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IRAQ: ONE YEAR LATER

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Introduction:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

DR. O'HANLON: Good morning, everyone. Welcome to Brookings. I'm Mike O'Hanlon. I'm up here with Ken Pollack, and we're just back from Iraq.

By the way, those of you who have been upset about the heat here should know that it actually has been about as bad as in Iraq in terms of how it feels on the body.

MR. POLLACK: Better in Iraq.

DR. O'HANLON: Other people here, like Ken Dozier and others, may know a little more about the Baghdad heat than I do, but I have to tell you the last couple of weeks did not feel that much worse than at least the weekend and early part of this week in Washington. So, take heart from that or whatever. But in any event, we are looking forward to your thoughts and questions after we open with some presentations on our recent trip.

Let me make a couple of very specific factual observations about the nature of the trip and then give a couple of brief observations about some military and security issues there, then turn it over to Ken, and then we'll look forward to a discussion.

This was a DoD-sponsored trip. There were

five of us on the trip -- Ken and myself; Steve Biddle from the Council on Foreign Relations; also Peter Bergen and Vali Nasr. We were invited by the Pentagon. However, we had a lot of say in the itinerary, and they did a great job of helping us meet with many people -- Iraqi, American, British, and others -- that we had requested to meet with. I would not claim this kind of a trip provides a sort of sense of the pulse of the street in Iraq, so right up front let me acknowledge that. But we did have a fair amount of access to enlisted American personnel officers, Iraqi security forces, British people who have been involved in Basra operations, which we'll talk about today, and a number of others, including some diplomats and some Iraqi politicians.

I just want to say a couple of brief words by way of, again, introduction on a couple of facts about the security environment, and the short -- I guess the short summary of how I would sum up my observations on the trip.

This has been the spring of the beginning of the blossoming of the Iraq security forces. There's been a big, big breakthrough in the last three months. Now, when one makes this sort of an observation, of

course, in the American debate, it's immediately necessary to make all the caveats that go along with that. This has been a very impressive trajectory. It does not mean we are near any kind of a stable end point. I do not think that we have all of a sudden seen the Iraqis fully emerge as a viable security force that no longer requires American help, that can handle its own security problems on its own, and that is bound to stick together cohesively no matter what. That's not what I'm saying, and I don't think Ken will either. The point is that the last three months have represented a remarkable period of the assertion of Prime Minister Maliki's leadership and the Iraqi army and national police willingness to go along with him and perform some relatively difficult operations that involve a little more hard fighting than has commonly been appreciated here in the United States, and we'll give some details about a couple of those operations in Basra, Sadr City, and Mosul in the course of the conversation today. So, remarkable progress -- still a long way to go, but, frankly, more progress than I even expected. The battle of Basra, for example, was a much more impressive display of Iraqi performance than I had appreciated prior to going on the trip.

The first week was a debacle, and we'll get into that. But what's remarkable is the recovery of the situation, mostly by Iraqis in the second week and thereafter. Let me just say a couple of words on the specifics and then turn things over to Ken, although there's one broad factual point I need to get on the table as well, because, again, it's often underappreciated in the American debate.

There has been roughly an 80 percent reduction in the rate of violence against civilians in Iraq since the surge began -- 80 percent. In other words, only one-fifth the rate of violence by the measurements of the U.S. military but also the Iraqi government and, to a greater or lesser extent, some of the independent research organizations trying to attract these kinds of things. That is a much better improvement, much greater improvement, than I would have considered even plausible when the surge began a year and a half ago. And this has continued even as the surge is winding down. We're now down to about 17 brigades and about 150,000 U.S. forces in Iraq. The peak of the surge was about 20-1/2 brigade equivalents and, as you know, something around 170,000 U.S. troops, and the standard size of our deployment in Iraq has

been, over the five years, roughly 15 brigades and 135,000 U.S. uniformed personnel. We're headed back down towards roughly that number, maybe 15 brigades and 140,000 U.S. personnel by the end of July.

I should note as a quick side -- and I'll make a couple of points on the campaign in Basra and pass it to Ken.

The international coalition's much smaller than it used to be. It was obviously never very strong, and nothing, by the way, that I'm saying should be construed as support for how the Bush administration has handled this operation on balance: very poor preparation for the war militarily, quite mediocre preparation for the war diplomatically.

As a result, we went to war with a very small coalition to begin with. It's even smaller now. We used to have 25,000 or so foreign partners, foreign military personnel, non-American, in Iraq. That is number is now below 10,000, so by the end of July when you add up American an coalition support from abroad, we will be below, well below, the typical average of the first four years of this operation. So, just to give you some perspective that the violence is continuing to trend downward, even as the U.S. troop

numbers and coalition troop numbers do as well.

A couple of specifics on Basra and I'll pass things over to Ken.

What happened in this conflict, very briefly, was that initially things went badly. Prime Minister al-Maliki rushed the operation. He pulled over American officials who had been planning this kind of thing with him, envisioning an operation in late summer or so, and he basically said to General Petraeus one day, “oh, we're going to start tomorrow, by the way, General, hope that's okay with you, and, by the way, even if it's not okay with you we're starting tomorrow anyway.” This is the sort of thing that people like General Austin talk about as the sort of assertion of Iraqi sovereignty that makes you uncomfortable but in a good way. It's the kind of decisiveness that even if you don't agree with every move it reflects an Iraqi willingness to take on more responsibility for their own country and reflects a certain backbone in the prime minister in Iraq that, as you'll recall, a year a half ago Steve Hadley in the famous leaked memo was quite worried he did not have.

So, we've seen him and the Iraqi army and the Iraqi national police come a long way. But

nonetheless, there was plenty of reason for discomfort in the American command in that first week around March 23rd, because basically Maliki didn't know what he was getting into. He deployed troops very quickly and efficiently, proved his ability to sustain them logistically, but they were losing the tactical battles in that first five or six days to the point where a major ammunition depot was almost overrun by the Jaish al-Mahdi forces that we were worried about.

Al-Maliki didn't expect the Jaish al-Mahdi as a group would largely rise up against him. He was hoping for a more targeted operation apparently against 100, 150 individuals. He wound up with a much bigger fight on his hands and very little British or American help at that time. Moreover, the unit that he sent into battle to start this thing was the 52nd Brigade of the 14th Iraqi Army Division, and that brigade was recently put together, had just finished training, had no American or British commanders or officers deploying with it to provide combat advisory support, and most of the enlistees were from Basra, meaning they had very conflicted loyalties and hadn't had enough period of professionalization in their training to learn how to overcome those loyalties. So, it went very badly.

A number of the police battalions in Basra also collapsed, and this was a lot of what was correctly reported by the American media in that first week. There's no doubt the first week was bad. There's no doubt in my mind the American media basically got it right. However, we started to miss the story starting in week two. By the end of that first week, some very brave American and British soldiers were deploying into the Basra Hotel right in the middle of this combat, taking mortar fire against their building, and trying to call in artillery support but also more -- probably even more importantly, helicopter and UAV support and reconnaissance information, and what we saw in addition to that was then two brigades from Al-Anbar province from the Iraqi Army, the First Division and Seventh Division, be deployed very efficiently by the Iraqi military leadership that, as you recall, has been lambasted for its lack of logistics capability by American advisors in the last couple of years.

It managed to send two brigades, within a week, down to Basra. These were mixed brigades -- about 60/40 Sunni/Shia in one case, a bit battle tested, and also with Marine advisory units embedded

within them, the so-called military transition teams. We have about ten to twelve people at every level of command within those Iraqi units at the division, brigade, and battalion level.

So, those two brigades from Al-Anbar province plus a national police brigade plus some individual battalions from the 8th, 9th, and 10th Iraqi Army Divisions all then arrived in the early days of April, and what we saw -- that plus American and British air power and reconnaissance capabilities really turned the tide of battle.

I'm just going to give you a couple more factoids and then stop.

We think that we probably collectively managed to kill 150 or so high-level Jaish al-Mahdi militia leaders. There's been a lot of reports that a lot of them got away. That's certainly true by all accounts. However, it's also true by best estimates that perhaps 150 mid- and high-level leaders were killed or captured, meaning that we've seen a substantial reduction in their capacity. Now, will that be rebuilt in the coming months? Perhaps. But the good news is that now the Iraqi army essentially controls Basra, along with rebuilt Iraqi police

battalions, some of which did desert in those opening days but many of which have now been rebuilt and accompanied by American and British police transition teams. And there's also much more of a sense that the Iraqi government is in charge of this town because they have displayed the symbolic trappings of control. They have a lot of people on the streets. They took us on the streets. We went on patrol with the Iraqi army alone, with no American or British combat support with us, just as a reflection of the much-improved security environment and the greater confidence of the Iraqi security forces in preserving it.

There are a million things that could still go wrong. I'm sure Ken's going to touch on a number of them. I'll just give you one example. Out of the so-called Sons of Iraq, the primarily Sunni volunteers who have been brought in by Americans to help with neighborhood security, almost all of them are still being paid by us, not by the Iraqis. Only about 11 or 12,000 out the 100,000 total have been brought into the Iraqi security forces, because most of them are Sunni. Prime Minister al-Maliki's is not wild about the idea of creating more Sunni capacity, especially when it's in Sunni-only units, as many of these might be, and we

are having to continue the pressure to convince him, bit by bit, to add more of these people into the security forces. That's just one reflection of the underlying sectarian dilemmas that remain, and there are, again, a number of others that I'm sure you'll hear about more in just a second. But the overall trend line here was quite positive, and I came away on this trip quite encouraged.

I'll turn things over to Ken now, and then I will go from there.

MR. POLLACK: Thanks, Mike. Thank all of you for coming out to join us on this sweltering Friday morning.

Let me start where Mike left off, with the Iraqi security forces, because I think this is a point that bears, actually, some repeating.

This really was the headline, I think, for all of us on the trip -- was this emergence of the Iraq security forces as a very important new factor able to contribute to the overall coalition effort in a way that they really hadn't been able to, even as little as a year ago.

They're getting bigger. There are about 560,000 in the Iraqi security forces, and they are

growing by about 100,000 per year and, what's more, they have a much smarter, more effective training system to deal with them, so the brigades are being stood up simultaneously; they're getting three, three and a half months of training; then they immediately get knitted up with American or in some cases British advisors; and they get partnered with typically an American and now possibly within a British unit. They get deployed to kind of safer areas where they're able to kind of start operating in conjunction with those American and other coalition forces in a more permissive environment and really get to understand how to do things, allow unit cohesion to gel, allow leadership to emerge in a way they haven't been in the past, and, as a result, the security forces are getting bigger. They're also getting better. And, again, they are not the (inaudible); they are not the equivalent of our Army yet, but the capabilities are getting good enough that they are having a real impact on the situation.

What you see across Iraq is that many Iraqi units now control their own battle space. It's no longer the case that the U.S. units are mostly out in front with the Iraqis kind of tagging along to provide

a nice face, a nice veneer on the American presence. It is more and more that the Iraqis are the ones out in front mounting their own operations with advice and input and support from the Americans.

You're even getting to the point whereas Mike was talking about the battle of Basra and also in Sadr City and Mosul -- you're even getting to the point where some of the better Iraqi formations are able to not just perform whole missions but even perform clear missions. And, again, it's a small number of Iraqi units that fall into that category, maybe six to ten brigades out of the forty-eight that Iraq has that are getting to that capability, but nevertheless that is a new development, and it is an important one, because one of the things that seems to have been most important about Basra was the fact that it was the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police who were doing the block-to-block clearing operations, not the Americans or the British. And, of course, we were there; we were providing fire support; the British were partnered and eventually knitted with the Iraqi units. But the Iraqis were the ones very much in the lead.

And, you know, the command is very much aware of where the American people want to go. They

understand full well that the American people would like to see a drawdown of American forces, and I think that they're looking at exactly this emergence of Iraqi capabilities as the way that this is going to happen, that the first thing that needed to happen was it needed to go from U.S. units being in the lead with Iraqi units supporting them to the reverse to Iraqi units being in the lead with American units supporting them. And then over the course of time, the idea is to try to reduce the number of American troops supporting the Iraqi formations. And what we saw is that that initial transformation, which is in many ways the most important in this transformation, that is well underway, and that is a very positive development.

I don't want to talk about every aspect of the Iraqi security forces but just a couple of other ones that I think are important. Mike already kind of hinted at this. You still have sectarian problems in the military. In some cases we've heard about them. In many cases we're just assuming, because they have to be there and sectarian problems can't go away that fast. But it is striking how the sectarian problems are receding and are no longer contributing to problems the way they were, again, even as little as a year ago.

The populace seems to be willing to embrace Iraqi formations almost regardless of their ethnic makeup. As Mike pointed out, in the operations in Basra the divisions or the brigades and battalions that really made the difference were units from elsewhere in the country were mostly Sunni dominated. The 26th Brigade in the 7th Division -- 80 percent Sunnis -- had no problem operating in Basra. The 1st Brigade of the 1st Division, which is -- that's the crème de la crème of the Iraqi army -- they have no problems in Basra. They're 60/40 -- 60 percent Sunni, 40 percent Shia -- had no problems in Basra, no problems in Sadr City, no problems in Anbar where they were formed, got no problems in Mosul.

Okay, and that seems to be increasing with the case. Another brigade from the 1st Infantry Division out of Anbar was sent to Diyala province heavily mixed, a very nasty sectarian fight there, participated in the clearing operations. Again, had no problems with the sectarian issues.

The one big issue that's still out there -- and again, my (inaudible) of this is that there do seem to be some problems for Iraqi units operating on their own home turf, okay, so, there is kind of an informal

rule that Iraqi units formed in one area don't actually deploy and operate in the area where they were formed up; they're moved elsewhere, because it's difficult -- as one U.S. officer said -- I had an Iraqi officer say to me that's my cousin's house, I can't raid my cousin's house, you guys raid my cousin's house or get this other Iraqi unit to do it. (Inaudible) there are important exceptions, and, again, those suggest more progress. The first of the first -- that, you know, great brigade I was talking about? That 40 percent that's Shia is largely Basrali, and they have no problem operating in Basra. In fact, it was an advantage, because they took a lot of their locals, put them in mufti and sent them into the city to collect intelligence. The 1st and 7th Divisions were formed up in Anbar. They're not having any problem operating in Anbar. The 14th Infantry Division, which Mike talked about, formed up in Basra. Initially a problem, but those problems largely seem to be because they weren't knitted and partnered with British units. Once they were, they did much better in the Basra fight.

And kind of a last point on the kind of sectarian issue -- immediately after the Basra battle, the 1st Infantry Division mounted a recruiting drive in

one of the worst Shia strongholds in Basra -- Hayania -- one of JAM's biggest strongholds. They were looking to fill out about another thousand people in the 1st Infantry Division. In one day of recruiting, they had to shut the drive down, because they got 3,000 people volunteering, which again suggests that the army is increasingly being seen as a national force and less as a series of sectarian militias. Again, that's not going away, and, as Mike pointed out, we don't want you to take away from this kind of a Pollyannaish view that everything's fine (inaudible) trajectory for success. There are definitely problems out there. One that occurred to us over the course of the trip is that the Badr Brigades have basically gone away. There effectively is no more Badr Corps, because they have all been assimilated into the Iraqi security forces. They're basically all in the army and the police forces, and on the one hand, they seem to be acting very professionally; there's aren't a lot of reports about problems with them but that does raise a potential problem down the line of what would happen if you were in an Iraqi government that doesn't have ISCI, the parent political organization of the Badr Corps, as one of its main component parts, and what if the

government decided to do something that ISCI didn't like? It's unclear exactly what that means, so that's kind of one of those residual problem out there, something I want to come back to in a minute.

Last thing on the Iraqi army before turning to politics: leadership. Leadership is obviously, you know, the Achilles heel and also the backbone of any military, and for many years in Iraq there were -- we had big problems with leadership. That is one of the main areas which seems to be improving. Why? The army seems to be performing so much better. And part of this is just a matter of attrition. For four years, the U.S. military has been hammering on the Iraqi government and the Iraqi armed forces to get rid of corrupt, sectarian, and incompetent officers; and over the course of that four years, they seemed to have gotten rid of a lot of those officers, and they have gotten better officers in their place.

A perfect example -- the best example of that is the national police. You know, the national police used to be an unmitigated disaster. Well, now they're at least a mitigated disaster and arguable actually doing pretty well, and the reason for that was in late 2006 they brought in a new commander who everyone raves

about, Maj. Gen. Hussein al-Wadi. He basically fired his top leadership. He fired the two division commanders, ten of the eight brigade commanders, 18 of 27 battalion commanders, and brought in new people who were apolitical. He instituted all kinds of new vetting procedures, new loyalty tests, new training measures; turned the force inside out to the point where now the NP is really quite respected. They did well in Basra. They did well in Mosul. Their communities are now asking to have NP battalions deployed there, whereas in the past the NPs were seen as nothing but a façade for the worst elements of the Shia death squads.

Let me turn to politics. Again, as you hopefully gathered from some of the comments that Mike and I both already made, the security developments are already having an impact on Iraqi politics. There's a lot of fluidity in Iraqi politics, which hasn't been there in the past. There is the potential for a fundamental rearranging of Iraqi politics (inaudible) potential. It's not there yet. And there's certainly a lot of Iraqis who seem to want that fundamental rearranging. Again, as we said, one of the most important things about what happened in Basra and Sadr

City -- one of the reasons why the Iraqi army was able to win and win as easily as it did was because the people clearly were sick and tired of the militias and they rejected Jaish al-Mahdi, which was a very big surprise to the Sadrists and they welcomed the army, because they saw it as a national army.

This -- you know, another element of this rejection of the militias is that it's forcing a lot of the top-level officials who, remember, are nothing but the political arm of these different militias to start delivering or trying to deliver services for the people in ways that they never bothered to in the past, and it's made a lot of the militia we use very nervous about the impending elections, about which I'm going to talk about more later.

As Mike pointed out, right now Nouri al-Maliki is flying high. And, by the way, you are finally starting to see some American press pieces that are also relating this. Gina Chon had a nice piece in the *Wall Street Journal* today talking about both of these phenomena, how the people seem to have rejected the militias, and how Maliki stock is so high in part because he's being seen as this kind of nationalist leader who somehow is above the militias, which is kind

of interesting given, you know, where he came from and how he got to be prime minister. But even out in Anbar where we met with a whole number of different Sunni sheiks, all of whom had nothing but nasty things to say about Maliki the last time we saw them a year ago, they all thought Maliki was great, and they were very clearly differentiating between him and the rest of the government, which they still considered miserable. But Maliki, they felt, had now demonstrated that he was a national figure, someone that they could actually probably work with, which is also a very important change.

Of course, he now has no party, which is probably not a stable situation in Iraq. Dawa, his party, was never very big, and Ibrahim Jaafari took away half the party, so Maliki himself is ruling over a tiny little (inaudible) party. That's probably not going to hold on forever. He's clearly, I think, going to try to use his newfound popularity to try to build some kind of a bigger power base within Iraq, although it's kind of unclear exactly how. One way he may try to do that is to try to capitalize on the reverses of the Sadrists and said the Sadrists clearly were shocked by what happened in Sadr City and in Basra. They're

very much out with the Iraqi people right now, but the space that they occupied in Iraqi politics is wide open. You know, many Iraqis, many Shia Iraqis, sided with the Sadrists principally because the Sadrists represents a nationalist, moderate, Islamist Shia position. That position I think is still very popular in the South, even though the Sadrists themselves are no longer seen as the champion of that view, at least for the moment, and again that's something that strikes me as a situation that's not going to last forever. Either someone else is going to move in and occupy that space, and it might be Prime Minister Maliki, or the Sadrists are likely to be able to make a comeback, and the big question (inaudible) out there is will they try to come back without Jaish al-Mahdi, without their militia, or with it; and, obviously, one would be much more difficult and much more problematic for Iraq than the other.

The Sunnis of course are eager to participate in the government. They want their fair share. They recognize that boycotting the elections in 2005 was a mistake. And, as I said, there's even this suspicion that Maliki may represent a new Shia leadership that they could actually work with. Again, one of the

interesting things, talking to many of the Sunni sheiks, was that in the past they used to say all the Shia are Persians, Persians can't deal with them. Now they're trying to differentiate. As I said, they differentiated between Maliki and the rest of the government. And they're also talking about other Shia in the South who are not Persians, who are just being misled or dominated by the Persians, and this seems to kind of marry up with what many Americans, British, and others talking about them -- rumors of the third way trying to emerge in Southern Iraq, one that is neither ISCI nor the Sadrists, but again represents more this middle ground of nationalist, moderate, Islamist Shia who the Sunni Sheiks seem to be suggesting they might be able to work with.

What all this does is put a great deal of focus on the upcoming elections. Everyone is looking forward to the elections, and the elections I would argue are going to be absolutely critical potentially for the future of Iraq, because they do have the potential on the one hand to lock in place many of the positive trends that seem to be emerging or potentially to dash them. On the one hand, again, everyone's looking forward to the elections. The people want a

new leadership. The Sunnis are looking for their representation in government and to have legitimate representatives there. They're looking for a different kind of Shia leadership, one that they feel they can work with. There are even Shia who are standing up and saying this is our moment to get rid of these militias and actually create new parties that are more reflective of what the people want. And the hope is that if you get even some degree of progress on all of those scores in the 2008 provincial elections and the 2009 national elections, that could really lock in place a lot of these gains and put Iraq on a stronger trajectory toward a better political system.

The problem, of course, is that everyone -- all the (inaudible) out there -- are trying as hard as they can to bugger the elections, and if there's a sense that the elections don't deliver, if they don't provide even some modest degree of change, then you could have a lot of disappointment on the part of the Iraqis, and while it's very difficult to predict how they would react, because, quite honestly, the Iraqis have been far more patient than I ever expected them to be, I would simply say that it's not a social science experiment that we ought to want to run.

Last point. The big picture takeaway for me from all this, one I hope you're gathering, is that there certainly is progress in Iraq, but progress, as one American general put to us, “Doesn't mean no problems; it means new problems.” The surge strategy and the surge itself were designed to deal with the most pressing problems of Iraq in 2006 -- the ethno-sectarian conflict, the insurgency, the failed state. They've made a lot of progress on those scores, and that's why you're seeing these changes in Iraq. But in making progress on those issues, they are both revealing other problems. And also remember, Iraq was a deeply dysfunctional society even before the United States invaded, and then of course the U.S. spent three, four, almost five years screwing things up even further, okay? So, Iraq has any number of problems in it, and we've dealt with a number of the first or we're dealing with many of the first-order problems, but in so doing we're revealing second-order problems and even third-order problems. In some cases we're exacerbating them.

And just, you know, very quickly, one of the problems that we're revealing, to go back to the army, is you are now having Iraqi forces, which are big,

which are much more capable, which are acting independently, and are kind of starting to feel their oats. And they're doing this in a system where the other institutions of government remain very weak, while elsewhere in the Middle East that's a recipe for military coups, okay? And so now one of the big issues that we all saw on the trip and that we hope the command recognizes is that you now have to not only help the Iraqi army to continue to deal with these sectarian problems and even the factionalism that's out there, but you also need to make sure that they stay in their lane and they don't get it into their heads that we can do this better than the civilian politicians. And that's important to the United States, because the likelihood is that they're not strong enough to actually mount a full-scale military coup. They'll fail. They will be seen as a faction, a sectarian group, and you will simply reignite the civil war.

The other issue out there, as I've already suggested, is that we are exacerbating some of the problems. Again, this was inevitable. This doesn't mean that (inaudible) problems in the surge (inaudible) always to have been expected, and I think that many people did predict exactly this, which is that now that

we're dealing with the conflict among Sunnis and Shia and Kurds more effectively, it is revealing the differences within these different groups much more. And so for me the big issue out there for the command looking forward is how do they simultaneously -- and this is also true for Washington and the embassy as well -- how do they simultaneously keep the pressure off to finish off the first-order problems and simultaneously shift their focus to start concentrating on these new second-order problems. I'm afraid that there's a danger that they're going to say, you know, we know how to do these, these are the first-order problems, let's stick with these; and the second-order problems could come up to bite them.

MR. O'HANLON: Thanks, Ken. Why don't we go straight to your questions. Please identify yourself, if you would, before asking, and I think we probably have microphones that will be circulating, so if you could wait for that, too. We can start up here in the fourth row and then we'll go to the back after that. I don't know if there is anybody here with a microphone or not. If not -- I guess maybe we'll wait on that for a second. Why don't you go ahead and I'll repeat the question if need be while we wait for a mike.

SPEAKER: (Inaudible)

MR. O'HANLON: Here comes the mike. Sorry.

SPEAKER: You've been very critical in some op eds about Senator Obama and his disinclination to recognize some of these changes. Have you seen any maturation, do you think, in his thinking? And what if any do you think -- this is for either one of you -- of his notion that we should commence withdrawal and then have this notion of a strike force of some type standing by?

MR. O'HANLON: Thanks for the question. I'll say a couple of things. First, I do disagree with the idea that we can schedule a withdrawal one to two brigades a month starting in early 2009 and essentially just set our departure to a calendar driven only by logistics essentially. I think for one thing that would ignore that there's a big election going on in Iraq next year, and we don't want to drive politicians back to their sectarian bases, making them worry about the security in their country in a security vacuum. Also, there are big issues like the return of refugees and internally displaced persons of whom there are four and a half million or so in or from Iraq that need to figure out some way to come home. I fear that if they

come home or try to come to their original houses, however, this could reignite much of the sectarian killing. And so I think we're going to have to see the Iraqi government struggle with alternative mechanisms. Right now, there's a very, very preliminary way of thinking about this. We're going to have to see that policy evolve before the United States can safely withdraw and assume that the sectarian quelling of tension and violence will really endure.

Another point on this front. We've seen a big improvement in the Iraqi security forces in terms of leadership. Ken mentioned that almost all the senior leadership of the national police and much of the battalion leadership has been purged essentially because we partner with them and then we allow Prime Minister Maliki to get some intelligence from us about how they're performing, and if we see bad behavior we've got to work with our Iraqi colleagues to convince the Iraqi prime minister to change the leadership. That's been a very important necessary process. There may have to be one more round of that before we can leave.

So, for all these reasons, not to mention the unsettled state of intra-Shia politics, I think leaving

abruptly in 2009 would be a huge mistake. So, I'd prefer to comment in those terms on the policy as opposed to Obama specifically. Now, obviously there are ways in which Senator Obama could think about a couple of aspects of his rhetoric that I think he could build upon, even as I hope he would shift in a couple of others, and let me just me just mention a couple briefly.

One is that I do believe that the pressure from Democrats has been important, not only in creating a change in strategy here in the United States with the surge and the appointment of General Petraeus and so on, but in making sure the Iraqis get the message that our help is not to be taken for granted, there's not a blank check, and if there is not greater Iraqi help in this mission and greater Iraqi cooperation politically working with themselves, we won't stay indefinitely. I actually think that message has helped to catalyze some of the Iraqi political progress of the last eight to twelve months, including on issues like their amnesty law, their budget laws, their de-Baathification reform, and their Provincial Powers Act, among other things as well.

So, the pressure from the American political

system, and particularly the Democratic Party, saying don't take our commitment for granted, we're not going to stay a hundred years if you don't do your part and hopefully won't stay a hundred years no matter what -- but certainly -- we may not even stay two years -- if you, the Iraqis, don't do your part. That's a useful form of pressure. But it has to be combined, as Professor Collin Call of Georgetown has I think convincingly argued, with the idea that if they do cooperate with each other and ourselves in Iraq, we will be willing to structure a more gradual drawdown process that builds on whatever modest successes, whatever partial successes have been achieved, even as the overall war hasn't gone well and it's been, I'd say, unbalanced -- if you look at the whole five years not a success for the United States or Iraq. There's a lot more progress and hopefulness now. We should try to build on that as we leave.

So, I'm, as you can see, trying to avoid a directly pointed response, because I do think this is an important moment for Senator Obama to reassess based on his new political standing in the United States and even more on what's happened in Iraq, and to try to build on some of the positive elements of his previous

rhetoric and his party's previous rhetoric but shift to saying to the Iraqis we're not going to drawdown too fast in 2009, and we'll be a little bit more pragmatic thereafter, as long as you do your part.

The good news from our trip is that you may be able to leave a little sooner than previously hoped and sooner than Senator McCain has proposed as the most likely scenario, based on progress rather than based on defeat, and presumably any American who would be President should welcome that reality.

MR. POLLACK: Mike, if I could just add a couple of things, because, again, I famously tried very hard to stay out of U.S. domestic politics. But on the substance of Iraq and withdrawal of American troops, it is a very important issue for the nation as a whole, and just to kind of add onto the points that Mike has made, you know, again there is definite progress there in the Iraqi security forces, and that clearly is the path to withdraw American troops, to drawdown American troops over time. What we saw were very good trend lines. What we did not see was the end state. They're not variants. They are transitioning, but there are still areas of Iraq where American forces need to be out in front, and we're still the ones owning the

battle space. Fewer and fewer over time, but they're still there. Even where the Iraqis are in the lead, our support to them is absolutely critical, and, you know, what you saw in the Basra operation was the vast difference in the performance of Iraqi troops between those who have knitted and partnered with coalition forces and those who weren't, and the ones who weren't really weren't up to snuff, and we're not in a position to simply pull those guys out, and what's more, we are at the moment kind of knitted and partnered out. We're getting to the point where when we've got so many MTT teams and so many partner units out there that we're actually having to pull partner units away from some of the best Iraqi formations. The 1st of the 1st, the 1st Brigade of the 1st Division, no longer has a partner. They've got a MTT team, but they don't have a partner formation, because we don't have the troops for it, and our feeling is these guys are performing well enough they don't need the partner, they only need the MTT team, so we'll move the partner unit over to an Iraqi formation that does need it. So, if the Iraqi army continues to expand, and it probably does need to continue to expand further, we're going to need those troops to do that. In addition, there are these issues

of kind of second- and third- and fourth-order problems. Now, truth to tell, the third- and fourth-order problems -- when you start to think about them, they're not the kinds of things that require large numbers of U.S. combat troops. They're mostly political and economic problems. They're mostly problems that the Iraqis will need to solve themselves with our help, with our advice, training, things like that. But there are second-order problems, things like what does the Iraqi military do? Does it mount a coup? Things like does the Iraqi government decline to some kind of Russian-like cleptocracy, or do they fail to provide services to the Iraqi people and that allows groups like Jaish al-Mahdi to come right back in and reestablish themselves. Those are issues that are probably going to require large numbers of American combat troops to deal with.

So, we haven't even -- we haven't finished off the first-order problems. The second-order problems are also potentially very dangerous -- not as dangerous as the first-order problems but still potentially dangerous -- and we're just beginning to address them. So, like Mike, I think the idea of a massive withdrawal of American combat forces in the

kind of 2009/even into 2010 time frame -- probably not a good idea. The Iraqi elections, again, have this potential to move Iraq in a very positive direction. I think if we get a positive result from those elections, that might be the period when we could start thinking about all right, we can start pulling out larger numbers of U.S. forces.

MR. O'HANLON: Let me just add one brief point, and we'll to the -- we'll go back on the far side of the room.

Just to be very specific on what I think is becoming a viable range of possible options -- and of course these have to be seen as contingent ideas depending on circumstances. Senator McCain gave a very good speech in May where I think he finally began to answer in a way that President Bush and General Petraeus and others have not wanted to or felt able to what the trend line could be in our strategy. If we keep the current strategy, which is population protection and partnering with the Iraqi security forces as the surge itself ends -- everyone talks about our strategy in the last year and a half as surge-based strategy. Of course, that's a nice shorthand, but it can no longer be true when the surge is over, as it

will be in about a month and a half. And so we have to focus more on the core of what was the surge trying to do -- protect the Iraqi population, provide a political space for greater Iraqi compromise, and then give the Iraqi security forces time to improve as we could (inaudible).

So, that strategy, if you're going to continue it, Senator McCain said, might lead to a reduction of more than half of our combat presence in Iraq by the end of what would be his first term. I think that's a very prudent way to think about the strategy, and, frankly, I would not want to disagree. On the other hand, what we saw in our trip gives me reason to hope that there may be a more optimistic strategy, and it may be the one that Senator Obama could usefully emphasize as being possible, and he may also want to underscore that by the way, it's only going to -- we're only going to have this much patience if the Iraqis if they do they part as well, so, again, it's contingent on Iraqi cooperation in a way that Senator McCain has not been as inclined to emphasize. And that could lead to I think a fairly gradual and very modest reduction in U.S. forces between August of this year and the end of 2009 or beginning of 2010

through that Iraqi election process. But then once the Iraqis have a new government I would hope we might be able -- and again let me underscore the caveats -- we might be able to start withdrawing forces at a more rapid rate than previously hoped, and let's say by the end of 2011 the -- down to 50 to 70,000 American forces. I think that's a viable thing to hope for, and those remaining American forces would be largely the so-called MTT teams -- military transition teams, police transition teams, air power, artillery, armor. We've still got to do a lot of work training the Iraqi border police, who right now are not good at all. We've still got to do -- we've got to have a couple, three, four brigades in Iraq to still be, you know, an important player in the core security issues and to do some of this partnering that Ken has alluded to in the most difficult areas. Right now, there's still a lot of fighting in the north of Iraq, for example, and I'm not sure when that will end, and so I think we're going to need to have at least some brigade capability even beyond this 2010/11 drawdown period. What you might be able to aspire to is getting our presence in Iraq down to 50,000 to 70,000 troops, let's say, in the course of 2011 as a more optimistic scenario, and I would hope

that Senator Obama might be willing to countenance that sort of option if the Iraqis continue to do their part (inaudible) by their own police.

Yes, ma'am.

MS. MOGAHED: This is Dalia Mogahed from Gallup. First of all, thank you for such an insightful and clear presentation of your analysis.

My question is what are your thoughts on the deep divide between public perception and the Iraqi government concerning the presence of American troops and the continued presence of American troops, and what effect will that have on upcoming election and our continued presence in Iraq?

Thank you.

MR. POLLACK: Thanks, Dalia, for asking such a difficult question. Can always count on you for that.

Look, it's a quandary, and, yeah, the problem is both we and the Iraqis got ourselves into this. The truth was that the U.S. government didn't want a status-of-forces agreement. They actually wanted just another U.N. resolution, and it was the Iraqis who came in and said no, we want to demonstrate that we're out from under the U.N. aegis, that we're standing on our

own feet, that we are truly sovereign, and therefore we want a SOFA.

And the problem, of course, is, as you well know, the history of SOFAs in the region is a really bad one. You know, 1964, the Iran SOFA was an absolute disaster, which I think many people would say set the course for the eventual Iranian revolution, and in particular the anti-Americanism in the Iranian revolution.

So, it's very, very easy for anyone who opposes either the government or the Americans -- and some of them oppose one, some oppose the other, some oppose both -- to simply make the SOFA into this incredible political lightning rod by reference to the '64 SOFA in Iran and other SOFAs around the region, and because what's in it is not very well understood, quite frankly, either here or over in Iraq, it makes it extremely easy to do that, and because you've got politicians who are, at the moment, suddenly very, very concerned about public opinion because public opinion is now asserting itself in a way that it hadn't before and saying we're not happy with you guys.

So, your average Iraqi corps deputy -- he's got to ask himself the question alright, they're not

very happy with me because I'm not providing basic services, do I want to add to that the fact that they're going to be unhappy with me because I'm voting for a SOFA that they don't particularly like whether or not it's good for the country? I think that compounds the problems that they face. I don't think that the solution is an obvious one, but I do think that at the end of the day it is going to come down to the Iraqi government basically biting the bullet and doing one of two things, either going back to the U.N. and asking for a new resolution -- and last week you heard Hoshyar Zibari, Iraq's prime minister, saying we may go to the U.N. as early as next week and ask for a new resolution -- or being willing to kind of suck it up and say we need to do this.

Again, at the moment, Maliki is riding high. If he wanted to, he could use some of that political capital to go to his people and say, you know, this is important, we extracted the following concessions from the Americans, this is going to give us the opportunity to do things our way -- and I think Mike has actually been very eloquent, especially when we were over in Iraq, in trying to explain to both Iraqis and Americans that in fact SOFAs are really good for the host nation

because it actually makes it easier for them to kick us out or prevent us from doing things than it would be under the U.N. resolution. Again, the fact that that's not very well understood in Iraq is part of the problem. But we don't know whether Maliki would be willing to do it. I mean, again, that is one of the great question marks that's out there, at least in a very near-term sense of for the moment, Maliki is riding high. He doesn't have a very big political base. What exactly is he going to do with all this political capital he seems to have accrued? And one of the great fears that the Americans have is that he is going to overreach himself, that, you know, at the moment he is riding high, but he's not yet solidified control and Iraq's institutions remain still very weak, and he could do something that really oversteps himself. We don't know what it would be, whether he'll actually be willing to deal with the SOFA before he oversteps himself, or maybe he'll take another right step and be in an even better position. One (inaudible) at the moment, you've got this dilemma, which I think you correctly identified, and I think that both the Americans and the Iraqis have a sense of both what the dilemma is and where it needs to go, but

the problem is it's just really hard for both parties, and I think they're playing it very tactically at the moment, and I don't think it's easy to say who's going to be the one to give. But at some point in time, someone, and probably on the Iraqi side, is going to have to bite one of these two bullets.

MR. O'HANLON: Yes, sir, in the gray shirt about two-thirds of the way back -- on the aisle.

SPEAKER: (Inaudible). I'm with General Public Radio. I would like to know whether you've had the chance to get some impression about the economic situation and if there are any improvements for ordinary people in Iraq.

MR. O'HANLON: I'll start on that one. I was disappointed, frankly, in what I was able to learn about the Iraqi economy and also, in what little I was able to learn, the state of the Iraqi economy.

Now, of course, we're all helping them by paying -- not only keeping all of our forces over there but paying $4.25 a gallon for gasoline. Iraq's number one export, of course, is oil. It's something like 98 percent of its foreign export earnings, and so the GDP has done very nicely in microeconomic terms, and the inflation rate's not bad either.

And there are a couple of other indicators that look okay. Oil production's up a bit, although the price is what's really up, and the informal electricity sector is improving even if the official electricity sector has again run into some problems in the last few months after some progress last year.

And most other areas of quality of life or performance of infrastructure -- I've been rather disappointed in what I was able to learn or what I saw about the state of things. I have no doubt there's at least a modest improvement in, let's say, the number of kids in school because the security environment is so much better, but there's actually no dependable data from either Iraqi or American or U.N. sources to back that up. Same thing on health care. I've been quite disappointed in trying to appreciate and understand trends in child mortality and available of potable water and immunization programs, etc., quality of nutrition. There's just no good information, and even if the information is hard to acquire, we should at least be able to figure out what the Iraqis think about their own quality of life, because in the end in a counterinsurgency or a nation-building or a stabilization mission, the perception of the population

is crucial, every bit as important as the actual facts.

And so this is -- probably if there's a main area of my concern in terms of how well we're doing and also in terms of how well we're measuring what we're doing, it's in the economy. Now, I don't want to sound totally dower, because, again, with oil prices at $135 a barrel, there's no way that a Middle Eastern oil exporter can be doing absolutely horribly. There are some things that are getting better, and there are some informal indicators around Iraq that look okay, such as the fact that there aren't quite the kinds of lines in gas stations that there once were, and, you know, Iraqis are sort or a middle-income country, middle-income people. But of course that's bad news as well as good. Means their expectations are high. And so even when things get a little better, that's not enough to make them satisfied.

Unemployment remains a huge problem. You are starting to see some greater investment from the private sector at home and abroad among Iraqis to start new businesses, but the overall sense here is there's been virtually no progress in reducing the unemployment rate. So, I have to say on balance the economy is more of a disappointment.

The U.S. government's doing better. Our provincial reconstruction teams are embedded. Provincial reconstruction teams are now, for the most part, fairly fully staffed with a mix of military and civilian personnel.

There are some other nationalities. Italians are doing a nice job in one of the southern PRTs, for example, and the British are trying to do some work in Basra. But, for the most part, the actual progress that we can measure still leaves a lot to be desired.

MR. POLLACK: Mike, I think you absolutely covered it. I agree completely with everything you said. I would just add one point, which is that, again, this is I think a very important element going into those elections. It is one of the reasons why the Iraqis seem to be so unhappy with their government and so desirous of a change, and it's why potentially they could be quite pleased if they do start to see that change. And, again, it was interesting talking to Iraqis I think -- is that they don't have sky-high expectations for the election. They're not expecting a completely new set of governments, except for the Sunnis. The Sunnis are expecting a completely new set of governments in their provinces, and all expectations

are they're likely to get it.

Also in the country there's an expectation as a whole that there will be modest change. Evolution not revolution. That's good. The problem will be if they don't even get evolution. If they don't get evolution, then I think you could see a lot of disappointment because they have not yet seen the government delivering in exactly the ways that they wanted to, and, you know, quite frankly, again, as Mike has already said, a lot of the progress that there is in Iraq is economic progress but it tends to be very much at a micro level, and it's a response both to the improved security situation so that, you know, farmers can move their goods into the cities and sell them and people can go to markets and just kind of basic things like that and also because the U.S. government has gotten so much smarter about how it handles economic assistance to the Iraqis through micro grants, through large-scale employment programs but temporary employment programs and employment programs that look like, you know, WPA programs -- digging ditches, building roads, repairing bridges, things like that -- all of which are good and they're smart, but they are short-term fixes, and they don't -- they haven't yet

really affected Iraq's macro economy.

MR. O'HANLON: One quick proposal before we keep working down towards the front for the next question.

Building houses. I mentioned IDPs and refugees. Four and a half million need a home, and a lot of them aren't going to be able to return to their original homes. It might be a nice moment to see a major government-funded construction program -- or, alternatively, some housing vouchers provided by the government that could then help catalyze such an effort through the private sector. I think that would serve two important purposes simultaneously, and we should consider encouraging our Iraqi partners to devise that kind of a program.

Yes, please, in the green shirt about half way back.

MR. MORRIS: Stephen Morris, Johns Hopkins SAIS. Yesterday the Pew Center for the Press and the People issued a report on public opinion -- international public opinion -- and one element of this was the evidence that the American public has grown more pessimistic about the prospects of success in Iraq than two years ago despite the fact that what you're

saying here today indicates that the reality on the ground is in the opposite direction. Now, my question to you is how -- what is your political strategy for having the evidence of what you have seen become more widely known? You have the problem at election year we've already spoken about in partisanship, making it very difficult for your opinions to be universally accepted. But a new President will come in next year, in January, with a clean slate and possibly a political honeymoon, and have you thought about ways in which you might be able to influence the next President, especially if it's a Democrat, in the direction of recognizing the reality and bringing the American public around to thinking in terms of what's at stake as well as what's happening in Iraq?

MR. O'HANLON: Thanks for the question. I don't know if I can add much more than what I said in response to the first question. I think there are ways to try to take the temperature down on this issue a little bit. There are ways to try. I don't necessarily expect any great success, but it does strike me that -- I want to try to say nice things about both candidates right now and try to build on what I agree with of each. I agree much more, as you

probably know, with Senator McCain. I think he's been very robust on Iraq policy for a number of years and really been of the Shinsekir-Petraeus school even before -- well before that policy was adopted.

On the other hand, I think there are ways for Senator Obama to claim that the Democratic Party has had an important role in this political debate and that there are certain elements of the Democratic message that have been crucial to the improvement of the situation. I'd like to encourage him to try to evolve his own position to emphasize those and then try to develop a plan for withdrawal that's a little more gradual and that builds more on partial progress than on defeat as he expected would be likely when he began to run for President.

It's no surprise the American public is where they are, because for the last twelve months they've been watching a political campaign in which the parties have been essentially driving people back to their bases on this issue. The parties, with the exception, again, of Senator McCain, who I admire very much -- but for the most part the political debate has been polemic on both sides about Iraq. Either we have to win, because that's where we're fighting the terrorists, or

we have to get out because it's George's Bush's number one symbol of unilateral (inaudible) and foreign policy, and it's a failure, as we know, from the violence and the extended presence of the United States. So, that's sort of the flavor of the debate. That's what the media's been covering. There's been a lot less coverage of the Iraq war itself.

Let me add one final note on this and I'll stop. We were talking about this with a couple of American military personnel in Iraq, including some who were not supporters of the war in the first place -- and I won't name names -- but we were having this conversation about the rapid decline, the dramatic decline in American media coverage of this war, and someone pointed out that the American public is just tired of hearing about it and they just don't -- they intend to change the channel. They're just tired of this war. And the American officer -- I'll say that much -- he said <u>they're</u> tired of this war. <u>We're</u> tired of this war, and some of us didn't even want to be here in the first place, but we're still fighting on behalf of our country.

So, I think the American media and public have a responsibility, now that the primary season is

over, to learn about the facts. Whether you agree with our interpretation on every point or not, that's not the key point; the point is let's get back to a substantive discussion about Iraq instead of always putting it through the prism of a political candidate. And I think the natural rhythm of the debate will help. I think now we're going to be at a period of two or three months where we're going to be taking more stock of facts on the ground, and obviously the Clinton/Obama competition's over. That won't be gobbling up all the media oxygen. And so I'm hopeful that the public will now have an opportunity to hear more about what's actually happening.

Ed Joseph.

MR. JOSEPH: Thank you very much, Mike. Edward Joseph, Johns Hopkins SAIS.

Mike, apropos what you just said. You didn't have a moderator introduce you, so some folks might not realize that the op ed that you and Ken wrote last year was probably the single most influential piece -- agree or disagree -- whether people agree or disagree with the thrust of it -- but it was probably the piece that most shaped perception of developments over anything that was written last year.

Let me say one thing.

MR. MENDELOWITZ: Was that a compliment or --

MR. O'HANLON: Criticism --

(Laughter)

MR. JOSEPH: Yes. I said agree or disagree.

But I agree with many of the things that you say and do today.

Let me -- one information point from an Iraqi member of Parliament who spoke yesterday at USIP, who's a member of the relevant committee in Parliament. He said he's almost sure the elections will not be held on time in the fall. Because of three technical problems it'll be postponed, just to put that out.

Question for Mike and then one for you, Ken.

For Mike -- in the past we've heard the U.S. military in Iraq say repeatedly that among the major reasons for improvement in security in Baghdad has been the sectarian separation. The fact that the cleansing has already taken place and there the parties are separated. Do you still think that that is the case? In other words, is a modicum of sectarian separation still a core component of improvement in Security? Obviously there's a lot of implications then, of course, for federalism and the ultimate political

settlement that they decide on.

Ken for you -- Mike mentioned that al-Maliki is not thrilled with these armed Sunni elements, and neither are the Iranians as you know. The Iraqis themselves repeatedly talk about the importance of some understanding between the U.S. and the Iranians. How important, how central do you believe that is to establishing some equilibrium in the end in Iraq, that the U.S. and Iran first come to some kind of understanding?

Thanks very much.

MR. O'HANLON: Ed, on your question about separation, of course you and I -- I had the pleasure of writing with you on this last year, and as you well know we argued or estimated in our paper that perhaps half of the ethnic cleansing or sectarian cleansing that you might think possible in Iraq had occurred by mid-2007. Not a lot has happened since. So, I don't think the main issue here is that the neighborhoods are totally segregated. I think the issue is the neighborhoods are blocked off by concrete, and I don't think they are in a permanently stable position. If they were, it would be easier in some ways for policy. So, we have to figure out a strategy for taking that

concrete away, and those of you who haven't had the pleasure of traveling in Iraq, it's just amazing. I mean, these are literally concrete walls that the U.S. military built, and they are walls. I mean, there is no space between one concrete block and another. You can't even fit a rifle through. That's the point. And so these are neighborhoods that are just, as Fareen Zarqawi said the other day, like medieval towns, but a number of them just squished together. And so we're going to have to figure out, with our Iraqi friends, some strategy that over time the walls can come down. A big part of the goal here has to be continued political reconciliation or at least accommodation and compromise, as you well know.

I guess I've been concerned about a number of issues. We haven't yet talked about (inaudible) today. It's one of many disputed areas inside Iraq where multiple sectarian groups claim jurisdiction over the same land. But this refugee and IDP issue is the one that I've mentioned, and I'll say so again -- I think there has to be a strategy for helping people return maybe to their home province but not to their home neighborhood. Otherwise, we are asking for trouble on this front. There's been a lot of progress in quelling

the sectarian tension, but I don't think we can take it for granted as a permanent state of affairs, and if start letting these people come back or encouraging them to come back and they have no choice but to try to push squatters out of their existing homes, then we're going to have a problem.

Last point -- the real key to preventing the ethnic violence and the sectarian violence from resuming in addition to these points I've already made is that the militias have to be kept weak, and so that is why the ongoing operations in Basra and elsewhere, even though they were not always pretty, even though they may have advanced al-Maliki's own personal interests, at some level they were also necessary. Militias cannot be allowed to run huge neighborhoods in cities of Iraq and then also to drum up more support and more followers to then get ready for the next round of sectarian cleansing if and when the concrete walls come down and American withdrawal makes it possible. We have to weaken the militias, and so let's hope that al-Maliki was acting for good motives. I think he was. But we won't know for sure for a while, but there's no doubt that what he did in Basra and Sadr City at some level needed to be done at some point, and given that

he's done it faster and sooner than we thought, we'll have to hope that he's really in a position to consolidate the gains and take things to the next stage.

MR. POLLACK: Just a quick comment on your question for Mike and then turn to your question for me, which is that Mike (inaudible) segmentation of the Iraqi society. I just don't want to give people the sense that this is an enormous problem, it's insurmountable. This is the way that these operations are conducted, and other successful stabilization operations have included this kind of bifurcation or separation of all these different communities, and there are ways that people understand how you deal with it over time and you remove them. And, in fact, you're even starting to see that in Iraq. In Anbar they are removing checkpoints, they are removing blast walls. You know, Anbar is remarkably the province that is going best. And you're seeing that start to happen. As people feel more comfortable you can pull these things down over time, but it does require time to make all this work.

Now, on your question about Iran. I'll give you three. Either -- I'll put it this way -- either

three different possible answers for the question about what about Iran and Iraq, and I want to start actually by saying that one of the surprises for me on this trip was actually how little Iran came up in the conversation, how little it came it up in the conversation in particular with American military personnel. I was really expecting, given what we were hearing here, given the rhetoric here -- I was really expecting to go over to Iraq and find, you know, pretty much every guy in uniform or gal in uniform saying to me this is a proxy war with Iran, the Iranians are the problem, it has gone from an internal Iraqi conflict to a conflict between us and the Iraqi government and Iran. It was rare that we heard that inside Iraq. I thought that the American -- both American military and civilian personnel understood that this was a largely internal Iraqi conflict and that Iran was exacerbating certain elements of it for its own interests. But I felt like there was a much more sophisticated understanding of Iran's role in what was going on there than I was hearing in the debate over here, which is a positive effect.

Now, your three -- to the -- your question and my three dimensions. At one level, Iran is

enormously influential in Iraq, and it is likely that they are going to retain some degree of influence in Iraq for a very, very long time, perhaps even forever. Depends on how you define the word "influence." The economies are too heavily interrelated; there are too many family ties, travel ties, other ties across the border; Iran is big, it's important, it's powerful. Every Iraqi knows that they will be there long after we are gone.

All of that means that Iran is important. And at some level, the ideal would be for the United States and the government of Iraq and the government of Iran to sit down and actually work through all right, what is it that we are looking for? Where do our interests coincide? Where do our interests differ? Can we reach compromises on this? That would be the ideal. I think that's what Ambassador Crocker's been trying to do with his dialog. I heartily encourage it. I think the U.S. should do more and more and more to try to make that possible.

That said, I'm not holding my breath waiting for this to happen. I think there are some important differences between U.S. and Iran and, more importantly, I think there are deep divisions within

the Iranian government over both their Iraq policy and their U.S. policy, and I think both of those things make it very hard for them to actually sit down and have that conversation with us. That's why the first three rounds of conversation between Crocker and his Iran interlocutors have not been terribly productive, and I think that's why you've seen the Iranians consistently postpone the next round of conversations, because they don't yet know there's probably a lot of debate in Tehran about what to do now in Iraq because of the developments of the last six to twelve months, and, by the same token, there's also a lot of debate over how to handle the United States, and both of these things make it very, very difficult.

So, the second possibility is we might simply come to some tacit agreements with the Iranians where, you know, we could, working through various interlocutors -- and obviously the Iraqis are the most obvious interlocutor -- just figure out what are Iran's red lines, what are our red lines, what are some areas for cooperation and just look things that way and not necessarily sit down and have a grand bargain, even over just Iraq, but just be able to work out how we're going to some things in unison. And things like Qasim

Sulaymani's effort to broker a ceasefire, which, by the way, was not nearly as important to the outcome Basra as is being made out to be, but it is important from the perspective of Iranian -- or thinking about Iranian goals and strategy, because it's clear that the Iranians didn't want to see the government fighting JAM either and therefore were willing to try to step in and stop this. That opens up the possibility for that kind of cooperation. Well, as I said, it wasn't as important as I think it's being perceived over here. It wasn't unimportant. I think certainly useful. And that's the second possibility.

The third one is something that I wasn't really thinking about before the trip to Iraq, but some of the things that we heard, particularly from Iraqis, opens up -- which is the possibility that if you do get very good elections, a lot of this may go away because the Iraqis may simply assert themselves. You know, we need to remember that while the Iraqis, on the one hand, are always wary of the Iranians and aren't necessarily looking to poke them in eye -- most Iraqis don't like the Iranians and actually don't much like the Iranians having influence in their affairs. Now, the biggest problem is over the four and a half years

we've created such a mess in their country that we have driven many people into the arms of the Iranians and we've empowered a lot of lot of really bad elements in the society who have willing accepted aid from the Iranians in return for doing some things that were useful for the Iranians.

The hope among many Iraqis is that if you do start to get a change in the political circumstances, if you start to weaken the militia parties and bring other parties to the fore, that we may not need that anymore. It may not be so prevalent. And, again, that's absolutely the best case scenario. I wouldn't bet my house that it would happen. But it does open up a possibility that maybe even you get all three of these working at the same time or even just the last two. Some element of the Iraqis asserting themselves more, pushing back on the Iranians to limit Irani influence, and more of a tacit agreement -- more tacit agreements with the United States. In fact, you could make the case that the third would make the second much more possible and probable, because if the Iranians feel like they're getting more pushback from Iraqis than they had in the past, they may be much more amenable to working things out with us.

MR. O'HANLON: Sir, and then we'll work back on the other side.

MR. GUSTAFSON: Hi, Erik Gustafson with the Education for Peace in Iraq Center. Thanks so much for the latest report.

My question is about independent humanitarian space in Iraq and what you all saw, especially -- I don't know how much of the trip you were able to get into some of the PRTs and meet with folks there. But I -- there's a number of trends. One of the interesting trends with improvements in security is that we actually are starting to see NGOs look to return to Iraq, which is a good sign, and especially with the number of IDPs, those huge needs there. But there's another trend that I think is of concern, and that's pressure for these NGOs to operate from within the wire, from the PRTs, and for some of these organizations what has made them so effective is that their security strategy is being under the radar, not having their local Iraqi national staff have to go, you know, across the wire, and to have the support ownership of local communities, and that provides their local protection. So, that -- it becomes a threat to them in terms of their operations, their effectiveness,

the community ownership; but it also compromises the security for the local national staff. So, is there a role for these organizations and other agencies to -- outside of the PRTs -- be able to get things done?

So -- and then also just generally did you all have any opportunities to connect with some of the NGOs that are operating inside Iraq, or even the Iraqi partners, the Iraqi civil society groups?

Thanks.

MR. POLLACK: Erik, as you know, as we've discussed in private, I think this is a very important issue. I want to say up front, I don't feel like we got the information that would allow me to -- I'll put it this way -- to change my perspective on the issue. We did get to meet with some of the PRTs, and clearly what they are doing is improving. As Mike pointed out, you know, much better staffing, much better access, able to get around. I think many of the programs that they are implementing are much smarter. We were not able to meet with any of the NGO groups themselves. We did meet with some Iraqi civil society groups, but in all honesty what they wanted to talk to us about is what the U.S. was doing right, what the U.S. was doing wrong -- not, you know, how do we get more access to

Transparency International or, you know, (inaudible) or something else, some other group like that. So, it wasn't on their agenda, and so that's not what we necessarily heard from them.

You know, I will simply make a blanket statement that I still think that we need to do a lot better there. We need to, first of all, create a much more permissive environment for the NGOs to function. To some extent, I think, you know, it also is a matter of the NGOs' need to recognize that there is improvement in security; it's not the Wild West that it was in 2006. But, you know, again, since we're the ones who created the problem, we're the ones who have to go the extra mile in saying to people look, it is better and we're going to create the opportunity for you guys to do things how you want to. In fact, it would be useful for us to sit down with you and you tell us how you want to operate. You tell us how we simultaneously enable your operations without getting in your way or compromising your operations. And I still think that, you know, just again, my gut sense, not from this trip but from previous conversations with (inaudible), I don't think we're there yet. I think there's been some improvement but not nearly as much as

there ought to be.

MR. O'HANLON: I'll just briefly add that as you know there still is a lot of politically motivated assassination in Iraq, including the greatest problem now being Iraqi political figures themselves who are often targeted, and so I think Westerners still need to be quite wary about living outside the wire. It doesn't mean they shouldn't consider it, but I think they're going to have to take care of their security in various ways and not just assume things are fine. As you well know, they're not fine, and there are a number of groups still active in Iraq that are quite capable still of targeting people who's death or demise in some other way they think would be politically useful to creating more resentment about the war here in the United States or elsewhere. So, I don't think Iraq is safe for NGOs right now, and I'm sure you appreciate that very well.

Why don't we -- we're sort of back to front again. Far back, blue shirt, sir.

SPEAKER: You painted -- at least as I'm going to take away a fairly but cautiously optimistic view of our military situation over there, but I have a question that's really nagging, and you gentlemen on

this side referred to it. These 90,000 -- I believe is the number reported in the *Post* of these Sons of Iraq, and we're paying them $300 a month. I mean, what happens when we stop paying, or do we just pay it indefinitely? Because obviously the money is what's keeping them at bay in terms of resorting to violence against Americans.

MR. POLLACK: Look, I think you've identified a very important problem. For me, this is one of those really important second-order problems. The Sons of Iraq were a very important idea that helps deal with the first-order problems, and they really have helped. And, you know, for that reason you want to continue it. But now you've got these guys and, quite frankly, many of them would like to go into the Iraq security forces, and as Mike has already pointed out, the government, you know, they're kind of dragging their feet on that.

Now, this is an issue that needs to be dealt with. Point number one, I think we do pay for them for a while longer, and the fact of the matter is that while there are Sons of Iraq in some parts of Iraq that are now safe enough that you ought to think about how you transition them, whether that's into the Iraqi

security forces or providing them with a vocational program -- and there is actually a vocational training program that's designed to get them jobs. My great concern with that vocational training program is it's four months long, which means that they're only out of circulation for four months and when they come out where's the job. As we've both said, we haven't done nearly as much, or the situation with unemployment hasn't changed enough that you can start growing 90,000 young men back onto the economy with an expectation that even if they've got new skills they'll be able to get the job that they need or want. So, to some extent, simply paying them for a while longer is actually a good answer until the economy has survived to a point where you can think about transitioning them.

Another thing to do is lengthen the vocational training. Make it 12 months, 13 months. You know, it's a different way of kind of keeping them off the streets.

Another thing that we're going to need to do, though, is we're going to need to lean more heavily on the Iraqi government to integrate more of these people into the security services. And, again, what's

interesting is there's a much greater willingness on the part of the security personnel themselves to do it. Again, to go back to this, you know, wonderful director of the national police who's really seemed to turn the force around. He went out of his way to bring in people from Anbar, from the Sons of Iraq program, and now is a 50/50 officer corps, which means that the Sunnis are highly overrepresented in the officer corps, and he's got a 25 percent Sunni representation in the rank and file of the national police, which means that even there they're slightly overrepresented. And he's doing that because he wants a force that the Sunnis will look as this is no longer a Shia death squad in uniform, this is a truly national police. So, there's a willingness to do it on the part of many of the security force commanders. The problem, again, is at the top, and that's going to require the U.S. working with the government, helping them to overcome their fears, creating structured programs so that when these guys are brought in the government feels like they can be trusted. It's also going to mean simply getting past some of the sectarianism that remains. As I said, sectarianism is no longer quite the issue that it once was, but it ain't dead.

MR. O'HANLON: Here on the aisle, about half way back, then the next -- you, sir, after --

MR. STERN: Stephen Stern, Washington, D.C., Jewish Community Center. Ken, about three years ago at another forum I asked a question and you went into a very impassionate look at a central dilemma, which I've heard about changes today, and when Mike talked about suppressing the militias then you were talking about this utter cacophony of what was militia, what was police force, what was assassination squad, what Iraqi politician or fragment of the government or community was associated with each. And what seemed to happen -- there's a spirit of 2004 through 2006 that seemed to lead further and further into tactical and strategic catastrophe, and now there's been some kind of American and Iraqi partnership and you're talking about positive trends, but you haven't talked much about the rest of the regional or global atmosphere. You talked about our election, which will be a big part of that, but in terms of the way forward, is -- how will the regional global international environment play on this Iraqi/American partnership?

MR. POLLACK: (Inaudible) I'm glad that, you know, you're recognizing the evolution that we're

seeing out there. And, again, as I think I said at that forum, you know, the problem with these kinds of situations is also the positive, which is that they are -- they take on these cyclical natures where if things go bad they get worse and worse and words; when they start to well, you know, the benevolent cycle can start to kick in, and we're starting --and again I want to stress this -- starting to see that in Iraq.

We are not out of the woods. It is not on automatic pilot. It is not moving forward.

I think that the international environment has been in some ways part of the problem for what's going on in Iraq, because there is still a perception more broadly that Iraq is a catastrophe. Now, you're starting to see changes in the region; you are starting to see gulf investors showing in Iraq and saying we'd like to put some money into this place; you are starting to see Arab countries talking about reopening their embassies in Iraq -- all of which is good from a psychological perspective. And, again, if they do start to put money into the Iraqi economy it would be good from an economic perspective. But it's still very quiet.

And even beyond the region, you know, they --

the silence remains deafening, and I think that you do still have this perception that Iraq is stuck where it was in 2006, and I think that -- this goes back to some points that Mike made -- and even though I try hard to stay away from domestic politics, I think that this does, you know, result at least in part from what's going on here in the country where in the rest of the world, as Mike kind of said, this is George Bush's disaster, and the rest of the world continues to regard it as that and doesn't want to have any part of it.

And even though there's progress in Iraq, Iraq is, as Mike just said in response to Erik this morning, it still ain't a walk in the woods. There is still a lot of killing going on in Iraq. It is still not a completely safe and secure place, even if the trend lines are getting better, and that makes it easy for the rest of the world to say this remains George Bush's war, this remains George Bush's problems. I think that that does open up the opportunity for a new President to recast the entire reconstruction of Iraq in new terms.

And let me just focus on one element of that, which is the United Nations. I think that we have consistently done a very poor job engaging the United

Nations. I will never say that the United Nations is a perfect organization, but by the same token the United Nations certainly does have some agencies with some real capacity. This goes back to Erik's point as well. And, what's more, there is a veneer of legitimacy about the United Nations.

One of the things that's been striking to me over the last year, year and a half, talking to Iraqis -- you know, there was always this kind of sneer that, well, from Americans that the Iraqis don't like the U.N. because the U.N. is associated with sanctions. Well, honestly, what I've consistently been hearing from Iraqis over the year, year and a half, is, you know, they actually like the United Nations, and they actually see in many ways that dealing with the United Nations is easier for them than dealing with us, because the United Nations is seen as more neutral.

And, you know, you finally now have a really first-rate U.N. special envoy in Stephan Demistouris. Everyone is thrilled with him. I give the administration credit. They are working with him in much more cooperative fashion than they have in the past. They recognize that he is much more capable.

But I think there is a lot more to be done

with the U.N. I think there's a lot more to be done in terms of engaging U.N. agencies and giving the U.N. leadership in more and more areas of Iraq, and I think that that could be one way that a new American President, someone who's name is not George W. Bush, can help convince the rest of the world that in fact not only is Iraq moving in a different direction, not only are there these kinds of -- these buds, these new positive trends that are just beginning in Iraq, but the U.S. is handling Iraq in a different way, one that would be much more conducive to the way the rest of the world would like to see us do it.

MR. O'HANLON: We've got about 10 more minutes, so we'll go through a couple more and then we'll wrap up, please.

Please, sir, in the green shirt.

MR. BANJAMIN: Thank you. Mark Benjamin at Salon.

Michael, you brought up the press covering some of the political rhetoric in Washington with respect to Iraq, which I'll admit is very, very difficult for us as reporters in Washington to separate out, because we don't know as much about the facts on the ground. One of the things that I've noticed, say,

from somebody like McCain over the past years -- I've heard a lot of well, the reason why we're in Iraq still is because of Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda interact. You know, he says it's not like Vietnam, because they'll follow us home. You know, look at -- read Bin Laden if you want to know why we're in Iraq. We've been here for an hour and a half. I haven't heard -- I don't think -- either of you say the words "Al-Qaeda" yet, so just to be clear is that who we -- I mean, is that gone? Now, it sounds like you're describing it as look, guys, all we're trying to do now is prevent Iraq from a war, civil war. I just want to be clear about what we're doing there, because it doesn't sound like Al-Qaeda is really where it's at anymore, or if it was ever.

MR. O'HANLON: So, that's a question. Let me give a quick (inaudible) kind of want to chime in on this, too, because it's so important.

To some extent we've been remiss in not bringing it up, but you're still right, the fact that it could even not be brought up at all in an hour and 20 minutes is telling. It is probably still the central concern in Northern Iraq, although even there when we were briefed by the Multinational Division North, we were given a chart with four different

categories of groups they were concerned about with Al-Qaeda and similar (inaudible) or extremist such groups being only one of the four and that they were very worried as well about former Baathists, about some Shia militia groups, and about other Sunny rejectionist groups. And so even in the North it was well, perhaps the principal threat, only one of four main categories of concern.

Having said that, I also have no doubt that the civil was largely catalyzed by Zarqawi and by Al-Qaeda's efforts and they, of course, were not there in 2003, and I think the Bush administration deserves every single bit of criticism that's ever received on this issue.

On the WMD question, I have at least partial sympathy for some of their problems, because a lot of us thought that Saddam probably had chemical and biological weapons. But on this issue of links to Al-Qaeda, there is no reason to apply and certainly no reason to have justified the war on operational cooperation between Saddam and Al-Qaeda. However, since we've been there, they have moved in, to a large extent, and they did, to a large extent, provoke the sectarian struggle of 2006, and they would be willing

to do so again if they had the chance. So, we're doing relatively well against them.

One interesting thing, by the way, is -- and he didn't say it on the record in this particular conversation, but he's done it often enough that I have no problem repeating -- General Petraeus resists any talk about defeating Al-Qaeda, and most of the commanders feel the same way. You don't want to talk about this group ever being defeated. They are resilient. They may be on the run. Their overall area of operations in Iraq is probably one-fifth of what it once was. Their overall effectiveness in terms of car bombing and truck bombing is even less than that. But they are not gone, and we're going to have to continue to partner with the Iraqis, especially up North, but also even in places like Baghdad and Al-Anbar, where they could try to return, to make sure that they remain the kind of a group that you can go an hour and 20 minutes without mentioning in future Iraq discussions.

MR. POLLACK: Yeah, I'll just add to that a few points.

In some ways the problem in the North has become more Al-Qaeda than it was in the past, because in the past you had big (inaudible) assurgency, and Al-

Qaeda was only a piece of that. It was a spearhead. I think Mike is right that, you know, Zarqawi clearly was trying to create the civil war. He wanted that. And so it was not unimportant. But in terms of numbers, in terms of impact, it was only one piece of a much larger mosaic. But because of what's happened in Anbar, because of the awakening -- which of course is spreading even beyond Anbar -- because of the successful military operations, because actually a lot of other resistance groups have flipped so that most of the 1920 revolutionary brigade, most of (inaudible) have now switched sides and are becoming parts of the Sons of Iraq. What does remain is actually a great -- you know, in terms of percentage -- much more (inaudible) than it ever was before.

The problem in Northern Iraq (inaudible), as I pointed out, is greatly reduced, but the hard core that's remaining is more Al-Qaeda, and so they are out there, and, you know, that has to be taken into account.

I will also say that, you know, this question of what the threat is -- well, the threat is this larger civil war. Now, Al-Qaeda is part of that, because what we saw during the civil war there, what

we've seen in civil wars elsewhere, is that Al-Qaeda takes up refuge in countries in civil war, and Northern Iraq was out of control. There's no question that they were going to dominate more space, and what we saw in 2005/2006 was Al-Qaeda elements in Iraq starting to launch attacks outside of Iraq. Exactly the way they did in Afghanistan during the Afghanistan civil war. And had Iraq continue to spiral into civil war or if it starts to again, you will have that problem.

Now, I was always something of a heretic on this (a) because I never believed that the war justified by a couple -- any link to Al-Qaeda -- my book on the subject starts with a sentence and it seems pretty clear that Al-Qaeda had nothing to do with 9/11. But even then my feeling was always that, yeah --

MR. O'Hanlon: Saddam.

MR. POLLACK: Saddam, sorry.

(Laughter)

MR. POLLACK: You say "potato," I say "potahto".

(Laughter)

MR. POLLACK: The more important than that, they were going to have this all-out civil war, but, quite frankly, Al-Qaeda taking up residence in Iraq was

going to be the least of our problems. The bigger problems were going to be the potential for spillover of the civil war, for a civil war, you know, being created in other countries in the region, for a regional war to break out over Iraq, and that ultimately those would swap Al-Qaeda as a problem for U.S. national interests even though it was there.

So, what's the issue now? The issue there now is, again, we're dealing with the first-order problems, but they're not solved. They're not done. And we've got a second-order -- a range of second-order problems which could potentially resurrect the first-order problems. If you get to that point and you get that civil war, you're probably going to have Al-Qaeda back. But from my analysis again, having Al-Qaeda back, very bad, not a good thing, but that would be the least of our problems.

MR. O'HANLON: Incidentally -- a factoid -- the command now estimates that the foreign fighter flow into Iraq is about one-third of what it used to be, and these are obviously rough numbers, because anybody we find we obviously don't let in. But in terms of foreign Jihadists -- shouldn't say Jihadists, Al-Qaeda fighters coming in from Syria and other places, it's

now estimated at about 30 a month.

Why don't we take a couple more questions, and then Ken and I will just conclude.

So, we'll go here and then to the middle on the left side.

MR. BLACKWELL: Bob Blackwell, CIA. You put a lot of -- it seems that Maliki is the person that we're dealing with, and seemingly he is the rod that we're working with. How vulnerable is he physically and otherwise?

MR. O'HANLON: Good question. And then why don't we have this other question, and then we'll just wrap up.

MR. FELDMAN: Hi, I'm Jonathan Feldman. I'm at Stockholm University, live in Sweden, a country that's taken a lot of refugees much more than the U.S.

My question is, first, the big picture. I'm an academic and we kind of work with the dependent and independent variables. So, I'm just thinking of the journalists out there and the American public. What is the big picture? Improvements in Iraq, stay the course and manage things. Are there some intervening variables that shape the rate at which we go in more or less like the so-called Stiglitz effect, the cost of

the war, the work intensification of the troops that's also out there? How do you weigh those other independent variables to reach a conclusion.

Next question quickly. Maybe one good idea -- I'll just throw it out at you -- maybe a crazy idea, but what about trying to build some reconstruction here in the United States by taking in refugees, training them, giving them high-tech skills, etc., in a country that's relatively safe, you know? Why do a lot of this over there? Sweden has taken in tens of thousands of refugees. The American ambassador to Sweden said one of the reasons why America doesn't take these refugees is because it's not safe. Well, if it's safe, why not take them, train them, and help them? That's my question.

MR. POLLACK: Want to go first?

MR. O'HANLON: Okay, why don't I -- I'll go first, then Ken can finish.

Why don't I briefly touch on the issue of cost and your Stiglitz point.

Certainly the cost of this war has been enormous, and it's one of the reasons why I briefly mentioned earlier that if -- even though I was not an opponent of the war and I'm a supporter of the surge, I

would have to say on balance it has not yet enhanced American security, and I'm not sure it ever will. But we're also where we are. And you make policy based on your future options. Now, this is not a reason to keep fighting at the same level indefinitely if you have no hope of progress. But when you've seen an 80 percent reduction in violence in Iraq over 15 months, when you've seen the three and a half brigades already withdrawn and the violence levels not ticking upward in any way and you see the Iraqi army beginning to do good things on the battle field, there is a trend line here that is hopeful, and the security interests that we have in this part of the world are enormous. So, I think it would be a very unusual moment to conclude that because of previous costs that therefore we should stop. It doesn't mean that George Bush is going to go down in history as having accomplished any victory or any such success on this operation. In fact, I like to eschew and avoid any use of terms like "victory," "winning," etc., because it's somewhat insensitive to the cost and the mistakes that have been made in the past. But we are where we are, and I've sketched out what I think might be a more optimistic towards gradual withdrawal, sort of what Obama could in theory adopt if

he wished, a more perhaps prudent or cautious approach, which is what McCain basically laid out in his speech last month. Either way you're looking at future costs that I think would be substantially less than the cost that we've already incurred. It doesn't mean that that's not a good reason in and of itself to stay, but if we've seen the trend lines and the hopefulness that have emerged in the last 15 to 18 months, I believe the magnitude of our security interests warrant trying to salvage some level of stability out of this operation.

MR. POLLACK: I'll start with the question on Maliki.

I think that the United States was very disdainful of Maliki, and I can understand why. He had not shown any capacity to do much, and he was chosen for all of the wrong reasons, because he was a weak person who (inaudible) malicious thought could possibly cause problems for them, and for, you know, his first couple of years in office that is pretty much what he was. And as a result, much of the American political strategy inherent in the whole surge approach was actually in many ways to try to work with actors other than Maliki and in particular work with actors outside of Baghdad itself to push capacity and authority out to

the provincial governments in the I think (inaudible) correct expectation that they could be reformed more quickly and their capacity built much more quickly. And, again, they've had some success in doing so.

I think what's changed is that Maliki himself has kind of forced the Americans to take him much more seriously than we had in the past, because he did mount these operations largely on his own, and he pulled them off. Now, privately what you hear from many Americans was yeah, he pulled them off but, you know, this was a huge risk. It could easily have imploded on him, and we really prefer that he not keep taking these kinds of risks, because a failure could be very, very damaging not just to him but to the entire effort. You know, there was -- as (inaudible) was talk in the Bush administration of do we basically move to a replacement for Maliki? Do we kind of withdraw our support and hope the Iraqis can pick someone better? And the decision was basically no, because we can't think of anyone better. It's not because anyone had a lot of confidence in Maliki. It's just they couldn't find anyone better. I think that's still pretty much the case that today there are still a lot of reservations about Maliki. He's shown more of a spine than people

gave him credit for. He is more popular than I think any Americans thought that he would be. But there are still a lot of reservations about Maliki.

That said, he's still in many ways indispensable, because no one can agree on who would replace him, and so this question about his physical security and also his political security is an important one for the United States.

And then just kind of a final point, to go back to your question, Mr. Feldman, about -- your point about taking in refugees and providing them with training here and educating them. I couldn't agree with you more. And I think that obviously the United States had made any number of mistakes in Iraq. We fixed some of them. We're still making others. And for me, that falls into that category. You know, what I fear when I ask about this is that the big impediment is really about security, that at the end of the day homeland security is afraid if we start bringing in large numbers of Iraqis we're going to be bringing in large numbers of terrorists with them. And I find that both repugnant, as an American, and also foolish, as a strategic analyst. I think that one of America's greatest virtues and our greatest strengths is our

inclusiveness, is our willingness to bring in people, to provide them with the skills that they can then take with them. I think that has benefited us enormously. And, yes, there's no question that some people have come here to study nuclear physics and went back and worked on bombs or came here and hated America and went back home and became terrorists. But I think they are vastly outweighed by the positive good that those programs have done over time, and I think that this general trend that we've instituted since 9/11 to try to wall ourselves off from the rest of the world in hope of increasing our security by some increment is badly wrongheaded.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you all for coming.

(Applause)

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