wrong. – JH