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PARTICIPANTS:

Moderator:

MICHAEL O'HANLON
Senior Fellow
The Brookings Institution

Panelists:

SUZANNE MALONEY
Senior Fellow
Saban Center for Middle East Policy
The Brookings Institution

KENNETH POLLACK
Senior Fellow
Saban Center for Middle East Policy
The Brookings Institution

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PROCEEDINGS

MR. O'HANLON: Good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for coming. I'm Michael O'Hanlon here at Brookings. I'm joined by my colleagues Suzanne Maloney and Ken Pollack to talk about Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran, and we're delighted to have you here.

Ken and I have each been on recent trips to our countries of particular interest, and Suzanne is constantly thinking hard about Iran, so we hope we'll have some good updates for you. I think you all see the linkages between these three countries, and I won't have to spend a lot of time spelling them out.

But, clearly, one issue that links Iraq and Afghanistan in particular, and we'll be all wondering just how it should play out, is the fact that we only have so large of a U.S. military, and commanders in both places seem to, as is often the want of commanders, desire as many forces as they can have, and even though these is a downsizing occurring in Iraq, the pace at which that occurs is very open to debate and may have a bearing on how fast we can increase forces in Afghanistan.

And, of course, there's no need to spell out the role of Iran in any problem within a thousand miles of Iran's borders, and so I won't even bother to elucidate any, or enumerate any further motivation there.

What we'd like to do is each speak about 10 minutes, and Ken will begin. Ken was in Iraq as part of General Odierno and Ambassador

Crocker's assessment team for their joint campaign plan in October, and I was privileged to travel also with him to Iraq earlier in the year.

And then I will speak on Afghanistan where I was last week with the Canadian military on a roughly week-long research trip.

And then Suzanne will speak. We'll each go for about 10 minutes, as I say, and then look forward to your questions.

So without further ado, Dr. Pollack.

DR. POLLACK: Thanks, Mike. Thank all of you for coming out this afternoon. Unfortunately, because I made the mistake many, many years ago of going into the subject of Iraq, it feels like whenever I stand before you, I find myself fighting against whatever the common wisdom happens to be at the moment. And, unfortunately, this is no exception.

Right now you are seeing growing trends, polls increasingly showing that Americans believe that the United States is winning in Iraq, that we have won in Iraq, that Iraq is going to end well. And while I think that those polls accurately do capture the very considerable progress that has been made in Iraq over the last few years, I think that the sense that is increasingly taking hold in the country that we are either winning in Iraq or about to win, or have already won in Iraq is premature. There's still tremendous problems in Iraq.

And while I wish that I could say to a new Obama Administration, "We've got Iraq on a good path toward success, just keep doing what we're

doing and everything's going to be fine," the reality is very different. And I think we need to always keep in mind the importance of Iraq. I'm not going to dwell at length on this 'cause we've talked about this in other fora like this, and, obviously, we can in more detail, but we do need to recognize that Iraq is one of the most important of the Arab countries. It's critical to the stability of the Middle East.

Suzanne is going to talk about Iran and the opportunity there and also the need to change our approach to Iran. There is also the desire on the part of many people, myself included, to see the Obama Administration will actively engage with the Israelis and the Palestinians, with the Israelis and the Syrians, to deal with the problems in Lebanon, to deal with a whole of variety of other things in the Middle East. We need to remember that we can't let Iraq drift back into the civil war that it was in, in 2005-2006, because if it does so, it's going to undermine every single one of those other objectives, other initiatives.

In addition, we need to keep in mind, of course, that Iraq is one of the world's major oil producers, is intimately tied to the oil market; that spillover from an Iraqi civil war will affect other countries whose roles in the international oil market are as great if not greater -- countries like Iran and Kuwait and, of course, Saudi Arabia -- and we ought to keep in mind in the midst of this horrible economic crisis that it all started with oil; that the first steps, the first domino to fall was the tripling of oil prices between

2005-2007 which set the economy in motion in terms of recession, which then caused the credit crisis and then caused all of the other dominoes to start tumbling.

So that relationship to oil is a critical one, and we need to keep in mind, even as we're dealing with this massive economic problem, we can't forget about the ties to the international economy and, unfortunately, to the Persian Gulf and it's oil resources.

The key thing to keep in mind about Iraq is that, of course, the problems are changing. It is absolutely the case that we have made tremendous progress since 2006. Those of you beforehand, who've been here beforehand, have heard Mike and I talk about this; you've seen it now in the Press, you've seen it all over the place. It is clear that there are real changes taking place in Iraq, and many of those changes are very positive. Security is enormously improved and, obviously, we can talk at length about that, but I'll simply say that I think the biggest changes that I saw was that in 2006 there was no one on the streets of Iraq's cities because it was too dangerous.

In 2007, you saw adults on the streets, warily but they were there. 2008 you see children on the streets, and the children are playing and having fun. They go to school in the morning, and the adults are relaxed about their presence, and it just speaks to the increasing normality of Iraqi society. And, of course, with that normality you've seen a revival of Iraq's

microeconomies all across the country. The markets are full, the streets are bustling, there is traffic on the roads, things move in ways that they didn't before.

It doesn't mean that Iraq is perfect, though, and this is really what I want to focus on. There are still deep-seated problems in the country. In particular, Iraq's politics today have changed dramatically as a result of the surge, as a result of the improvement in security, and the beginnings of economic revival.

But Iraq's politics remain deeply dysfunctional, and the dysfunctions of those politics could very easily push Iraq right back down the road toward civil war, and that is the great task of 2009, 2010, as Mike and I and our colleague, Steve Biddle have written about it in several different fora. But the role that the United States has played now needs to shift. As the Obama Administration takes over, they have got to be focused on Iraqi politics because it's now all about Iraqi politics.

I'll give you some very quick examples of what I mean. There really aren't security problems across the country; there is terrorism. Absolutely, there is still some crime, but the number of sectarian conflict incidences declined dramatically. They're almost all gone, and most of Iraq is in a state of wary cease-fire policed by American and Iraqi security forces. But when you think about the security problems that lie out there, when you think about the things that could cause a resurgence in Iraq security conflict,

they're all about Iraq's politics. They're things like whether or not the Shia-dominated government is going to allow the Sunnis and the sons of Iraq to integrate into the Iraqi security forces, be trained, and be given jobs in Iraq's economy.

There are things like detainees. This year because of the SOFA, we're slated to turn over, over 20,000 Iraqi detainees to the government. Eighty percent of those detainees are Sunnis, and they're in custody for a reason. And, of course, there is real fear that when the Shia-dominated government gets their hands on those 18-19 thousand Sunni detainees, they're going to disappear forever. And it's not that the Sunni community necessarily believes that these are good guys who were wrongly accused; it's simply that they are looking at this as a bellwether for whether or not the Shia government actually lived up to its promise to integrate the Sunnis fully into the government.

And another one out there, Kirkuk and the flashpoints between the Kurds and the government as well. It's these kind of things that could lead to the renewal of conflict in Iraq, and they're all about problems in Iraqi politics.

The same is true on the economic side. As the microeconomies are starting to revive but Iraq's macroeconomy remains absolutely moribund, and the problems there lie in Iraqi politics, nowhere else. I'm not going to go into a lot of detail, but I'll give you one quick example.

When I was over in Iraq in October, we spend a lot of time digging into Iraq's Ministries of Oil and Electricity. We poured billions of dollars -- the United States of America -- into those ministries, and yet we don't seem to have gotten anything like the return on our investment. And so we wanted to find out why, and what we found, sticking with the Ministry of Electricity, is that at this point in time attacks are way down, the grid is basically stable, the generators are largely on line.

The problems are all about politics. They're about the mismanagement of the Iraqi electrical system; they're about idiotic feuds: There is a fight that goes on between the oil minister, who is Husayn Al-Shahristani, and the electricity minister, Karim Wahid. Shahristani doesn't like Wahid, so he shuts off the delivery of fuel to the Iraqi generators. In return, Wahid cuts the power to the Bayji refinery.

This is idiocy, but this is what's affecting Iraq's provision of energy, things like that at this point in time, and this is all about the dysfunctionality of Iraqi politics, not about residual damage from the wars, from the invasion, or about American mismanagement of the reconstruction. So it's all about Iraqi politics today.

And unlike many accounts of Iraq, Iraqi politics has been transformed dramatically. They are completely fluid, and you are now seeing alignments and realignments of Iraqi politics on an almost daily basis. And the good news is that these alignments and realignments are cutting

across sectarian and ethnic cleavages, so you see Sunni parties aligning with Shia parties; Shia parties aligning with the Kurds against other Shia parties, all of which in the long run is good but in the short term creates all kinds of problems and all kinds of threats.

And again, I'm not going to go into too much detail, but I'll throw a few of them out there. One is that you've had, especially since March and April, the emergence of Nouri Al-Maliki, the prime minister of Iraq, as the most powerful figure in Iraq, and he is increasingly centralizing power in his own hands, and there is tremendous fear all around Iraq that he plans to make himself dictator. Given that he comes from a small Leninist revolutionary part, and given Iraq's political culture, who can say otherwise? No one really knows what he intends, but that is clearly one of the threats out there.

Another is that you now have a military that is increasingly independent, increasingly confident, increasingly capable that looks around and doesn't see any other institutions that are as independent, capable, and confident as they are. And in the history of the Middle East that has produced coup d'état after coup d'état, including in Iraq.

And, of course, in both of these scenarios the worst outcome is not that they'd succeed -- unfortunately, both of which is unlikely -- the worst outcome is that they'd fail because in failing they would rally all of the other forces against whoever tried to become dictator. whether it was Maliki or a

general, or some other figure, whoever it was the other forces would see it as a sectarian bid for power, they would rally against it and reignite the civil war.

Beyond that, Iraq's political parties are doing everything that they possibly can to subvert its pluralist political system, creating a great deal of anxiety on the part of Iraqis that they're not going to get the kind of politics that they so desperately want.

Now, as I said, the positive is that there is real change going on and much of this change is breaking open the logjam that we saw in 2005-2006. But, of course, the danger is that the changes that we're seeing are also producing pathways that could lead Iraq right back to that civil war if things are not kept on the right path.

And, of course, that is the job of the United States of America, that is the role that we are increasingly playing in Iraq and that we increasingly have to play over the course of 2009-2010. We are the most important force that is preventing Nouri Al-Maliki from further centralizing power. We are the most important force that prevents the military from taking power itself. We are the most important force that is trying to ensure that there are fair and free elections and that the parties do not subvert them the way that they're trying so desperately to do so. We are the most important force that's going to ensure that once those elections happen, the losers give up power gracefully and don't try to employ violence to hold onto what they

once had.

And, of course, we are the force that prevents the government itself from going after Sunnis, from going after Kurds, from going after other groups that they don't happen to like. We are increasingly there to enforce cease-fires among different formerly armed groups, groups which could take up arms again rather quickly. And it is this peacekeeping role which increasingly we are forced to play, which it is necessary for us to play, and which also gives us the leverage to push back on these other various sources of power, all of whom are trying to subvert the Iraqi political process in one way or another.

The good news is that we are going to have three rounds of elections this year: provincial elections, municipal elections, and national elections, and if those go reasonably well, they ought to put Iraq on a firm footing to continue moving in the right direction over the course of time requiring fewer and fewer American troops to keep the peace, to prevent the bad actors from subverting the system, and to prevent different groups from using violence to change political circumstances that they don't particularly care for.

But, of course, the final point to keep in mind is that one of the reasons that the Obama Administration is going to have to remain focused on Iraq and going to have to continue to play this role is that, of course, in 2009 and 2010 when the SOFA comes into effect, when the congress has

had its say after the economic crisis, the likelihood is that the United States is going to be trying to play these various roles with fewer resources and less authority than they had in the past.

We're still going to remain the most powerful actor in Iraq; we are still going to remain tremendously influential in Iraq. But over the course of time those resources that influence those authorities are all going to decline, and it is going to take an ever more skillful administration to play the cards that it has still in its hands, effectively, to deal with the problems that are still out there and put Iraq on that could truly be a more stable trajectory toward a prosperous, peaceful future.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you, Ken, and I'm relieved in a way that Ken did not spell out the exact number of U.S. brigades that he thought would be needed for this process because now I can put my own recommendation out for Afghanistan without risking any potential disagreement, and we'll see if later on we have such a disagreement.

We also have a couple of members of the military here, including -- I won't mention by name -- but one of my own personal favorite Iraq war heroes and others in the crowd who may want to pipe up later, if they feel we don't get it quite right in terms of the constraint.

But I think that just to come right to the crux of the matter in terms of U.S. military force-planning -- and I'll begin with this point and then mention a couple of other things -- as you know, General McKiernan, and

apparently General Petraeus and Secretary Gates as well as President Bush and President-Elect Obama, all five of these powers over Afghan War policy seem to agree that what we should do over the next 12 months or so is to increase our capability in Afghanistan by about four brigades.

Now, that is a very big increase. We are fond of saying Afghanistan's not Iraq, we'd better not make the mistake of repeating the exact same strategy from one place and the other, et cetera, with four brigades -- sounds a lot like five brigades which was roughly the size of the surge in Iraq -- and, in fact, four brigades is the planned increase now in 2009.

Now, there are different degrees of formalization of this policy. As you all know, there are multiple reviews going on right now. I think the NSC has finished its review and didn't have the audacity to recommend one particular policy in the last month of the Bush Administration, but they did frame some choices. The Joint Staff is doing a review; General Petraeus is doing a review; I believe General McKiernan has finished his review, but obviously as commander on the ground, he's entitled to keep revising it. So not only that, but we don't even have the new president yet inaugurated, so it's a little hard to say what the policy is.

But when you're in Afghanistan, everyone talks about a planned increase from about two brigades, two plus that we have there now to about six, with most of that expected in the course of 2009 and, in fact, one

brigade expected in January, and at least two others hoped for by the summer, which is the big fighting season, typically, in Afghanistan, and a time when people feel it's quite important to have added forces on the ground.

So I think this policy makes sense, or this policy with a small "p," since it hasn't yet been formalized by the incoming Administration or General Petraeus for that matter. But let me back up a little now and explain a little more about why, and then later on we can decide if going to six brigades in Afghanistan in the course of the next 12 months is really consistent with the mission in Iraq that Ken has spelled out. I hope so and I think so, but I think there is some potential room for ongoing discussion and analysis on this point.

Let me, as I say, take a quick step back. I was very fortunate to travel to Afghanistan with the Canadian military. I want to say a brief word in support of the Canadians, not only because they were such good hosts and protection and company for me, but because of their remarkable role in this war. They suffered their 100th military fatality in the time I was in Afghanistan in a large IED explosion on the ring road, which is just west of Kandahar, the road that goes around more or less the perimeter of Afghanistan, and they lost three more soldiers this past weekend in a similar sort of large IED explosion.

They're fighting in a way that Canadians had not fought since the

Korean War. They've got almost 3,000 forces in Afghanistan. If you follow Canadian politics, which I did a bit more in the last week than I admit I usually do since my company was talking about it all the time, you know the Canadian government is basically dissolving in front of your eyes, and they have all these funny words, these French-English concoctions like "peer-roguing" to explain the strange things that are happening there right now while they wait for a big vote of no-confidence in January, and Prime Minister Harper's yacht that off.

And, anyway -- I won't give you my imperfect understanding of what's going on -- but even as Canadian politics are in disarray, the nation's commitment to this war remains firm at least through early 2011, which is now their planned departure moment.

So including, by the way, their forces being mostly in the South in Kandahar province, which is where a number of the American reinforcements are expected and is one of the two or three most violent parts of Afghanistan. So the Canadians are -- have really transformed their military culture, they've gone back to the warrior culture that we think of as typifying American forces which they themselves will suggest and acknowledge they had largely lost during the latter years of the Cold War in the 1990s, and they are out there fighting as hard as we are. American commanders love them and want more of them; unfortunately, there aren't a whole lot more Canadian forces available. So just a brief word of

introduction on that front.

Let me say a couple of things about the Afghanistan that I saw today and a couple of words about suggested policy issues or options for the future, and then turn things over to Suzanne.

First of all I want to put in an applaud for Jason Campbell and Jeremy Shapiro, who at Brookings have created the Afghanistan index, which I recommend to you: Brookings.edu/afghanistanindex -- all one word -- and has a remarkable compilation of data on trends in Afghanistan and helped me prepare for this trip, certainly.

But the basic facts that you'll find there are that again, as I'm sure most of you are aware, Afghanistan not only is a much poorer country than Iraq, a much less developed country, but it is also a country with very small security forces. And if you compare where we are in the Afghanistan debate today to where we were in the Iraq debate at any point in the last five years, it's not just a question of the foreign coalition being much smaller in Afghanistan; even more so what's a stark difference between the two places is that Afghanistan security forces are far smaller than Iraq's.

Let me just throw a couple of numbers at you, and again I'll try not to throw so many that they're confusing, but, in short, when the surge began in Iraq, the Iraqi security forces combined had roughly 400,000 troops. Now, they weren't -- troops and police -- they were not of great quality. There was a lot of bad leadership, a lot of sectarian-motivated leadership.

As Ken and I learned from our military friends in Iraq traveling around back in our trips, there were a lot of efforts to encourage the Iraqis to create a more nonsectarian officer corps, meaning, "Mr. Maliki, please fire these 17 guys because they're not running your military or your police the way they should," -- a lot of that conversation which is only beginning in Afghanistan, But there's also a huge disparity in just the numbers.

Today Afghanistan security forces are about 150,000 total, and this is for a larger and more populous country. So in Iraq before the surge, the western coalition had 150-160 thousand troops. In Afghanistan, before the increased level of commitment that General McKiernan says we have to sustain now for several years, the international coalition is only 60,000 or less than half of what it was in Iraq, and the Afghan security forces are 150,000 or less than half of what the Iraqi security forces were.

Now, you might say, "Who cares? Two different places, two totally different environments." Yeah, but you know what? That was sort of what Mr. Rumsfeld said about Iraq back in '03 when he threw out the rule book on how to size forces for counterinsurgency. I think we'd be a little bit remiss to make the same mistake again and to suggest that somehow fundamentally different counterinsurgency principles apply from one theater to the other.

In fact, now, you know, admittedly not becoming an expert on

Afghanistan but seeing a bit more of it than I had before, I would argue that the same principles do apply to a large extent and we're going to have to figure out how to apply them in Afghanistan and resource them in the way that we finally did in Iraq. And, frankly, 25,000 more U.S. troops and another 50-to-60 thousand more Afghan soldiers, according to current plans, may or may not be enough to do that.

Let me just give you one example in terms of doctrine and in terms of a mental image of I think why this is important. And it gets to the concept that we use in both theaters called clear, hold, and build, and many of you are quite familiar with it, and I'll be a little bit simplistic in describing it, but in Iraq and Afghanistan for the first few years we often hoped that we could go into a city, clear it out of insurgents, and then leave, and that somehow things would function better after our departure. We didn't have enough forces to keep them in the place where we had just done the clearing. It was only with the recognition that this was actually counterproductive that we finally waited until we got the surge forces and then tried to spread the oil spot, because what happens if you clear and leave, it arguably is worse than not clearing in the first place in some cases, because your allies, your informants, and your local indigenous supporters often get killed in the reprisal attacks by the insurgents when they come back into the city and know who was conniving with the coalition, the foreign coalition, during the time that the offensive had been waged.

So what we've learned in both theaters, belatedly but nonetheless importantly, is that you have to wait until you have enough forces to hold before you clear. This is a question of numbers; this is not some fancy, you know, reading of the 3,000 years of Afghan history versus the 3,000 years of Iraqi history and all the cultural differences between them.

You need a certain number of people to walk the streets in a given city of a given size. And we're going to be hoping we can pull that off with fewer people in Afghanistan than we have in Iraq. But that's just a basic reason why I think you have to view the theaters as, in many ways quite similar, even if a lot of the details are different in terms of implementation.

Okay, so a couple more quick words on Afghanistan today. Again, you can look at the Afghanistan index, but what I would say is the following:

It feels a little safer than Iraq. The statistics back that up. The trends are in the wrong direction in Afghanistan, but the overall environment is still slightly better than Iraq's, certainly, before the surge, and perhaps even comparable to Iraq today. Momentum, however, is all in the wrong direction unlike in Iraq where the momentum is largely in the right direction.

And so, you know, you see the kids playing in the streets, you see the markets open. I had much less protection in Kabul traveling with the Canadians than I ever had in any part of Iraq traveling with the Americans.

And I don't think it was an American versus Canadian thing; I believe it was more a threat assessment of the two theaters.

And so while Afghanistan is quite dangerous and I wouldn't want to suggest otherwise, the overall sense you get is that the trends are in the wrong direction, the absolute level of violence, however, is still relatively -- I don't want to say modest but -- moderate, compared to what it had been in Iraq in those civil war years of 2004 to 2006.

I'll just leave it at that and turn to my snapshot of what I saw, but now let me make three brief policy suggestions and recommendations. Actually, I've already made the one: that I generally concur with the proposal to dramatically increase our troop presence.

Unfortunately, our allies are not willing or able -- and this will be a great test of President-Elect Obama's diplomatic skills, but, frankly, we should be fair to Mr. Obama -- if we were to hold out as a reasonable standard for his reinvention of American diplomacy that he cough up 10-or-20 thousand more NATO troops for Afghanistan, that would be setting him up for a goal that even Mr. Obama probably cannot attain. If he can convince the allies to send one or two thousand more troops, three, four, or five at the outer limit, he's going to be doing very well.

And there are some countries that are very committed to this war, like Canada and Britain, and would be willing to send more if they had more. But they don't, and there are others that are feeling their way on this war like Germany and Spain where, frankly, we're not entirely sure in many cases just how many more of their forces would be useful anyway. I don't

want to in any way denigrate their contribution, but it is in a more constrained, limited way, and there are certain parts of the country where they're simply not very useful because of the constraints on their employment in terms of rules of engagement.

So we're not going to get a lot more forces. If there are going to be any more additional troops in Afghanistan, they're going to be Americans and Afghans. That's pretty much the bottom line.

So second recommendation, beyond supporting the McKiernan, Petraeus, Gates, Bush, Obama emerging strategy, is that we should probably go much higher in our goals for the Afghanistan army and policy, which means that some of those 25,000 additional Americans have to be trainers. We've been 2,500 American trainers short, or NATO trainers short in Afghanistan up until now. We probably have to go even above and beyond the previous ceiling and maybe add four to five thousand trainers to be where we should be.

We also have to assume that once the Afghan army gets to that current goal of 134,000 soldiers, they will probably have to go up to 200,000 or more in the following years before we can realistically leave the country and feel like they have a viable security force, which also means we have to think internationally about how to fund an Afghan security force that the Afghans themselves cannot fund at that level. And I think it's much better to have a bigger Afghan army and police than we, the international community,

fund than to have either of the two obvious alternatives of our doing more of the fighting or watching the war be lost.

So given the choice, put in those terms, I think it's much better to find a way to fund the security force, my second main recommendation.

Third point -- and I'll just mention this briefly now because I've already taken about 12 or 13 minutes, and I want to have time for discussion, and we want to get from Suzanne on Iran -- but what I would say is, as you know, the whole debate about how to do political reconciliation in Afghanistan is becoming of great interest to a number of people. Is there a way to do deals with the Taliban the way we did with some of the Sunni tribes in Iraq, for example? That's the kind of question you hear that's on people's mind. There may be Afghanistan experts in the crowd who understand Afghan politics much better than I, so I'm not going to presume to give you a comprehensive sense of the options here.

But let me just give you maybe three little vignettes that I think begin to frame some of the complexities of this concept of trying to work with local tribes, communities, whatever kind of sort of NGO you want to imagine working within Afghanistan:

Vignette No. 1. I was at the Kandahar PRT, the Provincial Reconstruction Team, right in the middle of Kandahar City, right in the heart of Taliban country, and I slept the best I've slept in the last three weeks, and so did all the rest of my traveling compatriots.

We were feeling very safe and well protected, and a big part of the reason was, as explained to me later, there's been no artillery fire into that base, even though there are, you know, Pashtun on all sides right in the heart of the city because about a year and a half ago the Canadians worked out a deal with a private Afghan security firm to do perimeter defense and intelligence collecting. And that's a big part of the rationale for why the security, at least in terms of mortar fire, has improved.

No one thought this was particularly controversial, and it certainly seemed to be effective. Now, this company was credentialed, it was regulated, it had to report to authorities. It's a little bit like Ken was describing about how we have to monitor some of the various entities inside of Iraq. It was not outside of the law, but it was an NGO. It is an NGO, it's a private company. So that kind of work with local communities, or firms, or militias was seen as a good idea.

By contrast, there is in the same part of Kandahar province where the Canadians were killed in the last two weeks another group that we've been trying to work with, that President Karzai has actually been encouraging that we work with, a local militia that despite having entered into an association with Karzai did not prevent or even provide intelligence on the locations of these IEDs. And so that showed a little bit the limitations of thinking that you'd get a quick fix to this sort of a problem by working with that particular militia.

Does that mean the idea is unproductive? No, but a lot of the Canadians were very wary about this sort of concept because that was a militia that we were directly working with.

Third vignette -- and I'll be done and we can discuss this later, if you wish -- we talked to the World Food Program representative in Kandahar province who said the way they deliver food to the most distant parts of Kandahar province, after they got tired of getting robbed on the roads and the Canadians didn't have enough forces to protect them, what they started to do was to go in and negotiate with the local elders before they would deliver the food, and they would say: We'll provide food as long as you promise that it will be secure.

And this gets into the issue of what's Taliban, and what's criminality, and what's just lack of law and order, but it works. They go in and they say to these communities we're only going to deliver the food if you protect it. And if there is an assault on the convoy, or if there is a robbery against this convoy, you can grab the food this time, I suppose, but we're not coming back with any more food because we only have so much food, and we're going to take it to where the people get it. So if you can't vouch for the security of these shipments, you're not going to get them. You're community won't get them. And this sort of arrangement has worked.

Now, they haven't had to provide any money or arms to these sorts of groups for this particular focus, this particular function, but it still

indicates the kind of local cooperation that may be important, that may be something we can build upon.

So we can come back to this, so I wanted to give you those three vignettes of the way the reconciliation process works. I basically agree with Sarah Chase, the former MPR reporter who wrote a piece in *Outlet* this weekend, basically saying reconciliation with the Taliban, with a capital "T," doesn't make sense. These are bad guys, this is the enemy, that kind of reconciliation I don't think people have a great interest in. But working with communities and trying to convince maybe some Taliban to reintegrate themselves into those communities instead of remaining as warlords and redefine their own role in society and then become part of a negotiation process thereafter, that probably does have potential.

Sorry to go on so long. Suzanne.

MS. MALONEY: Thanks, Mike, and thank you, too, all of you, for being here today. It is a pleasure and an honor to be batting cleanup on a panel that includes Michael O'Hanlon and Ken Pollack, and it is something of a relief to be the one on the panel who gets to talk about a diplomatic opportunity as opposed to a military conundrum, although one could certainly posit Iran in those terms if one wanted to. But I would like to offer at least my take on where U.S. policy stands toward Iran today and perhaps lay out five challenges for the Obama Administration as it enters office and tries to embark on any new policy toward Iran.

And when I talk about an opportunity, I think we're really at what I would describe as a watershed moment for U.S.-Iranian relations. And I say this with a certain degree of realism and cynicism about exactly how far we've been able to come in the course of previous watershed moments over the past three decades.

But really that is to say today for the first time in a long time, the policy debate on this side is largely settled, with the exception of perhaps Dr. Fouad Ajimi in today's Wall Street Journal and a few others. Almost all Washington has come to the conclusion that engagement is not simply an appropriate policy for the U.S. to pursue with respect to Iran but, in fact, the appropriate policy for the new Administration to embark upon as it enters office. This ends the debate that was largely, I think, a false one and certainly an unproductive one over the past eight years about whether or not we should be talking to the Iranian regime.

We spent a lot of time and energy and heat and light talking through this sort of a question: Are we legitimizing? Are we facilitating? Should we be across the table from a regime of this type or this manner? But in reality over the past three decades, every U.S. Administration, Republican and Democratic, has, in fact, endeavored to deal directly with the regime in Tehran, for the most part unsuccessfully, but this has been a fairly consistent element of every U.S. Administration's policy toward Iran. And if you doubt that, you can read Ken Pollack's excellent and very long

book *The Persian Puzzle*, which documents much of this history.

And, ironically, of course, it was the George W. Bush Administration, the current administration, which went further and perhaps achieved more in terms of its direct dialogue with the Iranians, and I speak specifically here about the dialogue that took place between 2001 and 2003 on the issue of Afghanistan, than any prior Administration had done, really, since the resolution of the hostage crisis in 1981.

And so in effect, today we are no longer at a point in talking in Washington about, should we or should we not sit across the table from the Iranians? Senator, President-Elect Obama talked about this very early on at some political price in his campaign. It's been very clearly an element of his strategy toward the region, and there's been really very little dissension in part because you've seen the Bush Administration return to its own policy of engagement in recent years, even going to so far as to send a diplomat to the nuclear negotiations this summer, having previously said that we would not do so until and unless Iran suspended its uranium enrichment program.

So I think the debate is settled here in Washington, and that's a positive.

At the same time we see, perhaps for the first time in post-revolutionary history, the first cross-factional public and authorized support for dialogue with The Great Satan since the revolution. We never had this sort of a condition before, and it's really been evolving over many

years. It is a product of the Reform Movement, and yet it has come to pass at a time when the Reform Movement is largely marginalized, and when Iran's internal policy has moved in a fairly regressive direction.

But today we have the supreme leader having come out and endorsed dialogue with Washington, and having done so, it makes it much easier for every other politician within the political elite to come out and embrace this sort of a position as well. It's not to suggest that there is no discussion, that there are no would-be spoilers on the Iranian side, but in effect it is no longer verboten for an Iranian to come out and talk about negotiations with Washington. This is part of the normal dialogue of conversation, of political discourse in Tehran today, and that is a major step forward for the Iranians.

So that puts us in a position where we have at least the opportunity for some sort of direct and conceivably constructive conversations across the table from Tehran for the first time in 30 years. And so I think that in and of itself is something that is going to be important to watch, and it represents a real opportunity for the Obama Administration over the next few months.

We know what the policy will be. We know the direction; we don't know the details, and I think what's important is the Administration comes into office, begins to outline its policy, is in fact that we recognize that there are going to be some real challenges, despite the fact that we may have a

sort of unique historical moments ahead of us in terms of U.S.-Iranian relations; that there are real challenges that they could very well torpedo any process that does get underway.

And let me just outline a few of those challenges, and then we'll open it up for discussion on all these issues.

I think the first challenge is how can the Obama Administration differentiate its policy from that of the Bush Administration? There's been a lot of commentary both here and even more so on the Iranian side about President-Elect Obama's recent interview on Meet The Press in which he talked about carrots and sticks, talks in ways that sounded very similar to some of the senior diplomats of the Bush Administration when it comes to Iran. And there is a sense, certainly, on the side of the Iranians that this may be a new face to an old policy.

And I think it's important for both sides to recognize that a new fact is not going to be sufficient to actually produce any real change in Iranian policy. The Iranians clearly have been hedging their bets for many months, if not years, trying to wait out the Bush Administration in the hopes that a new Administration might prove more forthcoming and might be willing to negotiate in a more wholehearted or a more comprehensive manner on all the issues that stand between us and the Iranians.

But it's very clear that if we simply apply the same policy perhaps with a little bit of new rhetoric or a slightly different face to it, that we're likely

to end up in exactly the same place that we are today. And so I think one of the challenges for the Obama Administration is going to be clearly differentiating what it's doing from what the Bush Administration is doing. And that is we will probably retain the P5+1, the multilateral approach to the nuclear program. We will probably maintain, I think for all certainty maintain, all if not most of the sanctions that have been applied to Iran, and particularly those that have been proven to be so effective in recent months: restrictions on Iran's involvement with the international financial system.

But what we have to do is present this opening to the Iranians in a way -- and this is something that we have laid out in the book that was recently produced in cooperation with the Saban Center here at Brookings and the Council on Foreign Relations outlining what would really be a comprehensive framework for negotiations with the Iranians, which is something that the Bush Administration eventually came around to but was not how the initial diplomacy toward Iran was presented in May 2006 when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made the announcement that the U.S. would be willing to negotiate with the Iranians on the nuclear program.

I think the key differentiation will be that we are willing to sit across the table, we are willing to put all the issues on the table, and that we are willing to deal with them in a serious way to make progress where we can make progress, even when we can't make progress in all areas.

I think the other main challenge for the new Administration is going

to be the question of timing, and this is really a twofold challenge. The first is the fact that the Iranians have already begun what is an intense and interestingly fought presidential election on their side. The election won't take place until June 12th. The campaign official season is usually only about two weeks, and yet Iranian politics today is completely consumed with the question of who will run, how will they run, who will come together to either oppose President Ahmadinejad? Will former President Hashemi throw his hat into the ring? What does this all mean for the various contending factions of Iran?

And this makes it very difficult, I think, both for the Iranians to move themselves forward because they are so consumed with their own internal politics. It also makes it very tempting for the Obama Administration to come in and to try to weight out exactly what happens in Iran's always murky internal situation. I think it would be a mistake, personally, for the Obama Administration to hedge its bets and to hinge any new diplomacy on the outcome of those elections.

I say this because I think we have almost no ability to predict the outcome of those elections, and we have even less ability to positively influence those elections in a direction that would conceivably produce a more fruitful set of negotiations in their aftermath.

And if we do appear to be hinging our diplomacy on the outcome of the elections, then we could very likely taint any potential successor to

Mr. Ahmadinejad, if he were to be elected. That is to say, the sort of diplomacy that the Clinton Administration embarked upon in the aftermath of reformist victory particularly in the parliamentary elections in 2000, made it very difficult for any faction in Iran to actually embrace the overture and reciprocate. And, of course, we know that we saw no reciprocation whatsoever.

And so I think it's important for the incoming Administration to signal even as it's involved in its own sort of internal policy reviews, confirmations, logistics of getting officials in place, but to signal early on and very clearly the direction that our diplomacy is going, and if that diplomacy is going to be irrespective of who wins the presidency in June. I would say that only a fool would cast a bet six months in advance of an Iranian election, or even six days in advance of the Iranian election on what the outcome will be.

But I will say that it's entirely possible if not probable at this state, that Mr. Ahmadinejad will be well positioned to secure himself another victory, if that's what the political elites of Iran decide to make happen. And so I think again that's another reason why we don't want to hinge our diplomacy on the outcome of those elections.

The other piece of the challenge on timing of any new diplomatic overture is simply that the Iranians are going to have every intent to make it a protracted process so that they can continue to move forward on their

nuclear program to get as much accomplished, to build as much, to have as many centrifuges up and running, and really to effectively cross whatever threshold we may draw, whatever line in the sand we may draw even as we're sitting at the negotiating table.

And so one of the real challenges for the Administration in creating a framework for diplomacy is going to be creating a set of guidelines and deadlines that are mutually agreed upon as well as potential concessions and incentives that are also mutually agreed upon, because ultimately there is very little we can offer to the Iranians in advance of them taking concrete steps to change their policies in advance of the suspension of uranium enrichment or in advance of any real meaningful and clear change in their policy on terrorism and intervention, and some of their neighbors.

But we need to make clear what the rewards for that kind of behavior will be: to keep them at the negotiating table, to give them the incentive to do what we need them to do. And we need to also make clear what the penalties for stalling at the negotiating table will be.

I think the other set of challenges revolve around the whole question of all right Iran can say yes to any deal, and this is the great unknown of any kind of U.S.-Iranian diplomacy. We do know, as I said, that the Iranians can sit across the table from American diplomats, as they did between 2001 and 2003 and actually engage in a constructive dialogue. They were not perfect talks; the participants will complain I think on both

sides of the frustrating experience that they have, but they did produce some positive outcome with respect to the establishment of what was at least at the outset a stable Ossi Government and a political process that was at least viable in the aftermath of the chaos and violence of the overthrow of the Taliban.

And so we know that the Iranians are capable at least on discreet issues of having some capacity to sit at a negotiating table with Americans and make progress and show results. And we know, of course, from looking at their relationships with other countries, particularly with Saudi Arabia, with the British, that Iran can, in fact, come to terms with old adversaries.

We know that Iranian policy on a number of areas, foreign policy and domestic policy, has changed in dramatic ways over the past 30 years. But what we don't know is whether Iran is capable of making a sort of epic confessions on terrorism, on its nuclear program, even conceivably on the way it treats its own people. We don't know if Iran is capable of making those concessions that would be necessary to arrive at any real change in the U.S.-Iranian relationship, and we don't know if the Iranians have the kind of internal policy coordination to carry out any promised changes to their own policies. So I think that is one of the major challenges, and it's the one unknown that needs to be addressed only by testing.

Fourth challenge for the Obama Administration is going to be

maintaining realism. There's a lot of excitement about what might be possible on U.S.-Iran relations. Some of this concerns the fact that the oil price has dropped by an enormous factor over the past six months. Instead of \$147 a barrel of oil, we're talking about \$47 and below these days, and that has an enormous impact on what was already a disastrously managed Iranian economy.

And yet we know again from past experience that the Iranians have some capacity to ride out really difficult economic times; that particularly where they see a policy that is either ideologically sanctified or existential for their own perception of their own security, they may be willing to absorb from the political and economic costs, at least in the short term, rather than alter that policy. So I think we have to be careful to maintain our realism on what -- how the Iranians are likely to change their own policies in response to the global economic crisis.

We also have to be realistic about what we are likely to get in terms of new pressure from the international community. The Russians, the Chinese have been on board, reluctantly, for a process for Security Council resolutions and will continue to work with us at least on the margins to ensure to make progress on the Iranian nuclear issue. And yet it is also clear that they're not willing to impose the kinds of really robust sanctions that would immediately or at least in short term cripple the Iranian economy and force Tehran to change its behavior.

And so we're going to have to deal with the marginal costs and sanctions and the lackluster cooperation of most of our allies rather than some sort of dramatic flow to the Iranian economy into the Iranian political system that would be sure to change their own intensives.

And this is true despite the honeymoon that the new Administration will likely experience with all of our allies and with the Russians and Chinese.

Final set of challenges is one that's really, I think, endemic to the American system, and the lack of contact with Iran over the past 30 years is something the Secretary of State Rice has talked about. We just don't understand the country, and I say that as someone who spends as lot of time following it.

You know, we have very little capacity to fully read the internal politics. We tend to spend a lot of time focused on internally debates which are fascinating and conceivably very important, but we often then forget that in fact many of these debates have been raging for 30 years; that even at the time of Ayatollah Khomeini's life when he was the unquestioned leader, founder of the revolution and of the state, there was an enormous amount of factionalism within the regime. And yet the regime endured all of this and more.

So we have to be careful not to spend too much time on our own kremlinology; we have to be careful to try to understand the Iranians as they

sit across the table from us, and I think we have to be prepared to expect the unexpected because what we know from the past 30 years of Iranian behavior is every time we think we have the country figured out, we see something new in terms of policy or in terms of internal development.

And with that, let me turn it back over to Mike and to your questions.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you, Suzanne, and let's go straight to those questions.

I should say, by the way, there are about five seats, five or six seats up front, if anyone's tired of standing in the back.

We'll begin over here on the front row. Please identify yourselves and wait for the microphone and ask just one question, if I could.

MR POWERS: My name is Ed Powers. Thank you very much, I enjoyed all three presentations. I almost completely agree with Ken and Suzanne. I have much more difficulty with your position on Afghanistan.

I just -- it seems like we're living this over and over again, the same kinds of mistakes we've made for a half century -- Vietnam and Iraq, of course, most recently, turning out to be a mistake, but the rationale for getting in, in the first place is always solid, strong, small forces, et cetera, et cetera.

The worry is that we're going to get into a similar kind of involvement unless we really know what we're doing. Are we going to

scope out our involvement? How much control do we need? How many troops are we going to send, one brigade, two brigades, four, five, ten as it grows, as we can't solve the problem?

How do you feel about are we going to have these controls in place? Are we going to have these questions answered? Are we going to have any backout/backoff strategy like we've never seemed to have before? It just scares me to death, and it seems like we're saying and doing the same things that were done before.

MR. O'HANLON: It's a good question. Let me try to give a brief answer, which is to say the following:

You're right. I mean in theory by the same principles I argued should apply to Afghanistan, you might need 15 brigades, 20 brigades, and so what confidence do we have that four will be a meaningful difference?

Well, the way I would build up to four is to say first of all, it's primarily along the southeast and particularly in the south where we've seen a real deterioration in the environment and not nearly enough force to do population security. Kandahar City has the better part of the Afghan police, and they have a nice Canadian rapid response team, and Kandahar City is doing much better. The population feels more secure, they want to work with the authorities, they're turning in 80 percent of the IEDs, improvised explosive devices, before they detonate. There's a real partnership between the population and the authorities because the population feels

there's enough capacity there to trust.

They don't want the Taliban back. We really have that going for us in Afghanistan, we just got to deliver and we're not delivering.

And so I take your point. There is a worry that four brigades will, you know, beget four more or a request for four more. And then even if Ken and I can figure out a way to agree on this combined proposal, we'll be in real trouble when General McKiernan wants 10 brigades and Odierno says, "I still need 10 in Iraq." And that would be a real difficulty.

But I think if you combine, let's say, 4,000 more for training, you also want to have some along this ring road and, you know, Afghanistan's underdeveloped which means it doesn't have a lot of roads to protect. We've at least got to protect the ones they do have. And then an ability to go beyond Kandahar City to some of the other large cities, or larger towns in Kandahar province and next door in Helmand province. That's the way in which I would justify the 25,000.

Now, you're right, that may not be enough. For example, the border with Pakistan would require probably hundreds of thousands to properly man, and we do hope to partially disrupt the flow of insurgents coming in from Pakistan with this increase of four American brigades. Clearly, we can't do it even with all four, much less the small fraction that will actually be along the border.

So you're right to express a concern, but again, if you piece

together the training mission, the protection of the road trying to go into the other major towns, not just Kandahar City, not just other larger cities in the southeast, I think you can build up a reasonable case why this addition of four more brigades is not just some haphazard guess; it's not just some speculation, it's reasonably well-grounded in military planning.

So I accept your concerns and caveats, and I share some of them, but most of this is pretty well pieced together, and it's the first time we've tried. It's the first time in Afghanistan we've thought in these sort of terms about protecting key infrastructure, key roads, and properly resourcing the training mission.

Yes, sir, here in the third row.

MR. HERRIOT: Judd Herriot, documentary film producer. My question is for Suzanne Maloney.

You mentioned that the Russians and the Chinese have been reluctant participants in the set of sanctions. Also in your monograph you also indicate that perhaps the Chinese and the Russians do not share our perception of a threat. I'd like you to -- my question is, could you comment some more on this? I just cannot understand why the Russians would not regard nuclear-armed Iran on their southern border as a threat.

MS. MALONEY: Well, I am not a Russia expert, but having just come from a discussion on this very issue, I feel uniquely well prepared to at least respond.

I would start by saying that I don't think that there is a country in the world with the possible exception of Venezuela on a day that really looks forward to an Iranian nuclear capacity. I don't know this, that there's a leader or country that sees that as a stabilizing factor or would make a credible argument on that behalf.

But what I would argue is that the Chinese and the Russians view the threat differently than we view it here, and differently than some of our allies in the region view it, which is to say they are very -- would be very unhappy to see an Iranian nuclear capacity. They recognize the potential for destabilization in the region and yet they don't believe that they would be targeted by such a weapon and, in fact, they do believe that potentially some of the remedies for dealing with an Iranian nuclear capacity could be more problematic than the policies that we currently have in place. And they also, I think, judge that anything that advances American preeminence in the region is not wholly in their interests.

Now here one can differentiate the Chinese for the Russians to some extent because the Chinese are a sort of free-rider on our guarantee of energy security and free flows of oil from the Gulf. And they clearly value that and recognize the importance of that. And yet they also recognize the importance of the marketplace and of the potential resources that they could tap into in Iran.

So they have a variety of different motivations. They don't want to

see Iran go nuclear, and at the same time I think their strategic calculation overall is that the threat, particularly for their interests, of Iran crossing that threshold is less than the threat of a Middle East totally dominated by an American security perspective.

MR. O'HANLON: Yes, sir?

MR. O'CONNELL: Erin O'Connell from the Naval Academy.

Dr. O'Hanlon, I'm glad you mentioned Pakistan because my question is about that. It seems that many of the military efforts to improve security in Afghanistan have actually been counterproductive to the stability of Pakistan, and I imagine that the addition of four brigades, particularly on the border with Pakistan, could be only furthering that problem.

So my question is, how can we achieve our security interest with a stable Afghanistan without empowering the extremism in Pakistan?

MR. O'HANLON: Ken, do you want to take that?

DR. POLLACK: All of the comments --but, look, Mike, my own feeling and also (inaudible) to Ed -- I assume the same concerns that you would as you're both voicing. Many of you in this room have heard me make the argument in the past that Iraq was not Vietnam.

I am afraid Afghanistan might be. There is real concern, I think, out there in my mind about whether the incremental addition of forces is really going to change things, especially given, as, Mike, you pointed out the vast imbalance between even the increases in number of forces that we're

talking about in Afghanistan and the actual size of the population and what all of these wars have taught us about what is necessary there.

In addition, what worries me, there's obviously history of Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires. The Brits couldn't do it, the Soviets couldn't do it, I am nervous that we, too, will be unable to do it.

And a last point is exactly the issue that you brought up, Erin, which is, for me, the reason we needed to stay in Iraq was that Iraq was vital to our national interests, at least sad fact but true. And, hopefully, we can all look forward to a day when that will no longer be the case, but it ain't now. Afghanistan is much harder to see the tide between Afghanistan and our vital interests.

Pakistan you can make that case. That combination, as our colleague Bruce Riedel always likes to point out, Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, and nuclear weapons with an unstable government that is, if not a failed state a failing one, you can look at that and say that is definitely something that affects our vital national interest.

But exactly as you're pointing out, Erin, Afghanistan's not Pakistan. And it's not clear that even if you put a 150,000 American troops in Afghanistan that would solve the problems of Pakistan. Pakistan's problems are largely political and economic and diplomatic, and additional increments of American forces in Afghanistan -- heck, additional forces, increments of American forces in Pakistan are not going to solve the

problems of Pakistan.

So I do worry very much about this, and I also worry that, as you're kind of pointing out, Erin, the more that we put the troops into Afghanistan, the more that we are tempted to mount cross-border operations into Pakistan, again exactly as we did in Vietnam. We have the sanctuary problems there as well; what we learned in Vietnam is special forces don't do it. You can mount massive secret bombing campaigns, even incursions into the neighboring country. It doesn't do it. The only way to do it is to mount the full-scale counterinsurgency campaign which you can only do with the cooperation of the government, which seems entirely unlikely in the case of Pakistan.

So it's simply for me a reason to at least have a red flag. I think that there are issues about Afghanistan that we need to be concerned about. There is the issue of terrorism, although I will say terrorism is not the most important thing out there, and we need to stop getting completely obsessed by it the way that the Bush Administration was. But given the overall vital national interests, what is at stake in Afghanistan versus Pakistan I am very wary about too many more commitments of forces to Afghanistan.

MR. O'HANLON: And I can't disagree with either you or Ken in a definitive way, but let me just voice the counterargument. The counterargument is:

a) We tried to ignore Afghanistan a couple of times before. It didn't

work out so well.

b) Are you really confident that Pakistan's going to thrive with a Pashtun sanctuary for insurgents to its northwest, which is what you're, in effect, potentially proposing with the idea of conceding Afghanistan to chaos.

And then 3) I guess -- and this is I hope maybe we could have a meeting of minds -- maybe, maybe not, but I'll throw it out as a possibility -- you could say you should only do this kind of a big new effort in Afghanistan when a comparable effort is being attempted on the Pakistan side, and you're trying to essentially control both potential sanctuaries, simultaneously.

And I think there is reason to hope, not to predict but to hope, that there is movement in the Pakistan environment on that front as well. We've seen a little bit more seriousness about the building up of their frontier corps. We are seeing the Pakistanis perhaps recognize that their neglect of the northwest areas was to their own detriment with some of the assassinations and terrorist bombings in their own country.

And so what I'm hoping is we can actually see the insurgency addressed from both directions, and that that is the most promising approach. But I take all the counterarguments and caveats under serious advisement.

Yes, in the fourth row, please.

SPEAKER: Thank you, (inaudible) The Washington Times.

My question is to Ken Pollack. You put quite emphasis in your presentation to the improving security condition in Iraq, and then, in short, you continued to say that Iraqi politics now matter more than ever for the future of the future of the country.

With that I'm just, you know, going to ask you when you're making your analysis about Iraq, do you eliminate or elevate the possibilities of Iraq breaking apart in the coming four years?

DR. POLLACK: Sure. I'll put it this way: I think that right now it looks less likely than ever that Iraq will break apart. I never thought it was highly likely. I always felt that it was far more likely that you would have a horrible civil war than you would actually see the parts of Iraq fall apart.

Kurdistan's a different issue. Kurdistan is its own nation, some day it ought to get independence; not today but at some point in time.

The rest of Iraq is one political unit and has been for 7,000 years, far longer than any other political unit, and the Iraqis made that clear constantly. The Iraqi Arabs weren't interested in partition. They weren't interested in splitting up. What they were fighting over was who was actually going to control it.

To get to the specifics of your question, it really depends on whether or not we see civil war in Iraq again. You know, as I pointed out, Iraqi politics are very fluid right now. The bad news is that there's a

tremendous amount of conflict in the political sense among different groups.

The good news, as I pointed out, is that the problems are what political scientists call "cross-cutting cleavages." It is now issues that divide across sects, across ethnicities.

During the period of the civil war, you are reinforcing cleavages. Everybody was a Shia and everybody who was a Shia believed in the following six things, and if you're a Sunni, you believed in the opposite of those six things. They're all mixed up now again, and that's very good, that's part of the positive of what's happened.

But what I've outlined is a number of scenarios which were unfortunately very plausible, which could push Iraq back in the direction of civil war. If Iraq gets pushed back in the direction of civil war, you will see those reinforcing cleavages reemerge. And if that happens, the possibility of Iraq falling apart will again be on the table. As I said, even under those circumstances, I think that partition, that division, is unlikely unless we take Michael O'Hanlon's plan and impose it on the Iraqis under those circumstances. Other than that, otherwise I think far more likely, is just as I said, a horrific civil war which consumes Iraq and spills over into the rest of the region.

MR. O'HANLON: That was my plan.

(Laughter)

The man right here in the third row, please.

SPEAKER: Thank you. I'm from the Embassy of Pakistan. I would like the panel as well as the audience to ponder about one thing: Whenever Pakistan is mentioned, it's always mentioned as the region where the across-border terrorism takes place from without realizing how much we suffer from it ourselves at the moment.

And should it not be taken -- what do you think, should it not be taken from the economic point of view when the ROZs are promoted, and Biden or Gary Lucas -- (inaudible) be called, should be promoted in Congress? Now, they talks about that, where it will be the economic uplift of the federally-administered tribal areas from where -- it's because it's a border sport; it's not just in Pakistan. Why didn't anyone always talk about that, the economic uplift of the area which will, of course, when your stomach is filled, your child can go to school, and there's as hospital, nobody will become a terrorist.

I'd like the reason that why is that never mentioned, the ROZs and the planet .

MR. O'HANLON: I you would like to respond?

DR. POLLACK: Oh, I guess I'm doing the impression of a Pakistan expert today.

Suzanne was good enough to mention one of my books. I'll applaud my -- another one which is my new book called The Path Out of the Desert, which looks at U.S. strategy toward the entire region. And even

though Pakistan's not part of it, I say right up front that there are a lot of people who, in reading the manuscript of the book pointed out that many of the problems I identify for the rest of the region are common to Pakistan, and many of the solutions are applicable as well. And I think that the issue that you've just raised, which is economic support, long-term economic, educational, political support, is a critical element of it.

I hope you didn't take my analysis as value judgment. It was intended as such; it was simply my analysis and actually my analysis reflected from people who know the subject much better than I. But in listening to these people who know the subject much better than I, what they say is very much in tune with what I think needs to happen regarding American policy toward the Greater Middle East and South Asia in general, which is to take a longer-term perspective to recognize that the problems of these countries were not created overnight, and they're not going to be solved overnight.

And therefore it is critical to develop long-term programs of economic assistance, educational assistance, trade, et cetera, to start building up an economic foundation to start helping to reform the educational systems so that over the course of time these problems will be ameliorated. That I think is the -- well, I'll put it this way: The good news is that that should be possible. We have seen it work in other parts of the world.

The bad news is, of course, is that many of the problems are immediate. They're right there in our faces, and the solution's really long-term. And, unfortunately, we've got to have the patience to allow those long-term solutions to have their impact and on the short-term think through what we can do to at the very least mitigate the risks.

Last point on this, and then I'll stop. And again I think and I suspect you will strongly agree with me on this. What we've typically found both in this part of the world and elsewhere is that there has to be an effort undertaken with the cooperation of the governments themselves. It can't be something that the United States imposes on the country unilaterally. It doesn't work. Those kind of long-term solutions imposed by the United States from the top down never work; it has to be an organic bottom up process, and that can only be undertaken with some degree of cooperation from the governments themselves.

MR. O'HANLON: Yes, sir, farther in the back. Yeah, you, please.

MR. PORTER: George Porter, an independent journalist. On the SOFA and U.S. troop withdrawal and the question of leverage, I have a question, or actually a pair of questions closely related, for Ken Pollack.

You seem to be relatively bullish, if I can call it that, on the intention of U.S. military to withdraw, as per the terms of the agreement. But, as you know well, there have been a series of articles in The Washington Post and The New York Times over the past month suggesting

that the Pentagon is actively planning for an alternative which is to stay longer with at least support troops and now perhaps even to reliable troops in order to do that.

So I'm wondering what you were told when you were there on this subject.

DR. POLLACK: Altogether I'm not going to say what I was told because the assessment team operated within the confines of security clearances, and it would not be appropriate for me to reveal confidential conversations that we had on that matter.

What I'll simply say is that we did have a great deal of conversation about plans, about drawdowns. They were very flexible. I thought they were, by and large, very smart. I'm going to bring this around to Mike's question about can we reconcile the needs of Iraq and Afghanistan, and what I would simply say is that, by and large, I was very impressed with the sophistication that the U.S. command was showing in terms of thinking about drawdown, about being aggressive in terms of being willing to take risks for drawdown recognizing it needed to happen, but also being very smart about how to continue to employ the residual forces.

I think that at the end of the day, though, the plans for the drawdowns in Iraq in some cases reflect best case thinking, and that's my one concern, which is, if problems start to arise in Iraq -- and as you all heard me just say -- I am very concerned about the number of problems and

the depth of those problems out there, and I'm very concerned that we will not get the best case, that we will not see the current trajectory simply continue. I think that we're going to see some problems out there that under those circumstances we're going to have to slow the drawdown from Iraq which is going to mean slowing the buildup in Afghanistan.

MR. O'HANLON: Yes, sir, here in the second row.

MR. CHIN: Josh Chin, freelance correspondent.

Bush has signed the U.S.-Iraq agreement holiday . That's basically they have to go to the Congress, and also with this country stick to Obama doctrine. What I mean, his doctrine is get out next year. Thank you.

DR. POLLACK: I'll just say very briefly, no, the status-of-forces agreement, it is not easily approved by the Senate, it's not a treaty. And second, I think that President-Elect Obama has made it clear that he thinks that the SOFA was the right thing for the United States to do and that it is not inconsistent with whatever it is that he plans to do in Iraq. And I think we have to take him at his word right now.

MR. O'HANLON: Back here about halfway back, I believe.

MR. MACK: David Mack from the Middle East Institute.

There are indications that Iranian behavior in Iraq has improved, let's say, over the past six months or so. If so, if you agree with that, why?

MS. MALONEY: Well, you know, I think it's an interesting question, and I don't know that it's one that anyone can give a definitive answer to

because I know that when I've had the opportunity to speak to people from the U.S. military, they find trends even where they are positive -- and there has been some evidence of positive trends in the past few months -- to be not wholly conclusive of any specific outcome. That is to say, are we simply getting better at interdicting what they are bringing in? Have they found new roots? Is there an effort to sort of stockpile munitions and be prepared for the next phase of the civil war, if, as Ken suggests, things could degenerate again?

The Iranians have an enormous amount of influence in Iraq, both political influence and longstanding relationships with all of the key militias that operate there today. And they value those relationships, I think tremendously, because for Iran Iraq is an existential issue. This is -- the experience of the Iran/Iraq War forged the world view of anyone at a leadership level in Iran today. That's entirely understandable given that it was an eight-year war that really consolidated the state and did not transpire all that long ago.

And so for Iranians, I think, across the political spectrum, there is a commitment to ensuring that irrespective of the outcome, they are positioned to assert their influence and, if anything, assert their primacy in Iraq.

And so I think we have to recognize that they will be capable of being flexible as the situation in Iraq changes. They are averse to seeing

their networks and supply lines wholly cut off, and so they stand somewhat creative as time has gone on as our efforts have intensified vis-à-vis their own supply. But at the same time I think they also want, at least generally, an outcome that is not wholly incompatible with the outcome that we're looking for, which is to say that Iran does not benefit from an Iraq that is in a full-fledged civil war. Iran does not benefit from Iraq which is on the verge of some sort of partition or breakup. And so they have to calibrate their own activities on that basis as well.

And I think that's why we may see the paradoxical outcome of an Iran that becomes more responsible as the U.S. moves toward a slightly smaller position within the country, which is simply a recognition of their own fundamental interests in the country.

MR. O'HANLON: Ted, do you want to comment on that as well?

TED: (Off mike)

MR. O'HANLON: Okay, Gary, and then we'll go to (inaudible).

MR. MITCHELL: Thanks. Gary Mitchell from The Mitchell Report, and I want to ask Suzanne a question and put it in this context:

I am struck by the fact that the last point you made about Iran was how little we understand them, and yet we're talking today about things that might be successful in getting them to the table and us to the table, et cetera.

So I want to sort of propose a thought experiment that is, arguably

a thoughtless experiment, and it goes like this:

Ahmadinejad gets reelected, a step back for the forces of moderation, et cetera. For reasons no one can understand there is a change of heart in Beijing and Moscow about sanctions. They've suddenly become pro-sanction; they're willing to ratchet it up, get tougher on sanctions so that the squeeze is tighter from the international community and tighter and tighter on Iran. And Iran is, you know, oil prices are staying where they are. So it's a worst case scenario for Iran and, in addition, Ahmadinejad is there which suggests that the Supreme Leader had said let's keep him.

I guess the question I'm after is given that we don't understand the Iranian, or the Persian puzzle as some have named it, what leads us to think that, that more pressure will be successful in getting a theocratic regime to do what they don't want to do? Are we using logic that would work with most nation states but not a theocratic one?

And my point is not so much to say, all right, what's the answer? It is in our policy thinking, do we have the capacity to think in ways that aren't ours, to think what would a theocracy do?

MS. MALONEY: That is a profoundly interesting question and set of hypotheticals, although I think, you know, what you describe or some version of it could certainly come to pass. We could see an Ahmadinejad reelection; we could see new impetus on the sanctions front or at least new

economic pressures, and we are likely to see a sort of sagging oil price for some period of time.

And yet, as you suggest, we could find ourselves in a position where none of that actually brings the Iranians around to negotiate in a really serious substantive way.

I would say, though, I don't think it's the specific character of the Iranian regime or government that makes it so difficult to comprehend or predict or anticipate. I don't think it's theocracy, per se, or the religious dimension at all. I think our difficulty in understanding how Iran functions and what influences their decision-making is simply the lack of any kind of contacts over a three-decade period in which the entire country has changed in ways that we can't even begin to appreciate. Most of the country was born since, you know, Americans beyond a handful, other than the aspiral populations were actually able to travel in the country.

And so we simply just don't have a good sense of what moves and motivates the leadership except as we're able to intuit it from some of what they say publicly, except as we're able to sort of infer how they might behave from how they've behaved in past sets of situations. And so I think that's their fundamental challenge.

I would say that, you know, one of the issues that you raise is the sort of lessons of this period and the vindication conceivably of the Ahmadinejad approach to the world, but I don't say this as one who believes

that Ahmadinejad is in any way dominant in Iranian politics or in policy making. He is, you know, a figure, but he is not the ultimate decision-maker. And yet, the sort of world view that he has trumpeted and the foreign policy that Iran has followed since he was elected has been one of fairly active assertion of Iran's influence.

And there is that we've some sense among a wide variety of Iranians, including those who dislike Ahmadinejad intensely and would be very happy to see him gone, yet that has paid off in some respects.

Now, many of them would probably alter Iran's willingness to come to the negotiating table, would change some facets of that behavior. But this idea that an Iran that has to assert itself because it is, in fact, always it's under siege, and it is always a sort of weak party surrounded by enemies, surrounded by states that are allied with enemies, and so this sort of thinking, I think, predominates today and the sense that pushing forward as quickly as possible, grabbing as much -- whether it's on the nuclear program or in Iraq or in Lebanon, or in other parts of the region -- has been to some extent vindicated by the results of the past four years.

The subject is an active debate today in Tehran, even among conservatives within the polity, which I think is quite fascinating. But what you suggest is that we are going to be facing a situation of difficulty in influencing Iran, and we have a very difficult time in interpreting the country and I can't disagree with that at all.

DR. POLLACK: I can just add one thing to Suzanne's terrific points.

For me this bigger question -- and Suzanne's I think quite right emphasis on the fact that we can't predict what the Iranians are going to do, a) because we have difficulty understanding them; and b) because the system is inherently unpredictable -- for me it gets to a second, another issue out there Suzanne raises before. And I don't disagree with her, but I just want to add another emphasis.

Suzanne was talking about the importance of at least signally the Iranians early on that we wanted to engage with them and that we would engage with them under any sort of circumstances regardless of who won their presidential election. I actually agree with that strongly, but I want to emphasize a point that Suzanne made about the euphoria that you're seeing around town and this desire to rush into negotiations with the Iranians. And so I'm not -- not at all suggesting Suzanne is advocating, but there are others out there who are advocating.

For me that's' very dangerous, in part for some of the reasons that you're raising, because I think we've got to see the approach to Iran, and I would describe engagement as a tactic, not a policy. The tactic is being as much about the Europeans and the Russians and Chinese as it is about the Iranians. We need to recognize that one of the worst failings of the Bush Administration was that he did a terrible job of actually cementing an

international consensus against Iran, an international consensus which was there for the taking. It certainly could have been much stronger than what they actually put together.

And if we're going to sit down with Iranians and make a new policy initiative toward them, which I think we have to do, it would be a terrible mistake to go into that without first having a very solid, at least very much better consensus among ourselves and the Europeans and, hopefully, the Washington Chinese on what it is that we're going to be willing to offer the Iranians, what we expect from the Iranians, and what we will do to the Iranians beforehand.

My fear is we will jump into these negotiations, as we've a bad habit of doing, without fully consulting with our allies, without bringing them on board.

And let's, by the way, remember the Gulf states and the other Arab states as well who also need to be brought into this process. And only once we've stuck our foot in it and have some bad, halfway something on the table will we then go to the rest of the world and say here's what we came up with. You guys have to support it, which is what we have done repeatedly over the past 20, 30 years, and under those circumstances we're not going to get the international support which is going to be absolutely critical both in giving us the best shot of convincing the Iranians to take the deal we'd like them to take and also putting us in the best position to deal

with the Iranians if they're not willing to take the deal -- which, unfortunately, I fear is the more likely outcome at least in the short run.

MR. O'HANLON: Now, we have the combination enlightening and wrap-up round, and we're going to have three quick questions and three quick answers, if I could request that.

So we'll go here, here, and here, if I could.

MS. MONTGOMERY: Jean Montgomery. I'm curious here about this little box called "Iraqi Politics," and I wonder if you could break that down a tad into your assessment of how much is a function of the structure of the government, how much is the function and the behavior of the people in various roles in the government, and the state of information about the voting population as to who bears the blame for the current state of affairs.

I'm using your example here of the electricity and oil ministries, and what's your assessment of how the elections might in some way influence the behavior of people in their various roles?

MR. O'HANLON: And then, ma'am.

SPEAKER: Hi, (inaudible).

Should we expect a major shift of policy from this inflation of strategic reviews going on in Washington right now about Afghanistan, or is it going to be a simple assessment of what we, you know, of what the policy already is leaning towards, meaning a U.S. military buildup, more focus on training, and so on? I mean do we need, do we expect, do we have to

expect any little surprise here?

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. And the, sir, last question here.

MR. DOYLE: Thank you. John Doyle, Aviation Week.

I was curious what all three of you think of the incoming Obama Administration decision to retain defense Secretary Robert Gates, and what reaction, as best as you know, the three countries in question have to his staying on in that position?

MR. O'HANLON: Okay, so why don't we, if you don't mind, we'll go this way to finish up, and people can address whichever questions they'd like.

DR. POLLACK: Sure. I'm a huge fan of Bob Gates, but (inaudible) question about Iraqi politics. I can't possibly do this full justice, so I'll make some very quick points.

You asked whether the problem is structure or behavior. It's both, and who's to blame? We are. We created a very weak structure. It is still malleable, it is still a work in progress which gives a lot of leeway to a lot of bad actors. That's the behavior part, and unfortunately we're to blame because we picked the bad actors.

We picked the worst elements in Iraqi society and put them in charge, and we're now trying desperately to get them out of Iraqi politics. That's what the election is designed to do. That's what hopefully they will do but not this round. This round can only start that. It will probably take

several election cycles, if we have decent elections, to actually get these guys out. And the hope is that what will happen is that each time you will see some different faces in there and a redistribution of power pointing at the election which is going to make the parties themselves recognize that they have to deliver to the people goods, services, et cetera, if they're going to win reelection.

Whenever that's been the case, we've seen these guys do the right things. Whenever they've believed they could subvert the system, they did the wrong thing.

MS. MALONEY: Let me just make two quick comments. One of them the question of reviews, which is that I don't know the details of any ongoing reviews on Iran. But I think it's incredibly important to undertake this sort of activity if only because from my own experience in government I can say that our own sense of institutional history is relatively weak, and I see that in the midst of an administration and can only be more sure at the outset of an administration, so I think it makes perfect sense and is wholly appropriate for the interagency process to examine what had worked, what hasn't worked and to do so in a really serious and comprehensive manner, which is to the limit of defense, I do understand the review is ongoing, is actually the case.

And in terms of Secretary Gates, I had the privilege to work with him on a project that I directed for the Council on Foreign Relations on

Iranian policy back in 2004 at a time when he was in academia. He was just a pleasure to work for and had a mind that was so impressive to me. And I think you can see the imprint of his sort of facile approach to foreign policy, and specifically to the issue of Iran in some of the policies that we've seen the Bush Administration adopt in recent years.

MR. O'HANLON: I know a couple of four stars, by the way, who think he's the best secretary of defense we ever had, and maybe I couldn't say I agree with him on policy, but as a place for Gates it's, I think -- is pretty well founded and widespread.

I'll simply respond on the Afghanistan review issue. Let me just say I think in general the main pieces of our strategy are fairly set in terms of the number of forces people seem to expect to flow in, and the basic counterinsurgency strategy that they plan to carry out as well as the partnership with the Afghan government and the kind of training of Afghan security forces that we had begun to learn about how to do in Iraq.

So all that stuff I think is relatively uninteresting. There will be details that will be tweaked. The hard questions in Afghanistan, to my mind -- and again my limited experience and travels have to do largely with how do you pursue this reconciliation process, and also how do you improve the economic development effort? I think those two areas are perhaps the most intriguing, which is perhaps why it's a little ironic that you have so many military organizations leading the reviews because in a way they've got their

piece pretty well figured out. It's the other parts of the government that actually are going to need to figure out their pieces perhaps better than they have so far.

And I think with that we all thank you for coming and hope to see you soon.

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