

The Institute for The Study Of War

“Iraq After the U.S. Withdrawal”

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KIMBERLY KAGAN: -- so much for joining us today here at the Institute for the Study of War for an in-depth discussion on the situation ongoing in Iraq. I think that many of you here have been very dedicated and focused on Iraq policy over time, and it has been a tremendously wonderful community to be a part of. And I'm glad to know that there is still a community of interest here in Washington, D.C., studying, talking about and discussing Iraq, because I think that it is of such importance to the United States, to regional strategic issues, and to the tremendous – and to the tremendous challenges that we face within the Middle East.

I have a few administrative announcements to begin with. First of all, if you could please silence your cellphones, this would be the moment to do that. Secondly, all of you should have found on your seats the latest report from ISW on the situation in Iraq, written by our Iraq scholar, Ramzy Mardini. Ramzy, could you just stand up for a moment and wave your hands – Ramzy's outside. All right. So Ramzy has been completing weekly updates on the situation in Iraq. You can, if you have not already, sign up for his weekly update by going to our website at understandingwar.org.

The second bit of administrative business is a heads-up for this community of interest. ISW is co-hosting a discussion on the state of the Iraqi police at the U.S. Institute of Peace on the morning of February 29th. More information is actually available to you on the flyers on your chairs. And we would very much welcome you to attend. ISW's Lieutenant General, retired, Jim Dubik will be one of the speakers there.

And finally, the most important business about this particular event, this event is on the record. You can feel free to use liberally. We are also providing you the ability to tweet about the event – for those of you who actually know what that is and how to do it – but you can tweet this event using the hashtag, IraqAfter – #IraqAfter. So thank you very much for joining us. We have a phenomenal panel of speakers this morning. You have seen their biographies. And I'm actually simply going to introduce them very shortly and briefly before they speak.

Our first speaker – he's cleared the platform here – is actually Dr. Mike Knights, who is a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and who is really one of our foremost experts on the Iraqi security forces – security situation in Iraq. I can't think of anybody who has traveled more and studied with such a fine-tooth comb what is happening on the ground with the security forces and with security issues. And it has been a great pleasure to get to know Mike over the past five years and really to see the rigor of his work. He's cleared the platform, because he has produced a fantastic briefing on the status of security in Iraq.

And I'm actually simply going to turn it over to him right now, and ask him to tell us, Mike, what's going on?

MICHAEL KNIGHTS: Thanks a lot. Do you hear me OK at the back there? OK, so that's a really generous introduction. Thanks very much for kind of shoehorning me into this – you know, this at the last minute. I have to leave after a certain amount of time, so they very kindly put me up first. And thanks for that.

So I'll very briefly run through some data about the metrics of security and really increasing destabilization in Iraq at the moment. If you're interested in this kind of work, there's also – there's also a piece out today in The National Interest which looks at, in detail, at the security metrics and ties them to political events in the – in the country at the moment. I gather most of my data, obviously, from my position at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and also because I've worked very closely with a number of private security companies in Iraq and undertaken periods of time embedded with Iraqi security forces and undertaken information sharing initiatives with them.

It's part of an attempt that I think is very important, which is to maintain situational awareness on what is happening in Iraq, both using Iraqi security force metrics and also metrics coming out of the foreign security companies and commercial entities in Iraq, diplomatic entities, and also open source. Only by putting all of this together can we hope to maintain a modicum of situational awareness. And of course we need that to inform policy, because if we have an outdated view of how things really are in the ground in Iraq, then we're not really addressing our policy to the reality.

So let's move on to the first slide, please. So little hard for you to pick out the details there, but basically Iraq over – on a year-to-year comparison is, you know, significantly – or suffering significantly more reported incidents than it did one year ago, which wasn't that long after the second Maliki government was formed. So the period of which the new government was formed, go one year further on, and we've probably got about a 40 percent increase in the number of reported incidents.

Now what's interesting with this is you have to take into account two other factors. First of all, that with the final reduction of U.S. forces and their removal from various headquarters, the incident reporting system in Iraq has degraded to a significant extent. And secondly, we've taken all U.S. forces – targets – off the roads in Iraq. And so there we have an immediate – you would expect to see an immediate drop in the number of incidents as there just were not so many roadside bombs against logistical convoys moving through the country, emptying the country out of equipment, of personnel; and also not so much rocket fire against the larger footprint that we used to have in Iraq, even up to the second half of 2011.

(Inaudible) – be expecting the figure to drop during this period. Whereas in fact really since mid-December, we've started to increase again quite significantly. So what it shows you is that not only is violence increasing, but Iraqi-on-Iraqi violence is increasing significantly. And as I point out in the National Interest article, you can say that Iraqi-on-Iraqi violence has almost doubled since mid-December. So things have gotten worse and perhaps worse than they even appear.

And something that I talk about in that article is that I believe part of it is tied to two things basically happen at the same time. One was that undoubtedly the Sunni insurgent factions had planned to undertake some kind of mini-surge of attacks in late 2011 to coincide with us leaving, much as you would have predicted in the CENTCOM and other U.S. commands were predicting for a number of years that when we left, they would attempt to show that, you know, that they had kicked us in the behind on the way out. That coincided with, I think, the Iraqi

government detecting some indicators of this, and also working off of some other kind of intelligence and their own basic fears about the issue of a destabilization after the U.S. left, of the coup attempt, et cetera.

I think those two things collided head-on, and have in fact deepened both of those things. So Maliki now feels more vindicated than ever that something really was in the making. And those who undertook their plan to undertake a mini-surge in late 2011 see that they were right, and that they did in fact need to move to signal to the government that they were still strong, that they were willing to fight, and that they weren't going to just wait for the government to comfort them in the night after the U.S. forces have withdrawn. So very unfortunate sequence of events, and one that I think perhaps if we had taken a slightly firmer line with the Maliki government in mid-December, that we perhaps could have headed off to some extent or maybe ameliorated, you know, the depth to which we've sort of experienced.

So basically, destabilization at the moment as we see it is primarily focused on the center-north provinces. The south remains nice and quiet, basically. Baghdad is not – has not destabilized to the extent you might expect. One of the reasons for that is because Baghdad is literally swamped with security forces, and they maintain a very effective grasp over the local security in many parts of the capital. To give you one example, when you looked at the indirect fire attack on the Army Day parade in the international zone in January, the attackers only managed to get off three rounds. Three rounds from a mortar is about as much as you can get away with in western Baghdad these days because it is pretty tight, which is one of the reasons why rockets are preferred, because you can fire them in sailboats and you don't have to be there when they all go off at once.

OK. Let's move on. The red – the red highlighting you see here is really where the concentration patterns of attacks are in Iraq today. They're not the sort of places you would expect. And that's really a bit of a worrying sign, because they are in literally all the old places, which were bad pre-surge. One of the ones that I would highlight, for instance, is northern Babil province, just south of Baghdad. This was an area that was exceptionally bad al-Qaida area. It was also an area which reconciliation efforts and the Sons of Iraq program really worked very, very quickly, resulting in a 90 percent reduction in violence within a very short period of time.

I always watch Babil, because in Babil I had – there's a sectarian fault line. And the moment I see Babil start to destabilize is a moment when I get a little bit worried about Iraq writ large. In the other words, it's a bit of a bellwether. It's a bit of a bellwether for how the country is feeling and what kind of – what's happening. And we see in northern Babil that Sons of Iraq has been really cut away at the knees by the government over the past two years. They've been very hard-hit by al-Qaida in Iraq. And then al-Qaida in Iraq recently stopped at offering them amnesties. And now we're through to the period where that area is a passive support zone for al-Qaida in Iraq operations in southern Iraq in Karbala – really strategic piece of terrain. It's where pilgrims move through every year. And we also start to see now helicopter-borne Iraqi special operations force raids in that – in that area.

So let's move on. And just to flag out, the green line – that's the Kurdish area from '91 onwards. The white line is the real area of Kurdish control right now. In between the two, you

have the disputed internal boundary areas, broadly. There's a lot more violence going on within those areas at the moment as well, sparking up in little places that have been quiet for quite a long time like Debes; like Daquq, which is south of Kirkuk; Tuz Khurmatu has got louder again; and many parts of Mosul and the support zones around Mosul are starting to get a lot more lively again, Mosul city particularly.

So really all along that federal Kurdish belt things are picking up again. And you might say, well, with the Iraqi or the Sunni factions siding with the Kurds, you know, against the federal government at this time, with some of their leaders sheltering in the KRG, why is this happening? Why it's happening is because basically, at a time like this, not everything has to make sense. Tension is rising across the country. The fact that the Kurds and the Sunnis may be on the same sheet of music at the moment doesn't really matter to people down at the local level. At that level, they start to see al-Qaida getting stronger. They start to find it harder to resist the insurgency. And they start being forced into passive support. They also see the other side reacting, disappearing people at night, et cetera, et cetera. So basically, you know, the tension overflows into neutral areas all along the trigger line.

OK, next. This was in January. Some of the mass casualty attacks there in Baghdad – they're very tightly focused on the Shiite residential areas and strongly Shiite areas. Al-Qaida in Iraq is undoubtedly attempting, once again, to foment sectarian violence in a very targeted way, in a very specific way.

And we also look – this is Baghdad by – some of the districts by color-coding – red for predominantly Sunni, green for predominantly Shia, and other areas mixed. One of the things we're tracking is indirect fire trends within Baghdad. It's a good leading indicator of whether you actually start to see neighborhoods beginning to pull apart and bombard each other. It happened at the start of the surge, and we haven't seen much of it so far. So Baghdad is surprisingly – is holding together surprisingly well at the moment, partly, I guess, because of the policing.

And that – that's just a – you know, you currently see some of these in – these significant actions, you know, are very blurry, probably from the back particularly. But you know, there's an – sort of an average week in Baghdad. Lots of inter-Sadrism skirmishing between different elements of the Sadrism movement. And – thanks – and mixed neighborhoods in the sort of southern arc of the city and particularly in west Rashid – this area of southwest Baghdad – are starting to see a lot more attacks – more attacks around Adhamiya and some of the sort of fault lines you used to get back in the old days between Adhamiya and the – and the strongly Shiite areas.

So worrying indicators in Baghdad, some signs of community starting to pull apart a little bit, and particularly stockpile and reduce nonessential movements – but not yet really serious deterioration in Baghdad. We don't see that yet. You know, what I'm more worried about really is north-center, Kurdish trigger line and some of the Baghdad belts like Babil.

So interesting developments, just to finish off. We're starting to see increased numbers of assassination attempts against Sunni Arab politicians who are in some way viewed as not

remaining – or in some way, any Sunni Arab politician who could be linked to actions that might be considered to be splintering the Iraqiya bloc, staying in parliament, you know, doing – you know, continuing to function in the Cabinet during the boycott, things like that. You’re starting to see more attacks against those individuals; also, a significant attack in operations against federal security forces across Iraq.

And this is an indicator of something you can see in many other cases, which is that al-Qaida in Iraq of today and related movements are a lot smarter than they were back in 2006. I think they’ve taken a lot of lessons on board. They’ve Iraqified to a great extent. They focus most of their tactical security forces, though not all. And they’ve learned how to live with both the local nationalist insurgents and also to some extent with the local communities as well. So you know, it’s a more dangerous foe, really. And this is a time in which their narrative is squarely in line with how a lot of Sunni Arabs are increasingly feeling within the country. So they’re not dissonant with how Sunni Arabs are feeling and invaders and occupiers and, you know, foreigners whose presence is not welcomed. I think they’re on the right track, which is worrying.

And finally, very interesting overlap starting to show between Iraq and Syria. And here we have two, from the perspective of insurgents, Shia Iranian-backed governments and one overlapping insurgency, Sunni insurgency, in both countries. And along the Shia – along the Iraq-Syria border, the Shammar tribes there have always worked closely together, with the Syrian side supporting the Iraqi side up to this point in the insurgency. And now we’re starting to see the favor repaid with weapons passing west, including large stocks of RPGs, large stocks of small arms and ammunition and some mortar systems as well.

So it’s interesting and strange to see the flow reversed after so many years of seeing the flow, at least of fighters, coming the other way. And indeed, we had a car bomb intercepted on the border the other day. It was the first time I have ever seen this heading west, which is the first time, you know, I’ve ever seen that. Usually, you know, it would be the other way around.

So as we look to the long term, you know, what’s going to be the interaction between these two things? What happens if the insurgency succeeds in Syria? What happens if it fails in Syria? How do they interact going forward? Whatever it is, it’s probably not a good thing for Iraq, I’d say.

MS. KAGAN: Mike, thank you so much for bringing this kind of detail and refinement to our understanding of the violence trends in Iraq and for stopping in on your way to other travels in order to brief us on this.

I’m actually going to turn on the lights because I know that a PowerPoint after lunch is not necessarily the best way to conduct a panel. But I really think what you’ve shown us, Mike, is really the extraordinary seriousness of the potential of violent fragmentation of the Iraqi state, the resurgent insurgency in particular locales that we are all very familiar with if we’ve studied the problem.

And what I am actually going to ask your – the – your colleagues to do on this panel is zoom out and tell us why is this happening and what can and should the United States and the government of Iraq actually do about it. So with that, I'm actually going to let the panelists come back up here to join the team and talk about some of the political and security dynamics that we see.

Excellent. The first – the first of our speakers contextualizing today will be Marisa Cochrane Sullivan, who is the deputy director at the Institute for the Study of War. She is quite an accomplished scholar of Iraqi Shia politics and also of the support that the Iranian Quds Force has provided to Shia militant groups. She has authored a number of reports, including “Balancing Maliki” and “The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Trend.”

And I'm delighted to have her begin today, talking about Iraqi politics. Marisa, how did we get to the situation that is permeating this crisis?

MARISA COCHRANE SULLIVAN: Can everybody hear me OK? I'll move back. So what I want to do today is just talk about how we got here and a little bit more – give a little bit more texture about what this current crisis is. The first thing it is, though, is it's actually a symptom of deeper structural political problems.

And while we tend to focus on what's happening right now, I think it's actually important to look back and see how Iraqi politics have developed over the last two years, since the political accommodation that began to take shape in 2008 and 2009 has started to unravel in the wake of the 2010 parliamentary elections and the long period of government formation that followed. And there are three dynamics that I'll talk about today as important, although there are many others that have contributed.

The first is the consolidation of power of the prime minister over the last number of years, but has accelerated in the last two years. The most obvious and dangerous representation of this is his control over the security and intelligence forces, but there are also other areas too. Maliki has pretty adeptly fragmented his rivals, the Sunni and the Shia.

And it's allowed him to make the Iraqi parliament – he's neutered the Iraqi parliament as a check on executive authority. And it's allowed him to exert a concerning degree of influence over the judiciary and then use the Iraqi security forces in ways that are silencing political dissent or cracking down on freedom of speech. And this was really evident in some of the Arab Spring protests that Iraq had in early 2011.

The second issue which is important is the lack of progress on the Erbil agreement and the growing dissatisfaction that the Iraqiya list, which is a secular list – although many of its main components are predominantly Sunni political groups – but there's a growing feeling of disenfranchisement and dissatisfaction amongst the members of Iraqiya and its broader constituency.

And Iraqiya sees – it came in, it won the most seats in the 2010 election, yet through some potential – through some questionable legal maneuvering, was not given the first chance to

form the government. Even in the power-sharing agreement that became known as the Erbil agreement, which was brokered in late 2010, there were a number of points that have yet to be implemented.

For example, Iraqiya was supposed to name – nominate a minister of defense. That did not happen. Maliki instead has put in an acting minister of defense, Saadoun al-Dulaimi, and so Iraqiya is dissatisfied with that. Likewise, they were supposed to have some say in approving an interior minister. That hasn't happened. Maliki's been serving as the acting minister of interior really since 2010, since the last election.

And then the last one, Iraqiya was supposed to be able to chair a National Council for Higher Policies, which is a body that's not in the constitution – which is a problem in and of itself – but was supposed to be an arena for discussing the most important national security issues among the different political blocs. And it was seen as a way to bring the Iraqiya leader, Iyad Allawi, into the government in some capacity.

That has not happened. This body was essentially stillborn and there's been no progress in implementing that. So this has left Iraqiya and its broader Sunni constituency feeling locked out of the political – of any real role in politics or governance.

The third is this growing – and it's related – this growing intense rivalry between Iraqiya and Maliki. And for the reasons I laid out, this is not surprising, but it's dangerous because it's taken on a very sectarian tone, Sunni versus Shia. And it's there's a growing feeling – and it has been accelerated over the last six months – that the Sunni are being targeted by a predominantly Shia government.

When you see things like what happened this past fall, where you had more than 600 people arrested for links to the Baath Party, but predominantly Sunnis from areas across the country, or in Salahuddin province, where you had a purge of the universities there – there's this growing feeling that the Sunnis are being pushed out.

And what it's – what it's provoked is a growing move towards federalism, which I know Laith is going to talk about, but this feeling that if we can invoke Article 119, we can form a federal region, like the Kurds have done, and exert some control over our local governance. Maliki has resisted this, and it's created this very dangerous confrontation that's going to be a problem.

But what really poured gasoline on what was already a pretty dangerous fire was – were the moves against the most senior Iraqiya officials this past December. And what happened was in this period of just a few weeks, really right as the prime minister returned from his visit to Washington in the second week of December, there was an order to surround the vice president, Tariq al-Hashimi's compound. A number of his bodyguards were arrested. The vice president had actually left for Erbil just the day before, where he's essentially remained in exile, and there have been terrorism charges brought against him by the judiciary on counts that he's been involved in death squads.

At the same time, another very prominent Sunni political figure, the deputy prime minister, Saleh Mutlaq, was effectively removed from his position by the prime minister after he gave an interview on CNN where he characterized Maliki's behavior as dictatorial. Maliki and Mutlaq have had a contentious relationship in the past.

And while there is a clause in the constitution that allows the prime minister to remove a member of his Cabinet, it requires parliamentary approval. This parliamentary approval hasn't happened, but essentially through executive fiat, Mutlaq's been removed. And there are some political discussions right now happening over what's going to happen to the role of the deputy prime minister.

There was also a third attempt to move against another prominent Sunni leader, the minister of finance, Rafi al-Issawi, although the investigation that was launched over his potential implication in terrorism was dropped really for political – I think political reasons. As a result, Iraqiya had decided to boycott both the parliament and the Cabinet in December, but this really proved to be a miscalculation because it only emboldened Maliki to further isolate Iraqiya and reduce its influence within the government.

And so what's happened is in the last few weeks, Iraqiya's come back to the government. It has made concessions. It has lost a lot of leverage. And where we are now is essentially that the big winner here is the prime minister. He has not had to make concessions. He's come out as the overwhelming victor. He's been very popular. It's boosted his popularity amongst his Shia constituents, and it's made other Shia groups – it's made it more difficult for them to move against the prime minister, as concerned as they are about this consolidation.

So while the political crisis may seem to be resolving through these efforts at a national conference, essentially, the underlying structural challenges and problems still exist, and they're going to continue to create problems moving forward. Thank you.

MS. KAGAN: Our next speaker is Dr. Laith Kubba, and we are really quite delighted to have such a distinguished guest today. He is a senior program officer right now for the National Endowment for Democracy, where he works on Middle East and North Africa issues. But equally as important are the extraordinary roles that he's played in the past, including his role as the director of international relations at the Al Khoei Foundation in London.

And we are really pleased to have you here today. Tell us more.

LAITH KUBBA: Thank you. I think there are lots of details, and those of you who are watching Iraq closely – they sometimes get lost because of the details. (Inaudible) – the protests, protests – and I think with those details, sometimes we lose perspective on where is Iraq heading. So what I want to do in 10 minutes, very quickly, is try to answer the question: After the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and the last Americans left, where is the political process in Iraq heading?

Of course, not details, but big picture – can the political process hold? Because if there's any degree of value, let's say, that the U.S. had left Iraq with – there are a long list of divisions and collateral damage, call it what you like – but one thing, very important, that I think

everybody is happy with is that we have a political process. Can this political process take the pressure now on itself?

And I think we can look at trajectory and try to look at, say, a three years' trajectory, not to predict – that's impossible – but to identify maybe 10 headlines we need to keep an eye on and check, like in your (I hope ?), health check or blood test. There's a long list of issues. I've been trying to narrow them down. What we need to look at in this test – let me start with the easy ones that are ahead of us.

Is Iraq's trajectory going to be influenced by events in the region which are military? That's, of course, a big yes. There is no question that events in Syria will upset the politics in Iraq. It's worrying how this might influence or affect the security sector and the security side of it, which is a big, big question, but certainly it will influence the politics.

Also, the issue of Iran and the confrontation with Iran – what is Iraq's position when there are sanctions on both Syria and Iran? Is Iraq being basically an area where some of those sanctions are bypassed, or does it work in reality? I think Iraq is in a position unescapable. It just cannot escape the fact that it has to live with those influences and eventually maybe have to pay the price for those events in the region. Again, no details, but it's a major factor.

The Arab Spring – nothing really major showing, although there is a problem of a different kind building up. (And I'll come ?) to it in a minute. A very quick note – for good or bad, I don't think anybody intended or did not intend that the last year – (inaudible) – Iraq, but it's a nice clean-cut point in history. Iraqis are now in charge, and an Iraqi politics will emerge. And yes, it'll be different. I think if there was one American soldier in Iraq, he would have been leverage. Maybe it would have been messy. This is clear-cut, and I think one – (inaudible) – look at it.

But most importantly, do we have a constitution that can sustain the pressure? Well, up until now, the constitution has been bypassed by politicians. I mean, because, one, it's Article 140 – it expired. It's now open to dispute whether it can be revived, under what terms, et cetera. That is – that is a contentious point in Iraq's future.

There are issues when different provinces tried to activate articles of the constitution and it backfired big-time. Politics could have led to violence. So there seems to be an emerging consensus in Iraq that the constitution needs to be amended. There is a mechanism for amending it. Of course, the politics will prove problematic, but this is going to be a testing moment.

Everybody seems to say, look, we're bypassing articles of the constitution. I think both Maliki, Allawi and other politicians are saying we need to revise this constitution that we approved, we adopted, but really, we did it – (inaudible) – and it's time to revise it. The Kurds are saying no, big-time, we do not want to do that. That is going to be tested, but the constitution does not seem to (hold ?) – too many ambiguities that need to be resolved.

One – actually, one thing – to the credit of the political process, with this crisis that happened – yes, there was a lot of politics around it, but apparently parliament is still

functioning. It has drafted an amendment to the powers; it clarified – and it's passing legislation to clarify what powers should the provinces have. This seems to take the steam out of the push towards creating more regions and weakening the center.

Also politics – the prime minister acknowledged that he needs to pay more attention to the provinces. He held one meeting; the ambassador and I think others might follow suit. But basically, we have something here that is working.

Is the judicial system in Iraq politicized? Everything in Iraq is politicized. But is it holding? Well, up until now, it's holding. There is a level of independence. It is being politicized; it is under the influence. But it is still holding. Nobody will say the judicial system rubber-stamps the government or the executive branch, but one needs to keep an eye on it.

So basically, we're having a process – are officials accountable? Well, not very clear. I mean, are they accountable for violations, for big financial or corruption issues or others – the Iraqis really, really expect far more than that. The real challenge, in the eyes of the average Iraqi, street Iraqis – not the political elites who are running the political process – the street Iraqis are dissatisfied with the constitution and the process.

They went to cast their votes, 70 percent turnout, three, four times, huge enthusiasm – but the process is not yielding cleaner or better institutions that are correcting themselves. The correction process is very slow. The gap is growing between, as you said, mainstream Iraqis, let's say, and the political elite that are in the country.

Which takes me to the second issue about the political elites: Where do we see those elites who were accidentally brought in with the U.S. invasion of Iraq? They have power. Now nobody wants to let go of power. And they have the means to keep themselves in power despite a lot of dissatisfaction in the streets.

Well, the politics in Iraq, pre-invasion, and maybe even two or three years after the invasion, was based on consensus. The big blocs, the big leaders – the Kurds, Sunnis, Arabs, call them what you like – they meet, they agree that it's in everybody's interest to keep the show on the road, and they move on.

Consensus politics is dead. It no longer works in Iraq. After so many years in power and with the U.S. departure, now there are real politics. People want to play hardball according to their rules, and if they can get away bypassing the rules without being caught, they'll try it. And if they get caught, well, then, it's a push – give and take.

Violence in Iraq – I mean, we saw initially the figures – but it's important to say those are not, in my interpretation – I think I'm (synching with Mike ?) – in my interpretation, we do not have the communal violence that we all fear. We do have political violence. A lot of it is assassination, politically targeted. And this issue is that there are tensions between communities because of the way the elites benefit from that tension.

Anybody, Sunnis, Shia, Kurd, anybody – you need to mobilize your power base, so you drum on an issue. Yes, it harms the country, but it benefits you as a politician. So there is tension, but there is – it's not really communal tension. It's tension generated by politics that is (raw ?), by politics that is (raw ?), a bit immature. But as I said, that's the reason I (pay ?) little hope about that conference that is supposed to take place, loaded with agendas. Consensus will not work. I think, I mean, politicians need to work on something else.

Very quickly, looking at that trajectory of where we're heading, one cannot escape commenting about the prime minister. There is an undercurrent in Iraq between two trends. This is very broad, across communities. There is one vision about Iraq that looks at a democratic Iraq, but a strong center, a strong prime minister, a strong executive that can move on with the country without having their hands tied down to too many things; and another vision that is basically supported by the Kurds, but not only the Kurds – (inaudible) – for example – (inaudible) – and others maybe support that vision – and that is they do not want a strong government; they do not want a strong center. And they would like to have more breathing space, and they are very, very concerned if – (inaudible) – irrespective whether it's Maliki or not Maliki. Those are two different views.

As it happened, that coincided not only with Maliki being a prime minister, but his personality is just a pragmatist “Jump first, ask questions later” – his attitude towards power, his view on where Iraq should go, coincides with that view. There is a – I'm pretty certain Ayad Allawi shares that view, and if he was in power, he would try to build a strong executive. But as it happens, yes, let's start with Maliki power party is basically the politics of endless consolidating that power.

But the real issues that Iraq is facing very soon in terms of undercurrents is, we are seeing an emergence Baghdad that is trying to be strong again and a prime minister that is trying to have the prime ministership, so to speak, with more powers in addition to himself as a person – maybe three years there will be a different prime minister – but the entire position is getting to be stronger. And that is going to be one contentious area. It's an area of tension in Iraq.

We have lots of test cases ahead of us. Article 140 is a big one – Article 4 and how it's being used, which is basically, can – would you – would you label the – your opposition as being terrorists – because that's now easily being used and politicizing this whole issue – (inaudible).

And I think one other undercurrent – if I can quickly comment – within the communities, what are the things to keep an eye on? Number one, to what extent the Kurds will be patient to stay within messy Iraqi politics that is emerging. There are real reasons why the vision or the possibility of maybe looking more inwards and really consolidating the Kurdish region semi-independent might be on the way. That's one test, now or later – how far later.

Amongst the western provinces in Iraq, I think the Arab Spring (is ?) tribal in mentality – they are facing a tough test. There is a center of gravity that is emerging within Arab countries, and they would like very much to re-assert Iraqi nationalism and Iraq-Arab identity. But that comes with the cost of being dominated by Shiites. So it's a very tough choice that they have, and they are split here. And I think, within the Shiites, there is a clear gap growing between the

Shia elites who are ruling and between a mass of few millions who really, really have not yet benefited from a new Iraq, a democratic Iraq that is run by Shiites, because there are still – they are still lacking in services.

Al-Sadr, of course, is a player that one needs to keep an eye on, because that's I think where, at the – and maybe two years to come, he's going to also emerge also – (inaudible). Thank you.

MS. KAGAN: Thank you so much. Our next panelist is the distinguished Ken Pollack, author of phenomenal and phenomenally readable books on national security issues in the Middle East – a tremendous – a tremendous scholar, a wonderful mentor, and about to be no longer the director of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. A new, free Ken Pollack – thank you for joining us.

KENNETH M. POLLACK: Thank you, Kim. That was an embarrassingly kind introduction. Perhaps the nicest thing you did say about me was that I am about to be no longer the director of the Saban Center. (Laughter.) Kim asked me to try to knit all of this together and try to go from 10,000 feet to 30,000 feet to help people see how it is all interlocking. And I think that, you know, the presentations were terrific. And I think in many ways it is apparent, just from these presentations, how all of these different things are interacting. But I will try to kind of put a gloss over all of it.

Let me start with Mike's presentation, which again I think is just remarkable because of its importance, and because of the ability of Mike to present this data and to kind of make sense of it and help us to understand what's going on there in a way that we just haven't been able to since U.S. forces left. And it's critically important that we do so. And what I'd say about Mike's presentation is that it is clear that the situation – the security situation has declined in the past two or three months. That has coincided with the U.S. withdrawal of troops.

And unfortunately this is not unexpected at all. Unfortunately, everything that Mike showed us in that presentation is very consistent – frighteningly consistent with a pattern of behavior not just in Iraq but around the world. We've seen lots of civil wars; we've seen lots of civil wars have a cease-fire or truce; we thought it was over, only to see them re-ignite at some point in time – is a very common pattern. And unfortunately, everything that Mike talked about is absolutely, perfectly in line with how these civil wars re-ignite.

Now, a point that Laith made – and I think that is a very important one about Mike's presentation – is that what Mike is showing you is all of the indicators for a recurrence of civil war, but all at a very early stage. So Laith is absolutely correct: We haven't yet seen the communal violence, which tends to come at a somewhat later stage and is a very alarming development when you see it. But as Mike pointed out, you have all of the communities beginning to stockpile. They're beginning to worry about one another. They're beginning to think about, at what point in time are we going to have to move over to the kind of communal violence?

And by the way, it's always worth keeping in mind – you know, we always like to say, well, no Iraqi wants a civil war, so there won't be one. Nonsense. No one ever wants a civil war, except a tiny little group of leaders who think that they will benefit from it, OK. Civil wars are not waged by large populations determined to right wrongs, OK? Civilians learn that, in about an hour of a civil war breaking out, that a civil war is absolutely the worst thing that they could go with. So it is commonplace in these kinds of civil wars – and especially when the civil wars recur – that the population is entirely opposed to it.

Some in this room lived through the Lebanese civil war. The Lebanese lost their appetite for that civil war, as I said, you know, the second afternoon after it broke out. And by 1980, there weren't any Lebanese civilians who thought that the Lebanese civil war was somehow good or constructive or productive. It was about a small group of leaders who were doing it for their own reasons, propelled by fear or opportunity, all of these other things.

But again, this is a historical pattern. Without an external peacekeeper – and the external peacekeeper in the case of Iraq was the United States, and we've now been removed – there is a very high rate of recidivism. And what we're seeing is the Iraqis fitting themselves right back into that groove – the groove they followed in 2005 to get into the civil war, and a groove that, if they continue to follow it, will push them right back into civil war. So all of the indicators are there. We are still very much in the early stages, and so this all should make us perhaps disheartened – you know, perhaps disconcerted. But it's a reason for concern, not necessarily panic.

One last point I want to make about civil wars and what I think Mike has presented us with is a very important caution, which is that as – while it is very clear that this is still very much in early stages of that kind of buildup back towards civil war, the one problem out there is that it is always impossible to pick the point when the trend accelerates and becomes irreversible, OK. The typical pattern is that there is a long period of slow decline, of slow deterioration of the security system, and then something happens. And you can never predict beforehand – you can never forecast what that will be.

But something happens that it galvanizes everyone's fears, and all of the (senses of ?) opportunities among the bad actors, and it just goes off a cliff, OK. In Iraq in 2006, it was the bombing of the al-Askariya shrine, OK. No one would have known that it was coming beforehand, and only a few people realized when it happened that this was going to be the turnover. Typically you only see it in the rearview mirror. So the one piece of caution is, we don't know how long this early stage can go on. And the problem is, it's highly unpredictable. It could go on for years, or it could just be a matter of months. We just can't tell.

Now, what's going on? To kind of pick up on both Laith and Marisa's presentations, what I'd say is that what we have going on in Iraq right now is obviously a multifaceted set of issues, of confrontations, of struggles. There is in effect a fight between the center and the periphery. We know that. But there's also a fight within the center, OK? And these two things are related; they are overlapping, but they are not identical. And it actually is important to keep them somewhat disentangled.

What happened over the past couple of months is that we had a crisis within the center, provoked by the tensions between the center and the periphery, OK. So you had the different provinces, the Sunni provinces beginning to push for greater autonomy. This provoked a fight in the center, caused the recent crisis. As Marisa described it – and I think this also fits with Laith's presentation – the prime minister in effect won that fight within the center, OK. He was not forced to make any real, meaningful concessions, at least so far. Iraqiya was forced to come back into the government without really getting anything that they wanted, OK.

That's a very important win for the prime minister; he won the fight within the center. But that doesn't mean that he has won a fight of the center against the periphery. And that's what's lying out there still, OK. The periphery continues to resist. Again, you can see that in Mike's presentation. The periphery is in fact increasing its resistance to the center.

And that resistance is coming from Sunnis; it's coming from Shia; it's coming from Kurds – the Shia – (inaudible) – being the most important. We shouldn't forget that, in the midst of all this, it was the – (inaudible) – who suddenly stabbed Maliki in the back by saying, perhaps we should have new elections, OK. And that was a very big changeover. And you're seeing a lot of ground – you know, grassroots opposition from the Shia against the prime minister, against what's going on in the center. So the periphery is resisting the center more.

The prime minister clearly has pretty complete control over the center. This was inherent in Marisa's presentation and Laith's – and again, Mike's presentation, when he talked about it from a military center. And we talk about the center both as kind of the geographic center at Baghdad and figuratively the Iraqi elite. The prime minister is very much in the driver's seat in both of those areas. What he doesn't yet have is the same kind of control over the periphery, OK.

The great mistake, the great danger – and again, I think Laith in particular was pointing to this – will be that there will be a natural inclination on the part of the prime minister to try to exert the same kind of control that he now has over the center over the periphery. That is an incredibly dangerous trend. If the prime minister tries to do that and he succeeds, he will have made himself the dictator of Iraq, OK.

As Laith has pointed out, there has been a lot of skirting of the constitution. And I'm going to explain – I'm singling out the prime minister for a very important reason. It has nothing to do with the prime minister per se; it's all about the role of the prime minister, and not who he happens to be. But if he is able to gain control over the periphery the way that he has over the center, he will make himself the dictator of Iraq however he decides to behave.

It is far more likely, though – because the periphery is very much apart from Iraq, is very much – has its own resources, its own power base, its ability to resist – it is most likely that the prime minister will fail. And if he fails – and if he makes that bid and fails, it will produce civil war, and it could well produce a failed state as well – both of which would obviously be disastrous for Iraq.

And I think that a lot of what Laith was talking about, in terms of what needs to happen – what that represents is actually the better move. The much better move, at this point, would be for the prime minister to recognize that he has won this great victory within the center. He has not won a victory over the periphery. In so doing, he has done a tremendous amount of damage to the political process that, Laith pointed out, was the one legacy that the United States left behind.

And so the question mark really now is whether the prime minister does further damage to that political system – whether he does away with it entirely, in going after the periphery the way that he did the center – or whether he is willing to repair that political process. And the things that Laith were talking about are really the things that the prime minister would have to do to repair that political process.

And in particular, the two that I would single out – one that Laith mentioned, which is the provincial powers law which has been – you know, these provincial powers laws have been struggling through the parliament forever. And it will be critical to clearly define and to reassure those in the periphery that the prime minister isn't going to try to overrule and to govern them and to control them the way that they fear he will.

The other one out there is the amnesty law, which has kind of, you know, languished in the parliament forever. So much of what happened in this recent crisis has been about using the judicial system to target particular adversaries, OK, and in particular about things that happened during the civil war. And anyone who knows anything about these civil wars will tell you, that is not how you handle civil wars. It is not through processes of legal investigation. It is through a broad process of amnesty, OK. Everyone who participated in the Iraqi civil war is one or two steps removed from some act of murder. And if you start selectively or universally trying to prosecute every single one of those actions, you will destroy the Iraqi political system.

So now it really comes to rest on the prime minister. As I said, this isn't so much about Maliki, OK. And I'm not trying to make this an anti-Maliki screed. But the prime minister in this kind of a situation has a special set of responsibilities. And by acting the way that he has – because he does have that special set of responsibilities – he has himself done a – done a tremendous amount of damage to that political process that Laith talked about.

This is not to suggest that other Iraqi leaders wouldn't have done the same thing, or would have done worse; they might very well have. I can think of lots of Iraqi leaders who are currently in the opposition who would have done the same or even worse. But it's about the fact that Nouri al-Maliki right now is the prime minister. And because he has won this very important and very dangerous victory, what he does next is going to be critical to what happens in Iraq in the future. I'll stop there.

MS. KAGAN: Thank you all. I think we have the basis for a pretty interesting discussion. And I actually would like to begin by spurring that on and asking you all: What are – what are the things that stand between Iraq now and the civil war scenario that Ken described? Are there particular checks and outlets for some of the politically motivated violence, or for some of the attempts at consolidations of power, that you would be looking to see to sense that

Iraq was not on a path to civil war, or that you do (see ?) that suggest that Iraq is not on a path to civil war? Laith?

MR. KUBBA: What that I think is worth noting – it was buried in the conversation – quietly we are seeing a developing (core ?) of the Iraqi army. It has become stronger. It is getting more professional. It seems to be a power. And of course I do not want to gaze into the future, what does that mean? But a strong army and troubled politics is always an indication, at some point in the distant future, that if the politicians don't get their act together, then the army – (inaudible). So this is one thing I think it's worth noting.

Second, also worth noting, the Iraqis – in particular in the provinces and the rural area – I think by now they got it, that the politicians are using identity politics to build their power base. And I think there is a level now, enough – what – I wouldn't say enough buffers, but I would say there are more buffers than Iraq had back in '03, '05, '06 – in particular between tribal Arabs, between (Shiites ?) and Sunnis. They seem to have reasonable channels that can defuse some of that tension.

And maybe one third fact that I would bring to light is that different players burned their fingers in the – (inaudible) – around in '06. And a lot of people don't want to burn their fingers again. They know, as I think Ken was saying, the high cost of violence I think at that level. It's not a guarantee. They can always be pushed into it. But I think, by and large, there is now a resistance. In fact, one of the reasons why – although there is so much tension and dissatisfaction with the performance of the government in terms of lack of services – people – (inaudible) – better life and – one of the reasons is that any form of mass expression of that, people fear it can be politicized and placed into that – into that communal politics. But that's one of the reasons. So I would say those three factors maybe stand against.

MS. SULLIVAN: I think there are a couple of things to watch. I think there are a couple of things to watch. First, how – for how long will the – will the Sunni stay engaged in politics and feel like they're getting something productive out of political participation? I think a question of, what's the Kurdish decision making? When do they decide, you know what, we've played – but, you know, they generally do play a role of mediator – when do they decide actually that it's – that the struggles and the challenges in Baghdad give them more of an opportunity to pursue their own course?

I think regional developments are going to play a role too. This is not just a case of Iraq in – standing alone. I think what happens – how Syria develops, how Iran feels its position changing depending on what happens in Syria, how the Gulf states decide to engage in the conflict in Syria and bleed over into Iraq – I think all of these factors could destabilize things further, and potentially mobilize larger communities to leave the political process and perhaps pursue violence.

MR. KNIGHTS: I'll just first start by reiterating the point that I ended with, which is in the most immediate sense, the most important thing that needs to happen to stave off a civil war is how the prime minister behaves.

If the prime minister is willing to take this win and turn it around and make some important concessions to his opponents – and they don't have to be far-reaching; they can be symbolic in many cases – but demonstrate that he's not looking to use this new power that he has accrued to just beat them all over the heads, that will be very important.

A second point that I think is worth making is that at the end of the day, it is ultimately about compromise. You know, as Marisa was saying, as I've written about, it is all about these deeper political, structural problems in Iraq. This crisis is just a manifestation of that.

And even if we get past this immediate crisis, if we don't start to address – if Iraqis don't start to address those deeper structural problems, there'll just be another crisis, and another and another, until at some point, one of those crises does push them. So willingness on the part of all of the different communities and all the different parties to begin to make the hard compromises that they've been unwilling to in the past, is also a critical one moving forward.

And then the third one was the one that Marisa just mentioned, which I also wanted to mention, which is Syria – and the regional developments, but in particular Syria. I started my remarks by talking about how Iraq was unfortunately falling back into this very commonplace pattern of events that leads back to civil war. Well, unfortunately, there's another one out there that is equally problematic, which is Syria is now in a state of civil war.

Civil wars like Syria's, like Iraq's, cause spillover, and spillover – and we're already seeing the spillover into Iraq. You know, you can read the pieces in the New York Times from the last few days. Spillover can cause a civil war in one country to create a civil war in another country, especially a fragile country like Iraq, especially a country that has common religious and ethnic groups spanning the borders, like Iraq and Syria.

I mean, again, all of the different patterns that allow spillover to have a greater impact on another state are present there between Syria and Iraq. So, you know, you can look at Iraq and say, boy, Iraq is really fragile all by itself. Iraq could wind up in civil war all on its own. You throw in spillover from the Syrian war and you think, wow, this is – it's going to be hard, it's going to take a lot of work, to make sure that Iraq doesn't fall back into that civil war trap, that civil war trap.

MS. KAGAN: So panelists, one of the things that you actually haven't mentioned much of is U.S. policy here, as though U.S. policy toward Iraq ended with the decision to pull out the last troops, with the caveat that of course there are a few left as part of the Office of Security Cooperation in Iraq.

First of all, have there been signs of life in U.S. policy since that pullout? And secondly, has it actually been advancing U.S. interests in Iraq? And if so, how; if not, how not? What should those interests be? I see smirking. That can't be good. (Laughter.)

MS. SULLIVAN: I mean, I think that you saw signs that the administration was concerned about the political crisis. You saw the vice president's office making phone calls and

engaging in the way that it has in the past. I think there's a tendency amongst policymakers in D.C., and especially when considering the Iraq policy, to isolate it in the region.

I think that's one of the most dangerous things that the U.S. can do is isolate Iraq from its Syrian policy – from the U.S. policy towards Syria and the U.S. policy on Iran. Because the other – U.S. interests don't succeed in either place unless you're advancing U.S. interests in Iraq. So I think that's one of the – one of the biggest problems with the current policy on Iraq and towards the region.

MS. KAGAN: Laith?

MR. KUBBA: Well, it's – as you know, in this town this is a highly controversial issue. Simply put, I think the U.S. definitely is in a very difficult position when it comes to Iraq. It's a question of lose-lose, and it's a question of how much would you accept of a loss in influence in order to cut your losses, basically.

Having said that, I am not at all suggesting that the U.S. has no position, no influence, or no responsibility be it moral, political, or has no interest. I think the U.S. can keep a good position by not being involved directly in Iraq. (Inaudible) – be that as it may, I think it's a clean cut that there are no soldiers, U.S. soldiers in Iraq. There are 15,000, currently, staff and contractors, and this might be reduced. But by and large, I think, it's better that the Iraqis get on with it and find a way to move on. So that's from that perspective.

Will that mean the U.S. is at a disadvantage? Well, I think if they had their soldiers in Iraq, they wouldn't be really at much of an advantage. I think they would be, again, criticized for whatever (goes wrong ?). At least now they are out of immediate responsibility.

They will have historical and moral and political – people can argue about why did we go there in the first place, which is a legitimate question – but I think the reality today is that Iraqis have to get on with it, and they will look for a good helping hand. And the U.S. is in a position to help them – (inaudible).

MS. KAGAN: Ken?

MR. POLLACK: I'll take the bait a little bit more, Kim. (Inaudible) – not to say this, because I've said it publicly a number of times, which is that I think the Obama administration – (audio interference, inaudible). (Laughter.)

MS. KAGAN: All right. Wow.

MR. POLLACK: Sorry, Mr. President. I didn't mean that. (Laughter.)

MS. KAGAN: They really have eyes and ears everywhere, don't they?

(Please do ?).

MR. POLLACK: This reminds me of – Kim, I apologize, but I have to tell this story.

MS. KAGAN: Go right ahead.

MR. POLLACK: Many of you know that I wrote a book before the invasion, saying that I think that the – I felt that the invasion was necessary. And the NSC asked me to come by – this, of course, was the Bush NSC – to talk about Iraq and talk about my rationale for invasion, which, of course, was somewhat different from theirs.

And to me, what was the funniest part of it was I started this talk by saying, look, I think that there are some things that you're doing that are absolutely right, and I think that you're doing them very well. And there are a number of other things that you're not doing, or are doing very badly, that have me very concerned, OK? And if we don't turn those around, then we shouldn't be invading.

And I literally went through my whole “here's what I think you are doing well” – and I said, now I'd like to turn to the areas where I think you still have a lot of work to do. And I swear to God, a fire alarm went off. (Laughter.) And they cleared the room and I was never invited back.

MS. KAGAN: Your list obviously wasn't long enough. (Laughter.)

MR. POLLACK: Clearly, they – yeah, I think that explains a lot, because on my list were things like you have got to plan for a long-term, full reconstruction of Iraq. That was issue number one, and for anyone who remembers my book, you will remember that was issue number one. So anyway, it just reminded me of that moment.

Now, let me see if I can actually deliver my remark, which is I think that the Obama administration was left an extremely weak hand by the Bush administration and has played it very badly. I think there's a lot of division within the Obama administration about what to do in Iraq. I think that there are people that I can look at within the U.S. administration who, as I understand their position, really have a very good sense of what's going on and would like to do the right thing. And I think that there are others who either don't have a very good sense of what's going on, or for other reasons, entirely unrelated to Iraq, don't particularly want to. They have other fish to fry. They have other things that concern them.

As a result, I think that we've made some very bad decisions here. I wholly would disagree with Laith. I think the withdrawal of U.S. troops was a terrible decision. I recognize that ultimately, that was the Iraqis' decision, but I think that we actually could have shaped that debate very differently from how we wound up doing so. And had we done so, we might have been able to have a residual presence.

Again, it goes back to the kind of historical work on, you know, what it requires to avoid civil wars, but it also comes from my on-the-ground experience in Iraq and seeing the difference that those troops made. That said, we are where we are. And unfortunately we have, as Laith

was trying very politely to point out – we don't have a whole lot of influence left in Iraq. It's unclear, I think, just how much influence we have.

But the one point that I would make is that one of the areas where I think that the administration has done a terrible job is in trying to build up alternative sources of influence with Iraq. It was clear that they wanted to reduce the troops enormously, if not get out entirely, and during that period of time we should have been trying to build up other areas of influence with Iraq. We have not done so.

The most obvious way to do that – and I'm just going to be very brief – is to say that Iraq needs everything. And at least in theory, the United States can provide everything. And to the extent that we are willing to provide things that Iraqis need – and again, they need everything – those are sources of leverage.

And I think that one of the worst things that we have done is not made clear to Iraqis – not just the government, but even more importantly, the Iraqi people – what could be on offer if they were willing to go down the right path, the path which, quite frankly, as Laith pointed out, the vast majority of Iraqis want to go down anyway. That's what I'd like to see us start to do. I'm just hoping it's not too late.

MS. KAGAN: Ken, I'd jump in on that and say that those things that the United States has on offer had not necessarily been conditioned to achieve the policy responses that we would prefer. For example, as Laith pointed out, the security forces are an incredibly important potential guarantor of the state, but can also be brought into a politicized mode as the politics of Iraq brings churn and change in the wake of American departure.

It would seem to me that Iraqi security force assistance – including major equipment, but also training and funding – could be made conditional on a continued sectarian balance within the officer corps of the forces, for example, in a way that would advance the kind of Iraq that we want to see, as well as the security of Iraq that we have invested in so much.

So I would agree with you, Ken, that we do have leverage. And the issue is, how do we communicate what could be on offer? And how do we use what is on offer actually to help facilitate the emergence of a strong, stable and inclusive Iraq from the crisis that has been under way – not just for the past 60 days, but for the past few years?

I'm going to take an audience question, so I'd love to see – love to see hands. Harlan (sp), you get the first question.

Q: Thank you. I would like to dampen this otherwise sunny conversation –

MS. KAGAN: Thank you. (Soft laughter.)

Q: – to ask you to speculate – can you speculate on the range of consequences in the Middle East if, let's say, Israel attacks Iran, with or without American assistance – (inaudible). Can you speculate as to how you think that might have an impact in Iraq?

MS. KAGAN: Great question. Who would like to take that happy thought – I'm sorry, hot potato – first?

MS. SULLIVAN: Well, I think it – I think it, number one, forces Iraq to make some tough decisions of its own in terms of – and even as, you know, as there's any response, or as there are sanctions, or as there are countermeasures, which side does it choose? The other thing, I think, to note is that there are a number of Iranian-backed groups in Iraq that work with other Iranian proxies, like Lebanese Hezbollah, to conduct attacks in Iraq, but also to train elsewhere.

And I think that this is – I think Iran is cultivating additional proxies and cultivating, hedging its bets against what happens in Syria, and will look to Iraq, I think, to fill some of those gaps. So I think it's – I think it's going to be difficult for the United States, but I also think it's going to force some difficult choices for Iraq.

MS. KAGAN: Marisa, could I ask you – since you've been working on the Iranian-backed militias and their activities, can you – we really haven't talked about the state of play among Shia militant groups. And I was wondering if you could talk to me about some of the trends that you see, since those would be relevant to the degree of control, influence, and types of pressure that the Iranians might be able to put on the Iraqi people or Iraqi politicians in the event of the situation that Harlan so kindly asked about.

MS. SULLIVAN: Sure. Well, there are three main Iranian-sponsored groups that are active in Iraq. The first and most dangerous is a group called Kata'ib Hezbollah, which is very proficient, very well-trained, very savvy in operational security and conducting sophisticated attacks.

It's essentially, you know, it is the closest to the Quds Force, and so it's a very worrisome group. It has no interest in Iraqi politics and it has no real political constituency that it would appeal to even if it were. So it is a very dangerous group and it's still being actively supported by the Quds Force, trained and armed – (inaudible).

The second group which I think is problematic, and perhaps even more so from a political standpoint, is Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, which is the League of the Righteous, which is actually a splinter of the Sadrist trend. It's led by Qais Khazali, who was a student of Sadr's, Muqtada al-Sadr's father, was Muqtada's deputy but broke from him in '05 and '06. This group is dangerous because this group does have a political constituency. It's actually fighting with the Sadrists right now for it, and you've seen some armed skirmishes.

And Mike talked about that during his presentation. But they do have political objectives. Maliki has been negotiating with them. He's tried to get them to come into politics. They've said recently, now that U.S. forces are out, that they are willing to join the political process, but they're not willing to give up their arms. They're going to lay down their arms, they say, although past indications suggest that they'll continue to function as both an armed group and a political group.

This is – this can be problematic because they are – this group is closely aligned with the Quds Force, with Iran, and it presents another opportunity from which Iran can influence Iraqi politics, not just through the threat of force or intimidation, but actually within the political process itself in ways that you've seen with Lebanese Hezbollah in Lebanon.

And then the third group is the Promised Day Brigades. This is kind of the successor to the Jaish al-Mahdi of the Sadrist trend. They do continue to receive Iranian assistance. They were continuing to conduct attacks. Attacks continue even against U.S. diplomatic personnel. This is not – this is generally for all of the groups, but actually, AAH is pretty active in conducting attacks on U.S. diplomatic personnel.

But all of these three groups are still active in Iraq. They retain their capability for violence. They've used it against Iraqis, not just U.S. personnel. And they can be pretty influential in the political calculus of Iraqis, whether that's through targeted assassinations, intimidation, attacks on the green zone or even participation in the political process, in the cases of, say, AAH or the Sadrists.

MS. KAGAN: Thanks, Marisa. Laith, what will happen – or what could happen if, in fact, we saw a – what's so lovingly called a third-party strike on Iranian capabilities?

MR. KUBBA: I think there are two things. One, I mean, definitely there will be a political backlash. I think Iraq, Iraqi parliament, by and large, will not be sympathetic with an attack on Iran, just being in mind in politics and on trade and the influence that Iran has. So that's factor one. Factor two, the Iraqi military muscle is – it's too weak to be relevant in such a fight. So, I mean, Iraq currently does not even control its airspace. It does not – it's irrelevant in that fight.

So it will happen. There will be a political backlash. The fact that Iranian intelligence, with all its different arms, is inside Iraq – I mean, there aren't – (inaudible) – worthy targets to look at, so – except the U.S. embassy, which is big and it's there. But that's a small issue, and I'm sure Iraqi government will protect that. It's absolutely against their own interest and credibility if that – if the embassy is harmed.

But I would also say, politically, it is misleading – or, not misleading – but you say we need to understand Iraqi politics better by really realizing, you (stretch ?) Iraqis, ultimately there is a distance – a real distance between them and the – (inaudible). Yes, currently everybody does their own instant calculus because of short-term benefits and gains and fears and what have you and they might make noises. But look at big picture about Iraq, they're very distinct from Iran. Iraq has been weakened tremendously by the – by Saddam's policies and by the U.S. invasion. And the doors were opened wide for Iran to expand its influence in Iraq by default. I mean, this is, as he said, that these people puzzled that what the U.S. actually – (inaudible). And that will take a while, but the only way it can be addressed, if Iraq builds itself the state, the institutions, the army. Iraq needs to look inwards, build itself and it displaces gradually Iran's influence out of Iraq.

So in a fight, as he said – I mean, majority of Iraq is going to stay out of that fight. And I think that will be – they want to minimize the damage or the cost of consequence of such a fight. Thanks.

MS. KAGAN: General Christman.

Q: First of all, I wanted to pick up on this offer that Ken had made to ask the question about what's on offer in terms of U.S. It's interesting that with – when Ken made that point, Kimberly's first answer was to focus on the security side, which is understandable. But there are many other elements on national power – (inaudible). And I'd just like to ask the panel on one of those other elements, and that's the business sector and economic development.

What areas of (opportunity ?) there exist? And where have been the constraints in the past? There have been several of us in the room that have led delegations there to Iraq with the U.S. private sector. And it's like – it's like pushing a noodle to make that happen. But nevertheless, the opportunities there are enormous, the investment laws – the investment law is actually quite progressive, and working in the WTO accession, there's a continuing policy effort.

What – is there a – (inaudible) – with respect to that element of national power to put something on the – on the (altar ?)?

MS. KAGAN: Ken, you're shaking your head yes. That means you get to answer the question.

MR. POLLACK: Sure. It's a great question, Dan. Let me – let me answer both the broad question that you asked and the specific one. And first point, I couldn't agree with you more that we have to think about what can be on offer in a very broad sense.

The security one is, in some ways, I think the one that the Iraqis are most aware of, because we've made it clear, you can buy weapons from us and we'll sell you pretty much anything in the arsenal. I mean, it's not quite the Shah; you can even have F-14s and the Phoenixes, but you know, F-16s, even Block 50s, is pretty good – it's pretty high up there.

Where I think we've been much, much worse is everywhere else. And my own experience with Iraqis, both from polling data and anecdotally, is that they kind of resented that a little bit, that they would like – you know, they'd be much more open to seeing a lot more. You know, look, they need – (inaudible) – they could use enormous assistance with their educational sector.

You know, one of things I'd love to see us doing is a lot more scholarship money for Iraqis. Bring them here, bring them to Europe, bring them – you know, send them to – (inaudible) – you know, send them to other places. You know, the Iraqi educational system is utterly devastated and they desperately need – first, they have a huge problem with unemployment. You could get a lot of those young unemployed people out of the country that way, teach them meaningful skills.

And beyond that, again, they need help rebuilding the agricultural sector, which is a huge area where you can have tremendous unemployment – oh, sorry, tremendous employment if you do it right. We’ve not been doing enough there. Again, across the board – I won’t go into every single area – but those are two examples.

And now the business sector, and I’m right there will you. And, you know, I’ve been wanting to see this happen for the longest time. And I’ve had any number of conversations with American firms thinking about going into Iraq who will come to me and say, you know, we’re thinking about doing it. We want to explore it a little bit more. Tell us about this, that and the other thing.

And my experience with American firms and why they don’t go in is it’s a combination of three things: The Iraqi legal system, which remains, you know, very arbitrary, incredibly difficult for American firms to get a handle on. You know, real concerns about rule of law related to it, so that even when they actually think they know the actual legal system being able to figure out whether the laws will actually apply becomes huge for them.

Second one is security. Some American companies, very concerned about their personnel. Other American companies not so concerned about their personnel. And for the ones who are not concerned about them, what I hear from them is corruption – that they are terrified of falling afoul of American anticorruption laws. And they’re very afraid of the extent of corruption in Iraq.

And yeah, these kind of create like a, you know, three-headed monster for American firms going into Iraq. So those are the three big impediments I’ve seen out there. But, yes, if we could help the Iraqis deal with those issues, obviously be tremendous.

MS. KAGAN: Please.

Q: Juliana Pilon; I teach at the Institute of World Politics. This is precisely the train of conversation that I would hoping would take place, you know. In light of what you just said, Ken, would you recommend, now that you’re a free man – (laughter) – on a bipartisan basis, would you recommend how the United States government can conceptualize the concept that – the idea of reconstruction? Not only did the Bush administration have problems with it – I’m sure because they – because of the fire alarm – (laughter) – but also – but also what is most disturbing is that the very idea – the very word has disappeared from the State Department.

What was the office of Civilization and Reconstruction is now the Bureau – which is good, it’s better and bigger – of Conflict and Stabilization. Who does – who does what, for lack of a better word, could be called reconstruction? And the business, education, NGO building, that the – and that that does, how is – how does this fit into our policies?

MS. KAGAN: I think that’s a great question for the whole panel. Who would like to begin? (Inaudible.)

MR. POLLACK: I'm going to start, again this – (inaudible) – particularly hear Laith's thoughts, because of his position at NED. You know, first thing, I'll start by saying I couldn't agree with you more. And, yeah, having a bipartisan policy toward Iraq or any of these big issues would be wonderful. And I think everybody in the room would heartily agree with that.

I think that you're right that, you know, we've known this for a long time that the mechanics, the kind of structure of the U.S. government doesn't lend itself well to this. And, you know, we've got people in the audience who long-term – people who've served for a long time at State or within the military. And they understand how these kind of post-conflict reconstruction projects get horribly mismanaged because they kind of fall in between what State does and what DOD does.

And, you know, let's remember, to be kind to our State Department brethren, they're supposed to do diplomacy. They're not actually, you know, the equivalent of kind of the British colonial office, which is closer to what would actually do this. We don't have an equivalent of that. And what we need is something like that. It shouldn't be a colonial office, obviously.

It should be about making – it should be, you know, an agency set up to do that kind of thing, to bring in people with the right skill sets. And, yeah, just putting it in State I don't think was the right idea either because, again, that's not State's core mission. It's not what their people are trained and promoted to do. It's not really, you know, within their – within their – you know, their core skill set.

But the last point that I'd make is that, you know, the other aspect of bipartisanship that I think is really missing is, you know, most of the things we talk about – this aid and assistance to Iraq – most of it actually is stuff that either the Iraqis could pay for or is cost-free, like diplomacy. But it actually, I think, would be helpful to front some money, because, yes, Iraq has potentially a lot of resources. But there are areas where it's hard for them to unlock those resources. It's much easier, in some cases, for the U.S. to unlock those resources.

And it wouldn't take a lot. I mean, we're talking about maybe a billion (dollars) maybe \$2 billion a year for Iraq. And to me, it's appalling that we can't even have the conversation about it. I mean, it's – I mean, you all know the “Charlie Wilson's War” scenario. We've all talked about how it's happening in Iraq again, that we've spent \$900 billion waging war in Iraq trying to build the country, and it, to me, is just despicable that we won't even talk about a billion dollars a year for some period of time to ensure that we don't squander, not just all those – that money, but then the 4,500 lives lost in it, plus the countless the soldiers who were maimed and otherwise injured in it.

And, you know, if the problem is finances, then my god, we've a \$13 trillion debt. Is anyone here going to tell me that \$5 billion for Iraq over five years is the problem with our \$13 trillion debt? That ought to be a bipartisan issue. The administration ought to be willing to have the guts to go down there to the Congress and say, by god, we need to do it. And the Republicans in Congress ought to have the guts to say, you know what, you're right. Long term, this is what matters. And \$5 billion is not going to break our financial problems, and it's not going to fix them.

MS. KAGAN: Thank you, Ken. I'm not sure that any of us can follow with the same amount of passion, but I think we're going to try. Laith?

MR. KUBBA: Well, look, I mean, this is a great idea. There's no question about it. Somebody needs to be bold enough visionary – draw on the lessons that took place. And clearly whoever does it will have their place in history and it be recognized. But the reality is, great ideas and visions (hate ?) the politics, the reality. And I think it gets lost, it gets diluted.

I can just throw some parallels or lessons in the work where I think – that I work at. At NED with really small budget, quite low-key influential, et cetera – look at the mess currently we have in Egypt, by which the same minister whose been overseeing billions of dollars in aid money, today she is out against the U.S., against the American NGOs who are working in that country, and getting away with it.

I think, to emphasize what Ken said, I am a strong believer the bureaucracy is not designed to implement this. I think Congress ought to endorse such an initiative, but they ought to be more creative, look at really good practices and lessons how it can be done better.

And just to underline the point about – (inaudible) – Turkey is doing very well Iraq today. They did not participate in the – (word inaudible) – but the Turkish companies really are everywhere, from Basra all the way to the Kurdish area. And maybe some lessons need to be learned there. But with small sums of money and intelligent intervention, I think we can – the U.S. can earn a lot of credit in Iraq, and create a lot of good influence.

MS. KAGAN: I am going to take the moderator's prerogative to extend this point. It seems to me that Iraq has been a toxic component of U.S. policy for more than a decade, and it does really bring out very visceral reactions on both sides of the aisle. One would think that now that troops are indeed out of Iraq, we could actually talk about Iraq as it deserves to be spoken about, that is a fundamentally important, central country within the Middle East, which deserves to have a coherent U.S. policy created to accommodate it into the new international arena.

I think it's vital that the United States do that and begin to recognize that it does not have a policy on Iraq simply on the basis of a decision of whether or not there are U.S. troops there. There's much more to policy than that. And now that we have had that decision made, it is time to move forward. What does moving forward mean? Well, for one thing, I think it does mean actually having a vision of what Iraq can be within the international system.

The fact of the matter is that it is a land of great opportunities and incredible potential for all of the reasons that we've described. It's also, because of its key geographical location, some country that it is very important to orient in accordance with the interests and the allies of the United States rather than in accordance with the enemies of the United States – self-declared.

And therefore, it is actually necessary to think through how the United States can be absolutely rock solid as a potential supporter of Iraq as it tries to be independent of its neighbors,

but also that the United States recognize that Iraq does in fact have a political system and a political discourse, in which the U.S. has a stake.

It's not because we like to manipulate other people's politics – we do it so badly that I think no American could like it – it is because, actually, the outcome of that political debate and political discussion has incredible importance for whether or not Iraq is oriented as an independent state, aligned perhaps with Turkey and other allies, or whether in fact it allows itself to be manipulated against its desires by its Iranian neighbors.

This should be something that is very much a component of the policy that the United States is choosing to adopt against Iran. And, Laith, I really do appreciate your reminder that, in point of fact, the Iraqis have decided that they are not supportive of the U.S. sanctions, and that therefore the United States does not have a coherent policy on sanctioning Iran. Therefore, we might want to consider what we should actually do regionwide, given that circumstance.

These are all geostrategic reasons, not just moral reasons, for the United States to rethink its policy on Iraq, sharpen its focus, engage in a discussion about how the United States can help, and recognize that the United States has a profound interest in the outcome of the political disputes and the violent disputes that are ongoing now in a country that everyone here cares about so much.

So with that, I want to thank all of the panelists and all of you for joining us at ISW. And I really appreciate your ongoing interest and determination to follow what is happening in Iran. Thank you very much for (being here ?). (Applause.)

(END)