THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

THE ARC OF CRISIS: BEIRUT TO BAGHDAD

Washington, D.C.

Thursday, February 6, 2014

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. O'HANLON: Salman, good morning. Do you hear me, my friend? We'll do our little technical check while --

MR. SHAIKH: Good morning.

MR. O'HANLON: Good morning.

MR. SHAIKH: Good morning. I can hear you.

MR. O'HANLON: Good. And since we're about to start here, we'll consider this sort of a gentle roll into the actual formal initiation. Are you folks able to see and hear Salman from Doha? Is it working pretty well? And by the way, one more -- good.

One more thing I should say as we sort of do this rolling start is that if you would like to follow us on Twitter, there's a hash tag of -- or a specific site, #Syriacrisis. But this is not just about Syria, and that will be proven as soon as Ken Pollack shows up onstage, as well. There he is. And so anyway, we're doing a gentle rolling start here, Ken.

MR. POLLACK: I'm going to tweet my impressions while the thing is going on.

MR. O'HANLON: Okay. Okay, so I think we're all in pretty good shape here. Thank you, Dan. Good morning, everyone. Now we will begin. I'm Mike O'Hanlon of the Foreign Policy program. I'm joined by three of my illustrious colleagues who are experts on the broader Middle East, Ken Pollack, Michael Doran and Salman Shaikh.

Salman is joining us, as you see, by video from Doha, from the Brookings Doha Center. Ken and Michael are here at Brookings, of course, with me. And we are going to talk about the Arc of Crisis in the broader Middle East. This is an unusual opportunity, because we have people who are individual experts on the entire

region, even though they're often specialists on one part of it or another.

And so the overlap and the synergies and the connections between the different countries, these are big parts of the subject that we want to explore today. So as many of you know, Salman has worked a great deal on Syria, including a lot of onsite research and connections with the various parties to the conflict, thinking about how we might work our way towards what seems impossible at this stage, but bless him for trying, and you know, let's hope that it can move in a positive direction with time, a peace-making effort in the broader Syrian conflict. He also is of course, active more generally throughout the broader Middle East and has been just a fantastic scholar as Brookings has established its Doha Center and really seen it come to the prominent fore in recent years.

Michael Doran is extremely well known as a Syria specialist and writer; has been one of the most prolific, one of the most provocative, and frankly, one of the more critical of existing American policy, and I think in many ways, his predictions of the likelihood of frustration along the way have been borne out and vindicated, and we'll look forward to hearing more from him today, not only about what's happened so far, but of course, where we should go next.

Kenneth Pollack, my good friend and co-author on "Iraq Matters" and a longstanding Iraq expert is of course, a more general Persian Gulf expert and has written a fantastic book on Iran, "Unthinkable," which has gained a great deal of critical acclaim in recent months. But he continues to focus on Iraq and the broader Middle East, and that includes connections with the Syria crisis.

So, what we're going to do today, in just a moment, is to begin with Salman and ask for his take from the region as to what he sees. What I want to do up here in my part of the conversation is really just two main things. I want to begin asking

everyone to assess where we are, how we've gotten here; you know, basically their once-over on the situation, their assessment of American policy, but specifically, conditions on the ground in the broader region that we're talking about, with a specific focus on Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and other countries in the vicinity.

Once we've done that, the obvious next question is where do we go from here? Is there anything we can do to make the situation better, or at least prevent it from getting worse? And once we've done that, of course, I'll be inviting my colleagues to speak to and address and even challenge each other or question each other along the way. But within about a half hour, we'll get to you and your questions, as well, and try to work that out such that you can speak to any of us or address Salman in Doha.

So, without further ado, Salman, thank you for being with us. Good evening to you. And if I could, please, the question, as you heard, is just simply, how do you see the situation unfolding in recent months? We all know the general lay of the land. The failure, or at least the frustration of the Geneva peace process, the ongoing tragedy of the Syria conflict. But which specific points would you want to call to our attention as we begin the discussion today?

MR. SHAIKH: Well, it's great to be with you, and good morning. I daresay, it's a little bit warmer here than where you are, but it's great to be with you. Well, you said, where has the situation gone in the last few months? I would say to you over the last couple of years, it's gone from bad to worse.

And the trajectory of where we are in this space between the Mediterranean and the Gulf is looking at potentially very difficult scenarios. The Syrian conflict has opened up a can of worms in this region. I was just in Lebanon, for example, just a few days ago. I've never seen, and I've been in and out of Lebanon for about 15, 20 years now -- I've never seen such a silent fear and insecurity as I felt then.

The roads were pretty much empty. I was told that even the sale of fuel for cars has dropped and it's palpable in that respect. And of course, it's borne out by now a fairly regular amount of car bombs or such things going off every few days in Lebanon, and of course, in Iraq, which Ken can speak to, that's going at an even bigger clip.

And then of course, with regards to Syria, what this tells us then, and in fact, many of us were saying this a year and a half ago, two years ago -- the situation in Syria cannot be managed. Its effects cannot be managed, whether humanitarian, whether in terms of the human rights and other abuses, in terms of the killing or in terms of the regional spillover. The situation in Syria has to be resolve. And in that respect, you need clear leadership.

And the leadership, to a certain degree, has come from regional players, but I would say to you that's not enough. This is where we have needed a much more active U.S. effort than the one that we've seen so far. And so, whilst the Geneva effort continues, and here it's speaking to diplomats who were in the room over those last few days, and who are now preparing to go back to Geneva, there's no -- obviously, there's no illusions that this can be a game changer at this point in time.

We're starting off a very fragile process which rests on a regime which doesn't seem to want to talk, and may not even show up at this point in time. And on the other side, an opposition which has too narrow a base. I was told by one senior diplomat, the reason why the opposition did so well was because it was such a concentrated group. But that's because it's probably only representing a few hundred people at this point in time.

So, if that is the thrust of what we're hoping for in order to be able to change the dynamics in the entire region, then I'm afraid we don't have the right tools at

our disposal right now.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. A very good and helpful overview. Let me pry a little bit on one more question, one follow up before we go to Michael, and he may want to touch on this as well, which is, do you think the Geneva Peace Talks that just happened and may resume are even a good idea?

Obviously, there's been an effort, especially after their apparent failure, to manage expectations downward, and most of us were pretty skeptical from the start that they could go anywhere. But of course, there's also a truism in peace negotiations in civil wars. They take a long time, and maybe we shouldn't have high hopes, and a first round can really just be a breaking of the ice.

But there's also a counter argument in this case that Geneva became sort of the substitute for a real policy, and we tried to, you know, suggest that there was really some hope for a process that really didn't have any, and we actually disheartened some of our allies, and perhaps gave the side regime further legitimacy on the international stage by even convening the talks.

You know all these arguments better than I. Was it even a good idea to have these talks as they've recently played out?

MR. SHAIKH: Well, as I said quite recently in a tweet, and I stand by it, they've been ill prepared, ill conceived and ill timed. Now that they've started, there is a process. And I guess the opposition is taking some heart, those who did come, and in terms of their performance. And the regime has not really equipped itself that well.

Now, I would say that even with this process, we have too narrow a group of contingencies. We have the regime, and we have a part of the opposition. In and of themselves, they don't represent anywhere close to the majority of Syrians, and they certainly are not yet being able to encapsulate the views, the middle ground of what

I think that majority wants and what we continually keep hearing.

If the process is to go anywhere, and yes, it's very fragile. And you know, broadening it right now may not seem to be a very good idea to many, especially those who are trying to facilitate those discussions, in the medium term, we're going to have to make sure that there are people who are getting involved who have much more influence, credibility and presence on the ground who don't necessarily come from either of those camps, but who do want change in Syria and who do believe that the yoke of this regime has to go away.

But it has to, in parallel, these talks -- and we're seeing this already now -- there has to be a certain amount of pressure put on, I would say to the regime, in particular. And that pressure just hasn't been applied. Instead, the regime has gone on this offensive in a number of areas, including this barbaric practice of barrel bombing. In places like Aleppo and Daria and others, that is going on.

On the other side, we have still a very disjointed, disunited effort between rebels, and of course, infighting between them. Until you start to see the dynamic from the ground, diplomacy is not going to be able to change or shift the actual trajectory of this conflict.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. And sir, now, as we continue to lay the groundwork for a subsequent discussion about what our policy options should be, and I look forward to coming back to you in a few minutes on that.

Michael, over to you just to give us your sense. You've been -- again, you've been suggesting we're in trouble here with our policy and with this war for a long time. You've been warning against the approach we've taken. So in a sense, you've been very clearly vindicated. But what else would you say to call our attention to recent dynamics as we think about also, new opportunities in this conflict?

MR. DORAN: Thanks. Let me start by stealing something from Salman. I actually stole this from him some time ago and put it in print. Salman once said that in the region, we've got two alliance systems, the horizontal and the vertical. The horizontal is Iran, increasing the Malachi government, Syria, Assad Syria, Hezbollah and sort of Hamas.

And the vertical is the Gulf States -- Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and to a certain extent, Turkey, as well. And the two clash at Syria.

And that, increasingly, is determining all of the behavior of all of the major actors across the board. So, I think we have to treat this whole area, this crescent from Beirut to Baghdad as a whole. You have to have a policy toward the whole. Any policy that you adopt is going to have contradictions in it, because the Iraqi arena is different from the Syria arena is different from the Lebanese.

So, you have to start with the big picture, and then you have to manage the contradictions in the particular areas. We are tilting demonstrably towards Iran. Historically, we have been the representative of the vertical powers. But since the Iran deal, since the chemical weapons deal with Assad, since the Iran nuke deal and since the chemical weapons deal with Assad, we have tilted toward Iran.

Now, I actually happen to think that that's strategy, but I have to admit that the evidence is not entirely clear. And if somebody wanted to really argue with me, I could see how you could doubt that. But the effect, regardless of the intention, even if it's just ad hockery in each one of these individual arenas, the effect is that we've tilted toward Iran.

We're helping Malachi against the Sunnis in Iraq. We are -- our substitution -- I would answer your question about Geneva by saying that it is the substitution of process over policy. It is process completely disconnected from any policy

that could affect the outcome on the ground. And the effect of that, of going for process only, has been to strengthen Assad and the Russians and the Iranians.

And the same is true in Lebanon. And in Lebanon, we're also tilting toward the Iranians now and toward Hezbollah. Everybody in the region feels that, and to me, that is the number one biggest mistake that we have made, because it's a zero sum game on the ground in Syria for everyone. And we have decided either to sit on the fence with the effect of supporting Iran or we have actually decided to support Iran and Assad -- at least, say be neutral for would be a kind of more nuanced way of saying it.

The problem is, it's not going to solve -- there's a stalemate on the ground. Assad is barbaric. He's not going to reform. He's not going to open up. There's not going to be a more responsive, more democratic system as long as he's there. But we are unwilling to grab that problem by the nettles and do something about it.

Now unfortunately, this is bad foreign policy, but it's not bad domestic policy. I mean, another possibility in terms of trying to understand what the president is up to is saying he's got one major goal, which is to get past 2014 without any problems in the Middle East. He also wants to make his Iran nuclear deal work. That's the number one thing that he's concerned about. So, he doesn't want a problem with Iran in Syria.

So, as long as there's a primarily domestic concern and none of the problems that we're seeing in the region become a domestic political problem for the president, then he can handle it. But I think that the number one thing we have to do is, we have to realize that we are sitting on the fence, and so we have demoralized our allies and we have given more and more confidence to Assad that he can wait us out and that he can win.

And until we decide to come up with a policy that will actually change the balance on the ground, will actually change the calculus of Assad, we don't have a

chance.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Let me ask you, though, two quick follow ups before I go to Ken. And one of them is, and I'm just trying to clarify what I heard you just say and make sure I understand it correctly.

Are you implying or suggesting that we actually have to choose between the Iran nuclear deal and a better Syria policy? In other words, if we do what we should in Syria, we have to forego progress on the Iranian nuclear front, because we're not going to be to have the diplomatic engagement with Tehran that may lead to a peaceful resolution of that crisis. Is that a zero sum gain between those --?

And the related question is, what are the most fundamental big picture stakes, because the United States should be thinking about it in this conflict. You just suggested that maybe the president has an acceptable domestic policy, or at least maybe he feels that he does. My guess is, you would probably disagree, however, with that. Even though you just said, you would probably, if you had a chance to speak to President Obama, you'd probably tell him, Mr. President, this is actually not even going to work as domestic policy, because over time, something bad is going to happen in the region that's going to affect the United States and your legacy, and therefore, you shouldn't delude yourself into thinking that this short-term fix -- that's my guess of where you really would come from. So, can you spell that out a little bit?

MR. DORAN: Yeah, I can answer all of this, and I think pretty quickly. With regard to the last point first, absolutely. For me, the chemical weapons crisis, if we can call it that, in September, should have been a wakeup call for the president. In other words, whether he's thought it through this way or not -- I mean, the president is following Sarah Palin's advice on Syria. Right? The Sarah Palin policy advice is let Allah sort him out. Right? Now, the president is much more nuanced in the way he says it, and so on.

Those are not the words he uses, but the effect is exactly the same. We're letting Allah sort it out.

Now, that assumes that we actually don't have vital interests in Syria. Right? This thing can go this way. This conflict can go this way. It can go that way. We don't care. Right? Obviously, that's not true, and we can see it's not true, because in September, all of the sudden, the president said, oh, wait, we do have a vital interest in Syria. Right?

Then, they were all taken care of with chemical weapons. We don't have any more vital interest anymore. Now, since the failure of Geneva, they've ramped up the messaging very, very noticeably to say, hey, there's a major Al-Qaeda threat in Syria.

I'm actually suspicious of that, by the way, because I'm waiting for the next shoe to drop. And I think the next shoe to drop is going to be oh, there's a major Al-Qaeda threat in Syria. We've got to work with Iran to take care of it. Right? We'll wait and see what they're -- they've raised it up now. Kerry said it. Clapper said it. Surrogates are saying it. Al-Qaeda threat in Syria.

Well, they have yet to say, "and therefore." And I'm waiting to hear what therefore is going to be. For me, though, what I hear is, hey, we have a vital interest there. So, sooner or later, it is going to become something that we're going to have to deal with. And so, we should be putting together the alliance now that can work with this to solve the problem, so that we don't end up having to do it unilaterally.

And then just quickly on the nuclear deal. There's a trade-off on Syria for a nuclear deal only if you accept the Obama administration's theory of the case regarding what's happening in Iran, because their theory is that this moderate movement has taken a considerable amount of power in Iran, and it needs to be nurtured by us so that we can cut a deal with Iran, not just on the nuke deal, but in the region at large.

So, we need to demonstrate, right? To put it in Christian terms, we have to witness, right, before them our interest in cutting a deal with them, and that will strengthen them. And I have a totally different theory of the case. I think if we're going to get what we want on the nuclear file, we are going to snatch that program, that nuclear program from the claws of the regime by force; not necessarily military force, but we're going to have to take it away with them kicking and screaming, which means we have to ramp up the pressure, not play nice. When we play nice, they just take advantage of us.

MR. O'HANLON: Ken, my guess is you've already heard enough to have plenty of say, so I'm not going to wind myself up with another big question. Please, speak to this entire region, and of course, with adding in a rock to the mix, as well.

MR. POLLACK: Thanks, Mike. Yeah, obviously, I think this has been great. I think that both Mike and Salman have put a number of great things on the table.

Let me contribute four quick points that I think are worth talking about, some of which have been touched on by both Mike and Salman. Others I think need to be put out there in a little bit starker fashion.

First, I think it's important to recognize, as both Salman and Mike have already been suggesting, that what we've got going on in the region today is a combination of sui generous problems in each of the countries, coupled with overarching problems that link of them and span all of them, but aren't limited to any of them.

And I think that it's a huge mistake to try to understand what is going on in the region without reference to both of those problems. All right? So, just to give you an example. In Iraq, the Iraqi government would very much like to believe or have us believe that this is all the fault of the Syrian civil war; that it's nothing but spillover from Syria. And that is not untrue. It's just not complete. All right?

And in fact, I would argue that Iraq's problems start Iraq's problems start

with Iraq's own politics. And even there, I would argue the problem of Iraq's politics are structural, not personal. Okay? And I think another mistake that we are making is to assume that this is all just about aberrant personalities, and different sides have their views about which personality is in the wrong. But again, the problem is not personality driven.

You could flip the situation, and Nouriel Malachi could be leading the opposition. And opposition, and take our pick of the opposition leaders, and that person could be the prime minister. And chances are, you'd have the same set of problems. Okay? The problems in Iraq are structural. They're about the power vacuum. They're in particular, about fear, and that's another issue that spans the region.

So much of what is going on in the region today is really about fear. It's about the fear of so many leaders that if this happens or if that happens, they'll be slaughtered. Their people will be slaughtered. They've to make these decisions, not to say there isn't opportunism going on there, as well. But the opportunism seems to come mostly from these marginal players; people like the Al-Qaeda leadership of all different stripes, all of whom are have-nots, all of whom see opportunities to gain power, and they're the ones, obviously pushing some of the more dangerous things going on, and so much of what's going on with these leaders elsewhere in the region reacting out of fear of what's going on. That's what you see going on in a place like Iraq.

That said, second point, there is no question that Syria is having a pronounced impact, a point that both Salman and Mike made. The spillover from the Syrian civil war is very problematic. It is very problematic in Iraq; as I said, that's only one of the things going on in Iraq. But it is an important thing going on in Iraq.

It's also having a very important effect everywhere else. It's having a very important effect in Lebanon. We don't talk enough about what's going on in

Lebanon with the violence creeping back into Lebanon and the potential for renewed civil war there.

Look at what's going on in Turkey. Again, Turkey's own crises are also innate to Turkey, about Turkish politics. They are also, to a certain extent, wrapped up in the structure of Turkish politics and the personnel is involved. But they are also being heavily influenced by what's going on in Syria.

And if we had an Henri Barkey or an Omar Taspinar or you know, one of the other great Turkey experts, I assure you that they would be saying Syria is having an impact on Turkey's politics, as well. And we could say the same thing about Jordan. Okay?

And obviously, all of these things are being influenced by Syria, and I think it's an important thing to just ask ourselves, and I've been asking myself this question a lot about why is Syria different from Iraq? All right? We had the exact same civil war going on in Iraq from 2005 to 2007. And in fact, you could make the case that the Iraqi civil war should have been worse. Iraq is a much more important country than Syria is because of its oil wealth, because of its strategic position, as Iraqis like to say, the eastern flank of the Arab world, because of all the countries that it borders. Iraq is a far more important Arab country than Syria is.

And yet, the spillover from Iraq did not have quite the same impact as the spillover from Syria. It did have a big impact. And we forget at this point, just how bad things were getting in 2006 with the Saudis threatening to intervene militarily in Iraq, and the Iranians, obviously, all of the place.

But I would put it to you, and I know this going to be unpopular in many circumstances, but I think it is correct that the big difference is that the United States was in Iraq. And that's my third point, is again, our absence from the region. All right?

In 2005 - 2006, the Saudis, the Emiratis, the Kuwaitis were furious about Iraq; furious at the Bush administration for invading, creating a power vacuum and allowing the civil war to occur. But their feeling was you have 160,000 troops in the country. You were committing hundreds of billions of dollars. You need to clean up this mess, and you will. And they felt quite good about actually leaving it to us to clean up.

And one of the things that was always striking about the Iraqi civil war was that you didn't have more involvement from the Estonian states. The Iranians were in there all over the place in full force. But the Saudis, the other Gulf States, the Turks, the Jordanians provided a little bit of support, but it was actually quite striking how little they were providing. And so much of that was because we were there; not the case in Syria where they see the United States as entirely absent, and they believe they are directly having to fight Iran. They can't rely on the Americans to do it for them.

And that's the fourth point is that we have to recognize this point that both Mike and Salman have talked about. Mike talked about it in reference to stealing something from Salman; about these two different alliances that are waging a war all across the region. And that is how they see it.

When you talk to Saudis, the Saudis talk about what's going on in the region. They talk Sunni-Shia, Arab-Persian, Iranian-Saudi as if those were all synonyms for each other. They don't make distinctions among them. They see this as a region wide war, and they're pissed at us, because they see exactly what Mike does.

Now, I disagree with Mike. I think that what Mike is portraying is an exaggeration, and I also do believe that to the extent that what's going on in the region is caused by the United States, it's more out of a desire for the administration to pull back; his last point about not being interested in the region as opposed to the strategic argument that he was making earlier on. But nevertheless, I think that the impact is

there. It is certainly what the states of the region feel, and this is part of that fear; that sense that we're not there to fight the Iranians on their behalf, and so they've got to do it themselves.

And it's important to keep in mind that the Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, have never backed down from a fight from Iran. In fact, typically our problems have been they've been too aggressive with the Iranians. And that's what I see going on in the region.

The Saudis and the Gulf States are terrified of Iran. They see an Iran unconstrained by the United States. They feel the need to take it on directly, and as a result, we're getting Saudi-Iranian or Arab-Persian, if you want to think of that in those terms, or as we tend to like to see it, Sunni-Shia conflict all across the region stemming from this basic issue.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you very much. And now, I'd like to have my second main question, and then we'll go to you. And I'm just going to ask the same question to each of our three panelists. We'll start with Salman and go in the same order. And it's the simple question, what do we do? What do we do next?

But I want to focus in on Syria. Now, everyone has been emphasizing the links and this whole event today is the Arc of Crisis. So, people are more than welcome, of course, to put their Syria recommendations in a broader context. And you're more than welcome, in the discussion period, of course, to ask whatever you want about this region, including specifically on Iraq or Lebanon or Turkey or what have you.

But I want to begin with this one question which is still big enough to get things rolling. What is the next thing the United States should do by way of a better policy towards the Syrian civil conflict in the context of this broader Arc of Crisis?

And Salman, you hinted at some of your thoughts, but if I could ask you

to follow up and develop them in a little bit more detail, please?

MR. SHAIKH: Sure. Well, I'm grateful for Mike for stealing my sort of alliances thing. Yes, there is a balance of alliance struggle that's going on, and Ken, you know, very well sort of amplified that in terms of how the region sees the differences, vis-à-vis the Iranians in particular, the gulf region.

What I would say though, and it's noticeable when we speak to Syrians in particular, whilst others in the region and certainly outside may often term these in terms of balance of alliance struggles, or certainly in sectarian terms, many Syrian players don't.

Let me explain that. Syrians, I have been struck, often, even despite what is going on -- sure, on the battlefield, there are sectarians, certainly, sectarians things that are going on. But by and large, what we've forgotten is that Syrians do have a connective national identity. And by and large, Syrians think like Syrians first.

They have all these differences, but these are differences which they have learned to manage and to live with and to prosper from for many, many decades; many centuries, in fact. And it's that realization, I think, that we haven't really built on. When I talk about an inter-Syrian dialogue that brings in the middle ground, and interestingly brings in those who have stayed to one side, either out of fear or either hopelessness, or because they feel that they cannot get involved; that the right framework doesn't exist, that's precisely, I think the job that's ahead of us.

In terms of trying to foster an intra-Syrian dialogue, that is as inclusive as possible. That does bring in key constituencies and communities. The Muslim community, the Christian community, the business elite, the urban bourgeois elite. It's not -- it will business be needed if we are to stabilize Syria and look at a more stable transition. The religious Shiites, the tribal chiefs, especially in those important tribal areas

in the north and the east which are becoming, to a certain degree, safe havens for Al-Qaeda and linking up across the border with Iraq.

Those are the kinds of constituencies that we've got to be able to attract into a dialogue. And that, in my experience, is probably in the medium term, our best hope of trying to turn the tide.

And let me say, this kind of nationalist thinking, if a framework was created, a safer space was created, a legitimate international space for this kind of dialogue, I think this kind of sentiment would spread like wildfire within Syrian communities in a very positive way. But we are where we are, and we are now in a situation where, by which in parallel, we have to be able to also use another tool, which is, I think the credible threat of coercion, if necessary, even force, in order to be able to stop particularly, I think the main instigator of (Inaudible), which is the Assad regime from doing what it is doing to its own people.

So, the parallel part of this strategy is to see how you can affect the situation on the ground. Now, when you take sort of a running order of who are the groups who are fighting, it changes by the week. There are experts out there much better than myself who are tracking this in terms of the fighting groups on the ground on the opposition side.

We have this Islamic front, which is probably the biggest, which comprises a number of the main sort of groupings, but then there are other new fronts which are growing more regionally based. The challenge now is how you can bring them together, and many of them have proven that they don't want the extremists, the foreign occupiers, as they call them, in their midst.

In fact, over 2,300 Syrians have died fighting each other and fighting against the extremists. And by the way, the extremists have launched something like 40

plus car bombs or suicide operations not against the regime, but against other fighters who are supposed to be fighting against Bashar al-Assad.

The problem is that we don't have one channel of support to these people. We have not been able to help build a more unified structure. And here, I'll say it again -- I've said it before, is that the regional players by themselves cannot do it. This is where the United States' involvement in terms of providing the logistical support, in terms of providing the kind of trading -- scaling up of trading that is required, not a few hundred or a few thousand, but 20, 30,000, 40,000.

If that advice that President Obama was first given in the summer of 2012 had been taken by his national security and foreign policy team, we may well have had 30,000 or so Syrians who would have been trained now, and more of an effort to build a command and control structure.

It seems as if there will be a reorganization of the SMC, the military counsel. Many are saying that is becoming more and more irrelevant. The simple fact is, we've got to find a vehicle which is more inclusive of those fighting elements in order to be able to take the fight to the Assad regime as part of a broader national strategy.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. I just want to make sure I understood, too, a couple of points, because there's so much that's packed into this issue. I don't think I heard you say that we should be increasing our supply of lethal weaponry to the Syrian opposition, but I want to give you a chance to clarify.

And I also don't think I heard you talk about a direct American military intervention; whether it's a no fly zone or protection of certain safe havens for training inside of Syrian territory or some of the other ideas kicking around. Can I just make sure I heard you right on those points?

MR. SHAIKH: Well, they were missions, Mike. I guess I would say there

needs to be -- and what's been noticeable in the run-up to Geneva and after the chemical weapons sort of issue was "resolved," was that the credible threat of the use of force was taken off the table. That was a mistake.

The credible threat of the use of force for certain objectives has to exist when it comes to direct U.S. engagement, and the engagement of allies. You cannot have a situation that we've had over the past month or so or more, but certainly which is intensified, which is the dropping of barrel bombs as well as the use of scud missiles and other such sort of terrors of war being unleashed on largely civilian populations, and for it to go unanswered.

So, I think that credible threat of the use of force should be put back on the table, if this kind of practice continues. And yes, with regards to the opposition, it is again asking not just for our anti-tank and sort of other more advanced lethal weapons, but manpads. I know this is a problematic issue, but there has to be a way to protect these civilian populations from the air.

And if we were able to put together a kind of force where we had some confidence, and I believe that's probably possible now -- I believe that's possible -- then those kinds of advanced weapons such as manpads should also be given. It is unbearable, it is unforgivable to watch video after video of civilians being buried alive by the kinds of munitions that are being used against them. This should not be happening in this particular conflict or any other conflict.

And in this respect, I think the United States and its key allies have a role to play. They must give an ultimatum whilst these so called peace talks continue, and they must follow through on it, if necessary.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Very, very helpful.

And now, I'm just going to ask Michael to please comment on what you

think should be the next step in American policy towards this Syria conflict.

MR. DORAN: Basically, I agree with almost everything that Salman said. I'll just add a few points for emphasis.

Actually, let me summarize what I took Ken to have said, and he can correct me if I don't summarize it correctly. It's also what I think. If you don't have a Syria policy, you don't have a human rights policy. If you don't have a Syria policy, you don't have a counter-terrorism policy. If you don't have a Syria policy, you don't have a Middle East policy at large. And I would add my own phrase, if you don't have a Syria policy, you don't have an Iran containment policy.

And we don't have a Syria policy, so we don't have any of those things. The number one thing I think we need to do, first of all, is put together the coalition to support the opposition. And that's not the Friends of Syria. I can't remember how many -- I counted at one time how many countries are in the Friends of Syria. I know, Salman, what is it, 120, 78? Whatever it is, it's a rule in international politics, you know, the bigger the body, the less effective it is. And that was the goal.

The Friends of Syria is so big because we didn't want to do anything. But we wanted to have lots of process to make it look we were doing something. If you want to actually do something serious, you bring together the people who are actually directly affected and want to do something. So, we want to bring together the Turks, the Saudis, the Qataris, the Jordanians, the French and maybe the British. I think the British have pretty much dropped out, though.

But bring them together and build the coalition that will support the opposition to change the balance of power on the ground, and to have a proclaimed regime change policy. Regime change policy doesn't mean that we're putting U.S. boots on the ground. It means that we're just saying explicitly, our goal is to topple Assad, and

we're going to do whatever it takes.

We're going to -- everything that we do is going to be designed to achieve that goal, and everything we do in that arena should be designed to cause pain and discomfort and to weaken Assad, Hezbollah and the Iranians. And everything we do should be designed to build up the morale of the opposition.

Then, we're going to have lots of difficulties and contradictions, because there's going to be a question of who's inside the opposition, who's outside? Who deserves support? Who doesn't? These are things that are going to have to be managed. They can be managed if you actually want to manage them. They are difficult, for sure, but they have to be managed.

Our job is to be the strategic brain of the coalition. We provide the intelligence support. We provide a lot of the training. Right? We come up with the strategy. We build the units that will conduct the strategy, and the president should call his national security team together, and he should say, here's the goal that I want to achieve. I want to topple this guy. I want to do it with the least number of U.S. boots on the ground, the least commitment of U.S. -- direct application of U.S. force.

But give me several different options, and we can start with options of building up special forces teams that will go in in a very targeted way as part of a larger strategy to bring down the regime and to build up the opposition, up to and including no fly zones and direct application of force.

But if the president decides that for domestic political reasons in his own proclivities, he doesn't want direct application of force and a greater U.S. direct commitment, then he can pull back from that and still have a regime change policy. He would find that there's an enormous amount of energy in the region to do this, and people would be willing to take on a lot of the risks and a lot of the costs. I'm talking about the

Saudis and the other gulfees and so on, if there was U.S. leadership, if there was a credible strategy and if there was intelligence support and everything else to make it happen.

The alternative -- it's not an attractive proposition and there's no guarantee of success and there's going to be lots of problems down the road. But the alternative we can see before us. Salman and I already two years ago, maybe even longer, said if you don't build up the opposition, if you don't create an option for a non Al-Qaeda opposition, then you're going to have a vacuum, and into the vacuum is going to come Iran and Al-Qaeda, and the problems are going to get worse, and the cost of solving them is going to get greater.

And I think that that was true a year and a half ago, or whenever we first wrote it. I think it's true today. If we don't start doing this now, the problem is just going to get worse and we're going to find on down the line it's going to cost us even more.

MR. O'HANLON: Before I turn to Ken, let me -- since you and Salman have agreed on a fair amount, and I probably agree with most of what you're saying, too, but nonetheless, for the sake of the conversation, we should ask some skeptical questions, and I'm sure some of you probably have some, as well. So we'll get to that fairly soon.

But one question I would have is frankly, how long is it going to take to be effective in this policy, given that we didn't heed your advice two years ago and things have gotten worse? It looks to me as if the opposition is so fractured and so weak that to make a meaningful military change on the battlefield is going to take a long time. It doesn't mean it's a bad idea, but I would just like to get a sense of what you anticipate.

And then second, of course, there's the Jeremy Shapiro question. He put it in Seinfeld terms. You know, what happens next? Dah dah dah dah dah dah. And

then there's stability in Syria. How does your policy lead to stability? You've talked about getting rid of Assad, but we all know from the Iraq experience that that is not going to be the end of the road.

So, we have to think about what comes after Assad, and that presumably has to be part of the policy. Now, I know Ken's going to speak to that issue, as well, but can you begin to bring that part of the question in?

MR. DORAN: Ken's getting itchy. He'll go in and I'll come in after him. We'll tag team.

MR. O'HANLON: Okay. So let's do that.

MR. DORAN: Yeah.

MR. O'HANLON: Tag him out?

MR. POLLACK: Good, good, good.

MR. DORAN: Okay.

MR. POLLACK: All right. So I want to back up a little bit, just make a couple of interesting remarks, and then I'm going to jump right in and get to it.

First point: As I've said many times in the past, my biggest problem with the administration's approach has been this kind of half-hearted, half measures, getting ourselves dragged little by little into a quagmire which I think is the absolute worst approach to this.

I think we need to take a much more decisive approach. I have in the past, said you know, we can stay out of it. There is an argument based on American domestic politics and the difficulties of doing it. I think that that is a reasonable approach.

I think that there is the alternative argument, which Salman and Mike have just articulated, which I'm going to add to in just a moment. And I'll say that for many of the reasons that Salman and Mike have articulated, I am increasingly starting to

lean in that direction. Several months ago, certainly a year ago, I was, you know, dead set in the middle. I could go in either direction. What I didn't like was this kind of creeping intervention in Syria, which I thought was just disastrous.

As I said, I'm kind of inclining in that direction, because as we go along, for me, the biggest issue out there, and this is coming from a realist perspective, is the spillover is getting worse and worse. And you know, I am a humanitarian interventionist. I do believe in the human rights dimension. But as an American and someone who thinks about where the American public is, I have to think about in terms of interest.

And six months, a year ago, I think it was something out there you could say, look, the spillover is going to get bad. We should try to prevent the spillover before it happens. But it was a harder case to make six months to a year ago.

Now, watching what's going on in Iraq, watching what's going on in Lebanon, watching what's going on in Turkey and Jordan, I am becoming increasingly concerned, and so I'm starting to incline in that direction. That said, I would describe the right intervention as flowing or as being modeled on what was did in the Balkans with Croatia in particular, to a lesser extent, Bosnia, as you, Mike, have very eloquently written about the least well of all with the KLA on Kosovo.

But I think Croatia and the Bosniaks offer a very good model. And here, it's a slightly different approach from what Mike laid out. For me, it doesn't start with different options. It starts with building an honest to goodness Syrian opposite Army, one that is capable of defeating the Assad regime on the battlefield, one that is capable of holding territory, one that is capable as forming a stable institution around which you could a Syrian state, which starts to get to your second question, Mike.

When I think about what we did in Croatia, you know, everybody is talking about Dayton. Right? That's what we wanted from these talks, is we wanted

Dayton. But then when he thought about what it took to get to Dayton. Sometime, you know, there are lots of different things that happened, and sometimes, people will mention the NATO air strikes, and there's no question the NATO air strikes played a role.

But the most important thing that got us to Dayton was the Croatian Army smashing the Serbian Army on the battlefields. Had it not been for that, there never would have been a Dayton. Izetbegovic would not have made a single concession. Milosevic would not have made a single concession.

That is what it takes to actually get to a Dayton in Syria. The reason that Geneva failed so miserably was because the Syrian regime had no reason to believe that it couldn't win, and the opposition didn't see any reason it couldn't win, as will, certainly the Islamist opposition. Until one side becomes clearly the force that is going to win, nobody has an incentive to make concessions. And unless there is another power out there that is going to force the winning side to make some concessions, too, that side will never make concessions. That's the critical ingredient.

And as we have seen -- and you know this well, Mike, because you've written about it so brilliantly, in Kosovo, in Bosnia, in Libya, for that matter, in Iraq, the jihadists are always there. The corruption is always there. The divisions are always there. What deals with every single one of these things is the willingness on the part of the United States and our allies to commit the resources to build a military that can do the job and to make it clear, we're not going to allow them to lose. That's what did it in Bosnia, in Kosovo, in Libya, in Iraq.

And the last point, your issue about time, I'll bring it home for the two of us. February and March, 2005, I got invited to present to a group of very, very high level former U.S. officials. I'm not going to say anything more about them. But it was myself and another person. We were asked to present alternative strategies in Iraq, because it

was clear that the strategy that we were pursuing in Iraq was failing.

And I said, it was February of 2005. I was there, and I made the case for what came to be, in effect, the search for a real counter insurgency strategy or as I prefer, low intensity conflict building up the Iraqi military properly, doing it right, doing it over a period of time, forging a new power sharing arrangement based on that, more troops if we could afford it. I wasn't sure at the time, but laying all that out, the other person who spoke made a case for just staying the course.

At that time, I was repeatedly told by all of these senior officials, you know, Ken, what you're saying sounds really smart, and maybe if we had done that from the beginning in 2003, maybe it could work. Okay? But it won't work now. It's just too late. And of course, the Bush administration didn't do that for two years after I made that case. And it worked.

Yes, you're right. It will take a while. It is not going to be six months from now. It will take 18, 24 months before we have any chance of fielding Syrian units. But you know what? We've got nothing but time, because the Syrian conflict is not going to go away. And if we think about this in terms of, we've got to fix this problem immediately; we will just keep getting it wrong and keep getting ourselves sucked in worse and worse as opposed to stepping back and doing the right thing.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Anything to add?

MR. DORAN: Yeah, just a few points to the question you originally asked me about yada yada yada.

The fact of the matter is, in the Middle East as in life, the solution to every problem produces new problems. And if we topple the Assad regime, there will be all kinds of problem that will come from that. But the question is, what problems do you want and which do you prefer? That's what we should be asking ourselves.

In other words, we've got to start with the question, what are our strategic interests, what are our vital interests and how do we achieve those? And which kind of conflict is better for us, not just in terms of our interest, but also -- I think there is a moral component to our interest. I think it serves the United States and the region not to sit back complacently when a regime like Assad's is torturing children, raping women, dropping barrel bombs on and raising whole quarters and so on.

It says bad things about us throughout the whole region. And when we are seen to actually care about things like that, I think it enhances our power. I really do. But one more thing on the military dimension. This regime is much more vulnerable than it looks. We have to see the regime the way it sees itself. It's an Alawite regime at core. Right?

There are two parts of the country that matter to the regime the most. Damascus, the capital -- as long as they hold the capital, then they are the Syrian government. And the Alawite, the western part of the country. And also, the connection to Hezbollah. This is what Hezbollah cares about. It's what Iran cares about.

I agree with everything Ken said about building up the military, but we can start tomorrow building units if there was a strategy that could tax and exhaust and scare the regime very easily. The reason that they are destroying homes is because it's at the wasp's waist -- if you think about the regime as the regime sees itself, it's at the narrow wasp's waist between the west of the country and Damascus. It's at the crossroads, and also the point at which Hezbollah comes in.

If we started harassing the supply routes from Hezbollah into the country, if we started cutting the routes from the northwest to Damascus, hitting them in the airfields where their support from Iran and Russia comes in, that requires a strategic brain. It doesn't require actually building up -- it doesn't require building up a national

army. It means building up units that can harass the airfield; building up units that can cut the highways from north to south; building up units that can hit Kussair where Hezbollah comes in, and letting them know through our messaging, you're going down. You're going down. Every day, you're going down.

I think in rather short order, we would see a whole different attitude on the part of the regime if they saw that happening.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. I want to thank the indulgence of the crowd.

MR. SHAIKH: Mike? Mike?

MR. O'HANLON: One more second, because I know Salman wants to contribute here, and he's thought a lot about building a post Assad government. So please, I know you want to weigh in on this, too.

MR. SHAIKH: Just very quickly. I mean, we talked a lot on the military side, and I guess initiated, and I completely agree with what my colleagues are saying, and I completely agree on this idea of a national army. This is what you hear from a lot of Syrians themselves on the ground who would like to do that, including the current opposition defense minister, who again, has been talking in these terms, Asad Mustafa.

But I would again like to put in -- stress again for that political dimension. And let me link the two. You take a balloon and assume the balloon is the Assad regime. If you put real pressure on it from the sides, you'll start to get exactly the folks who need to be part of the political dimension who can answer some of that Jeremy Shapiro question of what's next.

What's next we will be more happy about if in parallel, as I said, we were able to attract these people? Former officials -- I'm speaking to them almost every other day now, who -- tremendous amount of experience as well as others in the opposition

who I think come from all different backgrounds, who together, can start to lay real foundational principles for a viable transition, and have the right people to help enact that.

It's not going to be easy. And I completely agree, again, with Ken here. We've got a long time there, so we might as well start now with regards to this particular endeavor. And my great frustration is, we still haven't got there just yet.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. And now over to you. I'm going to take two questions at a time. Please wait for a microphone and identify yourself, and Salman, we'll check back with you to make sure you're hearing everyone before we start the answers. But I can start with the gentleman here about six rows back, and then I'll take Jason's question, and then we'll go to the panel.

MR. WOLFSON: Thank you, Mike. My name is Tom Wolfson. I'm a retired Foreign Service officer, and I want to thank you gentlemen for giving us a lot to think about. But I want to address a question to Mike.

And forgive me if I'm putting words in your mouth, but as you made your initial comments, I heard a little bit about American leadership -- or rather, let me go back a second. You're saying that the administration has made a number of wrong foreign policy choices. You didn't really address whether you think they've made the wrong analyses of various situations that need to be addresses from which you make policy choices. I don't know whether you meant to say that or not.

The other point that I was wondering about is, I spent my -- I believe in American leadership. I believe in the exercise of American -- constructive exercise of American power. That's what I spent my career promoting. But I thought I heard in your initial comments the suggestion that we need to do this, this and this because other people expect it of us, or somehow, American maturity or judgment or credibility are on the line. And therefore, we need to act.

Now, in individual cases that's not a mistaken idea. But when you fasten on it too much as a motivator for action, you can easily get into trouble.

MR. O'HANLON: Thanks. Good. And Salman, is that coming through loud and clear over in Doha?

MR. SHAIKH: It's very good. Thank you.

MR. O'HANLON: Good. So we'll go to Jason, please, for one more question. Then turn to the panel.

MR. CAMPBELL: Good morning. Jason Campbell with Rand.

Ken, I think this is probably for you. Given that the Islamic state in Iraq and Syria or Iraq and the Islamic -- or Iraq and the Levant, depending on which media source you happen to be reading was essentially disavowed this week by Al-Qaeda Central. How does that bode for both the inner Naseem fighting we're seeing in Syria amongst some of the anti-Assad elements?

And also, in Iraq where ISIS seems to have sort of been going after some of the more low hanging fruit due in large part to some of the political deficiencies you alluded to; and then from the U.S. perspective in Iraq -- how does the fact that ISIS is now clearly not tied to Al-Qaeda change our decision calculus with respect to how involved we should become in Iraq, now particularly from the standpoint of providing more weapons to the fight, which it seems to be we're leading on right now.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. So why don't we start with Ken and then go to Michael and then Salman on this round?

MR. POLLACK: Sure. Great questions, Jason.

First, I'm not sure how the -- let me start with the second part of your question in terms of the split is affecting U.S. policy toward the different countries. I'm not sure is the honest answer. I think it's a little bit too soon. I don't think the administration

has really sorted that out, either.

I would argue that it would be a mistake to assume that because they're now split, this somehow makes the problem less pressing for the United States. I think that would be a bad analysis to take from it. I'm not suggesting that's where the administration is. I actually suspect they'll come down on the other side and just say, all right, look, these are clearly bad people. Who knows what's going on?

But I think we have to be looking for -- and for me, this is one of the important things that happened this week, looking at the Clapper and Brennan testimony, is the intelligence community coming forward and saying we now see these different groups who are fighting in Iraq and Syria, and I'm going to express it that way -- starting to think about coming after us. And I think that's a very important change.

It's something that I have been worried about all along. It's part of my rationale in saying I'm starting to feel like the spillover is getting bad enough that I'm now leaning in the direction of intervention, because you know, the spillover -- you can think about spillover in lots of different ways. Dan Byman and I have written about it. There are six different forms.

But you know, it's that terrorism piece in particular attacking us that affects our interest directly. The other piece is how much it affects the oil market. And what we're seeing somewhere is -- it hasn't done it yet. We've not suffered a terrorist attack as a result of Syria. We've not seen a major uptick in oil prices as a result of Syria.

But you're starting to see things exactly like that that are beginning to suggest that we will soon. And then on your first question, again, I think it is a mistake to draw too much from that. You know, people who have heard me talk about Syria for the last two years, know that for the longest time, I have been warning that this is what happens in Syria in civil wars, is that you get this constant fragmentation.

And I think the bigger mistake is to think about civil wars in terms of playing one side against another. Having looked at the history of several dozen civil wars, what you particular see is that when groups try to do that, it doesn't work out for them. And we should be thinking not about how do we split these groups up and play them against each other -- it doesn't work out.

What we need to be thinking about is if we want to end this we have to build a viable alternative. That's what works. And when you do that, it gets the political dimension that Salman is talking about and it gets the security dimension, which Mike and I have talked about. And that's the only -- and you've got to do both, as everybody knows. You can't do one and not the other.

MR. O'HANLON: Michael?

MR. DORAN: And I totally agree with what Ken just said, and that's the starting point for my answer to your question, sir. It's not American leadership for American leadership's sake. It's that if this problem is left to fester the way it is, then American vital interests are going to be imperiled, and we're going to have no choice but to intervene in a unilateral fashion.

So our intervention should be, or a more forward leaning policy should be designed to create an order in the region or a nascent order in the region that will safeguard our interests so that we don't have to do it directly. What troubles me so much about the way the Obama administration has pulled back from the region is that they have done it in such a way as to strengthen our enemies and to dishearten our allies.

But although our allies are disheartened, as Ken pointed out, they're not sitting back and doing nothing. So, one of the reasons they are taking matters into their own hands and they're doing it in a way that doesn't work to our advantage. One of the reasons we have to be a little bit more forward leaning is not just to harm our enemies or

push back our enemies. It's also to channel the activities of our allies in a direction that works to our advantage. If we don't do that, they go off in all sorts of different directions.

The thesis that the Obama administration is -- the implicit thesis of the Obama administration's policy is that chaos in the Middle East doesn't matter to the United States. And I think it's a false thesis. I think sooner or later, we're going to find that we do actually have vital interest and we're going to have to do something about it, so we should be shaping the coalition right now that can help us do it.

MR. O'HANLON: Salman, anything you want to add to this round?

MR. SHAIKH: Sure. Let me just say quickly. I mean, U.S. and other western vital national security interests are now being affected. We're clearly in that situation. And as Ken and Michael said, many of us have been saying, blue in the face for about a year and a half to two years, if you don't move more decisively on this, we are going to have this kind of situation.

And yes, now we do have some fairly alarming, perhaps not purely scientific numbers in terms of foreign fighters who are in north and eastern Syria, as well as of course, in Iraq. You know? The UK is probably around 400 plus who are right now in Syria. Some of them are probably doing humanitarian work, but others are doing the fighting. And France is probably even a bigger number than that.

But what I would say is that we shouldn't overlook, first of all, that when it comes to the Assad regime, it has helped to create a self fulfilling prophecy, and the narration of fighting terror is not something that we should allow ourselves to get fuzzed by. I mean, yes, you have to fight this kind of extremism, but we have to -- ought to recognize that the Assad regime, and you hear it over and over again from people on the ground who have seen the behavior particularly of (Inaudible).

The people who I've spoken to her who were fighting with (Inaudible) or

(Inaudible) who have run away now and who will tell you some of the sort of patterns of behavior over a period of time. Some of them were in prison with some of these guys that Assad let out in the middle of 2011.

The best way to fight these guys, and here, I would say perhaps something a little bit more sectarian focused is that the best way to fight these guys is for those Sunni communities to turn against these guys. And that's what they are doing.

I was reading a book the other day where it talked about how Aleppo and Damascus were not really taken over by the crusaders all those years ago because there was a line of support from Tripoli and Lebanon to Mosul in Iraq. And this is exactly it. You need those communities to be strengthened and supported and to take the fight to these guys.

And they will, as they are showing in Syria. But when you have the north and the east of Syria still not getting the kind of humanitarian support that they need, you know, thousands and thousands of internally displaced people are barely living off much, and the international -- we are unable to support them, well that vacuum, that contested space is going to be increasingly a place where these extremists will find a safe haven.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. And to make sure that we get a lot of people in, I'm going to take three in this round and test the memories of my fellow colleagues. But we're going to begin here in the front with Ben and then Harlan and Mark, and then we'll do at least one more round after that.

SPEAKER: Thank you very much to the panel generally. Can you speak to the Russian presence, opportunities and obstacles?

MR. O'HANLON: Excellent. And then Harlan here in the blue sweater.

MR. ULLMAN: I'm Harlan Ullman. I hope it's coincidental, but June 28th marks the hundredth anniversary of France Ferdinand's assassination, the start of World

War I, and there are an awful lot of archdukes and a lot of bullets working in what we're talking about.

Let me take issue with your thesis about the lack of a strategy on the part of the administration. I think John Kerry has a very real strategy which has three parts. The Arab Israeli and Palestinian talks which can take some time, Iran, which is going to be proximate to whether it works or not, and then finally, Syria.

If Iran works and there is denuclearization, I think there's a clear opportunity to move forward in Syria. And I certainly agree with your comments about the need for a kinetic response in terms of pre army and in terms of taking out the air power which will take some time.

But if the Iran talks do not work and if it fails to get some kind of agreement, I think that the possibility of an attack is very high. And I think under those circumstances, you may have to consider what's going to happen in Syria, if indeed, there is an attack against Iran. And I'd like comments on that.

MR. O'HANLON: Okay, thank you. And then behind you.

SPEAKER: Actually, I sort of take a different view from Harlan. The absence of a policy is a policy. The fact that this administration doesn't have a proactive policy as you're suggesting -- they in fact, have a very inactive policy as was described earlier. Just hope this whole problem goes away.

And if that is the policy, one that's lead by the four major national security authorities who all came from the United States Senate, all of whom very carefully listened to the domestic population in terms of foreign policy, which the Constitution specifically prohibited or neglected, how do you change the current policy of neo-isolationism, build America, so on and so forth? Short of catastrophe, how in fact, do you make these arguments in a selling way to this administration where the headwinds are

actually blowing in the other direction?

MR. O'HANLON: So Salman, why don't we begin with you this time? And take your pick about which of any of those directions you'd like to address, and then we'll just move through the group. We had the Russia question and we had the Iran Syria link.

MR. SHAIKH: Sure.

MR. O'HANLON: And then of course, the American domestic disinterest.

MR. SHAIKH: Sure. On Russia, and maybe this will be controversial with my fellow panelists, but I still think Russia is part of the solution. And yet, it's not behaved like that. I think Russia, as someone from there described it to me said we are realists. They will need to see the tide turn, but when the tide turns, we're going to need Russia or it would be better to have Russia as part of an effort of building a more stable transition in the future.

But it's going to be hard working getting there. Of course, we should lament right now that there are still very worrying signs that they don't want to join an international consensus, even when it comes to humanitarian access. And you know, the clear -- you know, 200,000 people being starved in and around sort of the central sort of areas -- cities of Syria, and yet, still there are political games being played in the Security Council.

There should be a Security Council resolution by now demanding that, and pressure being put on the Assad regime. But it seems as if Russia is not willing to join that consensus. Similarly, on chemical weapons, it's clear that the Assad regime is dragging its feet. And by the way, what I heard just a few days ago is fairly compelling evidence, I guess, in terms of people who are really quite close to that chemical weapons program telling me that the Assad regime has not fully disclosed the amount of its

stockpile. It may well be closer to 2,000 tons rather than the 1.3 that is disclosed.

And yet again, here, the Russians seem to be giving the Assad regime, at least for now, a pass. But I still do believe that when the change comes, and I think there will be change, it is much better to have Russia be an active player in helping to stabilize that transition. It's got tremendous knowledge and interest -- insight to Syria, which could actually prove to be helpful. But it probably won't until it sees the writing on the wall, which is why I think we've been suggesting the more aggressive strategy that we have on the military side, at least for now.

With regards to the Iranians, I think that's still a different kettle of fish. Right at the start, you had asked the question about you know, do we choose the Iran nuclear deal or a Syria policy. Well, from the region, I think the regional players would say we need both. You need a policy which rests on both legs.

On that Syria bit, it is trying to impress upon Iran that it has to show its peaceful intentions in the entire region. And Syria is the most important issue, at least for now, with regards to that, as well as acting in good faith with regards to the nuclear enrichment and the nuclear deal more broadly. If that doesn't happen, then I think we will continue to doubt Iran's intentions in the broader region, and of course, people will see this in this region as this monumental balance of power struggle.

MR. O'HANLON: Michael.

MR. DORAN: So, I disagree with Salman. Sorry to do that, Salman. I usually agree with you about everything. On Russia -- I think that the starting point -- I agree that they're uber realists. I think their starting point is that they want to support the Assad regime, and they see no benefit to themselves to have the Assad regime fall.

They don't believe that the successor is going to be a lie to them the way Assad is, and they're arming him and they're supporting him. The president said several

times now that it's no longer a cold war and we can work together with the Russians. And that is true. It is no longer a cold war. It's more -- you know, we're sort of frenemies with the Russians. And the Russians will work together with us on Syria, as long as we do things that will support Assad or that are neutral with regard to building up Assad.

The minute we ask them to do something that's going to weaken Assad, they say no. Or the minute we ask them to just admit the truth about things that are happening in Syria that's going to weaken Assad, like Assad used chemical weapons, they deny the truth.

And I look at Putin, and I think Putin grew up. He got anti-Americanism with his mother's milk. He grew up in the KGB. For most of his career, he got up and said, how do I cause the Americans pain, and that gave him pleasure. And I think that -- I don't know -- I'm not a great Russia expert, but I do know people, and you don't spend your formative years like that and then just lose it all one day because the wall fell down.

He knows that he has some overlapping interests with us. He knows there's no more cold war. But he still can't help it. When something causes us pain, it causes him pleasure. And I think we have to operate -- that's a theory. But it's also a theory supported by everything that they have done in Syria. They have never behaved as if they don't want to keep Assad in power and the same thing with the Iranians.

So, we keep saying -- we keep coming up with these theories that say that there's all these overlapping interests, and we can work together to find the middle ground. But they don't behave that way. So I think we should wake up.

On the question of the Kerry strategy, yeah, I just fundamentally disagree with it. There is not going to be an Arab Israeli peace, in my view. I think the chances of that are really slim. And if there was, it wouldn't make any difference anyway. The things that -- the center of gravity in the region for all of the players is Syria, as we've been

saying. There's nobody out there clamoring about an Arab Israeli peace.

I'm also highly skeptical of the nuclear deal. I don't think there's a deal there, and I don't think we're going to see a comprehensive solution. I think we're going to have a series of rollovers of the temporary -- you know, in the Middle East, there's nothing more permanent than the temporary. And I think the temporary Iran deal is the permanent deal, maybe played with on the margins.

The administration itself has even started to message that way a little bit. I think that if you don't -- you might not agree with what I just said, but I think perhaps a more reasonable way to put it is, there is not going to be a comprehensive deal within a year -- at least a year. It's going to take longer than that. You can see this thing is going to drag out forever.

And Syria is going to keep going on. So, I think we need to focus much more -- much more high level attention needs to be focused on changing the calculus in Syria and less about trying to broker an Arab Israeli solution. And then to Mark Kemmitt's question, I don't know. The only way I know to try to change the president's perception of these things is by events like this and saying these things.

I think there's an option. There's no doubt, as I said at the beginning, that the Syria policy of the president is good domestic politics. I mean, for somebody who was in the Bush administration, it's upsetting to me see how well it plays to say, you know, we're not going to repeat what Bush did.

And it's kind of -- I mean, it's kind of a wakeup call for us to think about what we did right and what we did wrong. But I think that there is a big gap between keeping Americans out of an open-ended war and what we're doing right now. I think there's a lot of space in there for doing things that wouldn't be damaging to the president domestically that could really change the dynamic on the ground.

So, I tended to agree with Ken's recommendation a year ago. You know, go big or don't go at all. No, I never agreed with it, but I thought go big is the best way. Let's just get it over and done with. But clearly, nobody is in a mood to go big, so we have to be thinking about that space between.

MR. DORAN: I'm going to say one quick thing before giving Ken the floor on this, which is you mentioned the four senators -- Obama, Biden, Hegel, Kerry. I think back and Ken's analogy to the Balkans reminds me of Senator Dole, who unfortunately is no longer in a position to do this. But instead of just trying to persuade President Obama, I would like to see a tool and a tactic that was employed in the Balkans where then Senator Dole essentially forced the administration, put a lot of pressure on them to begin a covert arming of the Croat and Bosnian -- Muslim insurgency or resistance movement or you know, beleaguered minorities within different parts of Bosnia.

And you can attach those kinds of stipulations to a defense authorization bill or something else where the administration has a hard time preventing it, or even a debt ceiling extension. No, I'm just kidding. But I think that there is an opportunity here for Congress, which is sort of picking the wrong fight in my mind right now, trying to do the Iran sanctions thing, or at least it was a couple of weeks ago.

If they want to find an area where they can usefully disagree with the president, it's not on that at the moment, it's on this. It's on Syria. And requiring the administration to help the opposition in a way that the administration itself has not managed to really become committed to.

MR. POLLACK: Thanks, Mike. So let me say some things about each of them in turn. So first, the Russians. And Ben, first, I tend to agree with Salman that I think they can and should be part of the solution. But for me again, it's how they were part of the solution in the Balkans. Okay? And the only way that you get them to take

that role is if you change the incentive structure for them.

And here, this is where I have my disagree with Mike over the military piece of this, which is you can think about this in terms of how you change the incentive structure by just doing an enormous amount of damage to the regime, maybe even taking the regime down. We may be able to do that all by ourselves. We may be able to do that just providing you know, some military support to the opposition and doing a lot of bombing ourselves.

I'm not convinced of that, first of all. I'm always wary of air power solutions. And second, I think it is a mistake, even if it works, because if it happens, you get Libya. Okay? And one of the ways that you could do that is to try to convince the Russians to stop providing arms and resupply to the Assad regime. That would hurt them badly. That would help bring about the end of the Assad regime.

The problem isn't whether we do it by air strikes or by stopping the Russian arms flow to the Assad regime -- first, getting them to do that might mean basically taking a pass on Ukraine and doing a bunch of other things that would be abhorrent to us on a whole variety of other ways. But even then, again, it doesn't put anything in its place. That's why, as I keep saying, I think we need to be thinking about what the constructive solution is, one where you can actually have a political outcome as well as security. And that only happens if you're willing to go big.

And here, let's be clear. Go big is not American troops on the ground, and it also is not an enormous expenditure of our own resources. Okay? It is not Iraq levels of commitment. What we did in the Balkans was actually relatively cheap, certainly compared to what we did in Iraq at Afghanistan. Okay? But it is a time investment and it is a commitment to political capital, and it is a commitment to the strategy to actually go ahead and do this. And I think it's very important.

And again, like in the Balkans, I think you'd see once you change the incentive structure, once it becomes clear that the Assad regime is not going to win, Russia's incentive structure will change. And I agree with Mike about Putin, and I certainly don't disagree about what they're doing in the region. But I think that once they realize that Assad is going to lose if the war continues, they're going to have an enormous incentive to bring the Alawise to the table and find a new power sharing arrangement that preserves their stake in Syria exactly as they did in both Bosnia and Kosovo.

MR. POLLACK: I actually agree with that, by the way. I think --

MR. DORAN: Quick Harlan --

MR. POLLACK: Oh, go ahead.

MR. DORAN: Harlan, to yours, I'll just stick with the last thing that you asked. I think that your preliminary marks are very interesting, but time is running short. So I just want to get to your last point which is about the military strike in Iran.

You know, I am on record as being very wary of that military strike. I think that it will be very problematic if we do it. I tend to disagree with you about the probability, but we can argue about that another time. And I am nervous about it because of the repercussions -- in part because of the repercussions.

That said, Syria is, I think, the one place I'm not terribly worried about, because I'm just not sure what else the Iranians can do to us in Syria. We're not really in Syria the way that we were in Iraq, the way that we still are in Afghanistan, and maybe if we get to that point with Iran in the near future. And they're doing a lot in Syria. I don't think that they -- I think you may be right that they will have less of an incentive to cooperate with us, but they don't seem to have much of an incentive to cooperate with us right now.

So again, I'm wary of a strike. I'm very concerned about it. I think they will retaliate. I think there are prices to be paid. I just don't think Syria is the place where I'm worried about it. I'm worried about it in Minnesota in the Mall of America. I'm worried about it in Lebanon and Iraq. I'm worried about it in Saudi Arabia and all around the region. Syria is the last place I am.

And then Mark, to your wonderful question -- I mean, in some ways it's a reflection of Mike. If we had the answer to your question, we would have been doing it. Right? We've all been trying this. But you know, for me, it's a combination of we've got to convince the administration that there are these middle solutions. And Mike and I may disagree about exactly what the range of these middle solutions are, but they are -- maybe they are more costly than what the administration thinks it's doing now, although I would argue that what it's doing now has more of a cost than they're willing to admit to, but that they're not as costly, anywhere near as costly as Iraq and Afghanistan; that there are not no costs, but lower cost options that certainly buy us more influence and an ability to affect things in the Middle East.

But at the end of the day, you know, again, it does come back very much in my mind, to what we saw in Iraq. You remember this, too. You were part of the same thing. You know, making the argument about the surge. I was doing that in 2004. And it wasn't just Democrats who were opposed to it. The Bush administration was vehemently opposed to it; didn't want to hear anything that I or other folks had to say until 2006.

And you said, can we do anything short of a crisis? Hopefully, with the Obama administration, it won't take a crisis, but I certainly do think it's going to take some additional changes, and maybe statements like Clapper and Brennan's statement. You know, maybe the potential for -- you know, if oil prices start to get a little jittery, maybe that will start to send the signals to the administration that you know what, what we're

doing right now really does have this long-term danger. Maybe we should think about some of these middle range options sooner before we get to that crisis point.

MR. O'HANLON: Quick clarification before the lightning round, which will be our last round. So be ready for the rules on that.

But Ken, your mention of a Bosnia analogy, which I've written about and support as well makes me want to ask, do you anticipate or at least allow for the possibility of American participation in a peace implementation for us that would follow a negotiated settlement in Syria?

MR. POLLACK: Yes.

MR. O'HANLON: Okay, thank you. And any of you are welcome, if you wish, to follow up on the lightning round, on that or any other topic. Here are the rules. We're almost out of time, but since we started a few minutes late and we've got a lot of energy in the auditorium, I want to allow for three more questions. I'm going to ask the questions to be very brief, and I'm going to ask each respondent to combine an answer to one of the questions with any concluding statements.

So we're going to sort of have 30 second questions and one minute responses, and we'll start with the two women right around Mark, to his right and right behind him. And then we'll finish up here with Gary.

SPEAKER: Hi there. I'm Kathy (Inaudible) from Colorado. So I'm going to hit you with this, and I don't necessarily agree with what I'm saying, but what if the American people don't care? They don't see a positive on either one of the sides, and right now, the economy is just starting to improve in parts of the United States. So, what would you tell them outside of the administration, as to why they should care about this?

MR. O'HANLON: Ma'am?

SPEAKER: Hi. My name is (Inaudible). I'm a (Inaudible) lawyer. I'm

thinking about the Kurds in the region, and because this is not their war and they're in the middle of the war. And they don't take any sides in either the opposition or the Assad side.

And I was wondering, as you talked about the Balkans, is there any possibility to create three different states, since these people don't want to live together? Like one state for Shiites, one state for Sunnis and one state for Kurds? It's the same thing in Iraq, and just to change the whole cart, like in Balkan is the question.

MR. O'HANLON: Very clear. Thank you. And then finally, over here.

MR. MITCHELL: Well, I think this will make the -- I'm Garrett Mitchell and I write "The Mitchell Report." I think the first question and mine are aligned, so it'll make this round a little bit easier. I want to make sure I get the Bubba question out, and inspired by Mike's mention of Sarah Palin -- I remember Sarah Palin when she would stand up in front of a crowd and say, how's that hopey changey stuff working out for you.

So, my question is, powerful case being made here today about Syria. But if you're Bubba, and you're saying to yourself Libya, Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan and now they want us to do Syria; I think I've seen enough. So, I think the question is not so much that Americans are tired of war. It's that they haven't seen anything we've done in any of those countries seeming to make much of a difference.

MR. O'HANLON: Salman, would you like to take any or all of those, but briefly, and then any concluding thought as woven into your answer?

MR. SHAIKH: Sure. Well, to that question, to that last question as well as the first one, as to why should the American people care, because I think for some of the reasons that we've laid out what's happening in this particular theatre between the Mediterranean and the gulf is going to affect vital American national security interests.

There's people who look like me with British passports who increasingly

are being radicalized in this zone who would want to do harm elsewhere. That's a fairly crude way of putting it. There is more than that, of course. I would stress the human rights and the humanitarian imperative of backing up the international law and system which the United States helped to put in place, in which it stood many people around the globe in good stead.

And also, there is also a dividend to the United States if it was to act in the kinds of ways that we were saying. You know, when Robert Ford, who God bless him is probably leaving I guess towards the end of the month -- when he was in Syria and when he was speaking up for those people, they were genuinely enthused by what the United States was standing up for. And you'll see that across the Middle East. It's a very troubled region. Then there are commerce reasons and all the rest of it.

But let me just say in terms of concluding remarks, we talk about an Arc of Crisis. Well, we have that now. We have a situation whereby which we are looking at three concurrent civil wars which will feed off each other, and which will, as I said, have the impacts on vital American national security interest that we talk about.

And to the point about the Kurds, look, there's a lot of talk about Sykes Picot and borders being redrawn and all the rest of it, what's going on as a result of this Syrian conflict that's acting as a catalyst is that we have a series of fragmented zones, atomized zones, people dividing themselves up from the Mediterranean to the gulf. Now, I would rather that people found a way to perhaps live in more autonomous zones or whatever it is through dialogue and through negotiation.

It's much better that you people come to a system of government and even of how to administer themselves maybe in smaller units through dialogue. And it starts with Syria. We've seen a small example in Yemen through their own national dialogue, but they are talking about some sort of a federal structure. They face huge

problems, but nevertheless, if we can get to that stage, I think you'll have a much more stable and potentially prosperous region with all of the potential that it has for trade and commerce and all the rest of it than the kind of sore which will continue, as I've said, to have a real and dramatic effect on American interests.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Michael?

MR. DORAN: So, with regarding to the Bubba question and the Colorado question, the -- I don't think we should exaggerate the impact of public opinion on foreign policy because of this question of the gap between where public opinion is and where the -- where current policy is and what might be done. There's a lot we could do that wouldn't affect -- that wouldn't get crosswise with public opinion at all.

We also have to recognize the fact that the president has nurtured this public opinion in a lot of different ways. Maybe not on purpose, but his policies have had the effect of nurturing it. If a president goes forth and makes a credible case to the people about why we need to have a policy and explains what he's going to do and explains what he wants to achieve and how he's going to achieve it, and he does that over time, I think it could have a much greater effect.

But really, it is -- I don't mean to minimize it. It's absolutely true, Garrett what you said. The American people have watched three or four dictators be toppled, us play a role in that, and they haven't seen a lot of direct benefit for themselves. And it's a challenge that any policy is going to have to face. There's no doubt about it.

I just think that it can meet that, because we don't -- you're really only going to have a problem if you're asking the American people for a lot of money, or you're going to put American soldiers in harm's way. And I think that the resources of the gulf combined with our leadership could produce a whole different effect without us ever having to put any Americans in harm's way.

And then there was the Kurdish question. I don't think you can carve out an autonomous Kurdistan, because the Kurds are -- in Syria, are divided into at least there different enclaves, and I don't know what that Kurdish state would look like. You're going to run into problems with the Turks, and so on.

(Discussion off the record)

MR. DORAN: Well, listen; if we could make Switzerland in the Middle East, then we wouldn't be having this whole discussion.

So, I think more along the lines of what Salman was saying about having some kind of political dialogue coupled with the kind of army building that Ken was talking about. And as part of the political dialogue, the United States has to say look, Kurdish rights within the post Assad Syria are a very important thing.

MR. O'HANLON: And Ken, you get the last word.

MR. POLLACK: Thank you, Mike. And Gary, I think you're right. I think that is one of the biggest hurdles to overcome, and you know, here I could make a glib argument that well, Bill Clinton faced the same opposition to the Balkans and he overcame it. But of course, that was a very different era. That was the era after Desert Storm as opposed to after Iraq and Afghanistan.

So, I think that would be not correct. You know, here, I mostly do come back to where Mike and Salman are, which is first, we do have to convince the American people that there is something that can be done that is much less than the prices of Iraq and Afghanistan, both in terms of blood and treasure, and that it's most important to do this now, before the problems get worse, because they will get worse, and trying to solve them when they're that bad would require a much greater investment, perhaps an Iraq or Afghanistan style.

You know, the last point I'd make is that -- and you've heard me say this

before with respect to other crises. What I have consistently seen from American policy makers is this unwillingness to engage the Middle East; the unwillingness to be constructive in the Middle East is what kills us. There's a problem. We want to slap a band aid on it and walk away from it as fast as possible. And it doesn't work. The wounds get worse and worse.

And you know, here, it kind of comes back to a point that Mark Kimmett said, which is the founders of our Constitution didn't want us to make foreign policy based on public opinion polls, because it's very difficult for the public to have that long-term perspective. That's exactly why the founders wanted a senate and a president who could look longer term. And it is the responsibility of those people to come back to the American people and say, look, I know it may not seem like it now, but the best evidence we have is that the problems are going to get worse over time, and we need to do this, because it is in our long-term interest, even though it may seem like it's going to be painful in our short-term.

MR. O'HANLON: Thanks to all of you for being here, and please join me in thanking the panel.

(Applause)

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Expires: November 30, 2016