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"AMERICA FIRST" AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Welcoming remarks and introduction

A keynote conversation with John R. Allen

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. SABAN: Martin's a liar. He convened the forum and when we looked for a name, he said we should call it Saban Forum. I said, oh come on, people are going to say I'm arrogant about it, and so on. He said, that's fine. So thank you for giving me this credit. I very much appreciate it, and embarrassing me.

You told them what I had in my speech so I'm scrapping my speech all together. And I worked on it. You need to understand it was two-minute speech. I worked on it for two months, you know, because I'm not as good a speaker as you are. With that said, you can leave the stage now.

I did have a speech that basically said what Martin said about the region and what's going on in every country and Iran being who Iran is and the administration being what the administration is, and you guys are all expert, you don't need to hear this from me and waste your time. So I'd like to move on to our next speaker.

A four-star marine general, a former commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, a former leader of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, a seasoned architect on all security aspects of a potential Israel-Palestine deal back in 2014, and now the Brookings Institution President, no one, and I mean no one, is more qualified to share the state of the region with us. Ladies and gentlemen, it is my honor to introduce the new Brookings president, General John R. Allen, interviewed by Yonit Levi.

MS. LEVI: Hello, everyone. Thank you for being here. And General John Allen, president of the Brookings Institution, thank you so much for talking to us --

GENERAL ALLEN: Pleasure.

MS. LEVI: -- and sharing your thoughts and expertise with us. We have a lot to go through, so I think we should just dive right in. And if we could open with a little bit of good news, which is actually a rarity in the Middle East. And I'm referring to the near defeat of the Islamic state in Syria and in Iraq,

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of course in Raqqa and in Mosul. You were the special presidential envoy to the Global Coalition to defeat ISIS and, in fact, you're the one who set up the Global Coalition to defeat ISIS, and a lot of what we're seeing today is a result of your work.

So could I ask you firstly to sort of walk us through how this victory was achieved, not only on the ground, but also the sort of challenges behind the scenes?

GENERAL ALLEN: Well, first I want to echo Martin's comments about how important the Saban Forum is to Brookings, thank Haim for his generosity and his continued support, not just for this forum but more broadly for Brookings. As I was listening to Martin, I leaned over to Yonit, and I said he's using all my stuff. And she said, well you can be the funny one, then.

Now my wife happens to be here tonight, and she's always said that I'm not a very funny general. So this is going to be flat-lined I'm afraid. So it is wonderful to be here with you and I want to welcome

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so many dear friends, and I mean dear friends, with whom I've shared some pretty important moments.

The Islamic state of course was for us and United States and more broadly I think for the community of nations. One of the most grotesque terrorist organizations that we had seen to this point. And in a qualitative way, it was worse than Al-Qaeda. And I think in the future, we should expect that some of these groups are going to be even worse still because of the march of technology.

The idea of ultimately bringing together a community of nations was that we thought that any attempt to bring the United Nations into this process, and it desperately needed a community of nations, was doomed to fail from the very beginning. And so Secretary Kerry and the President began the process, a rolling process, from city to city of gatherings of nations, the Arabs, more generally, the Western Europeans, Central and Southeast Asians. And that process produced ultimately the group that I convened and in fact on this day in 2014 in Brussels, the very

first meeting of the Global Coalition of 65 nations, to defeat this organization.

Three-year horizon was the intent and here, three years later, the world is very different. But from my perspective and certainly as I have remained and will always remain focused on the security of Israel. We remain challenged by this organization in a very real and important way. We have to remain conscious of that. The coalition came together to engage and ultimately defeat this organization in a physical sense in Iraq and Syria.

And we are, today, in a very different place than we were back in the fall and the winter of '14. In fact, we would say that, Daesh, the Arabic acronym -- Daesh occupied more ground and citizens than the size of the state of Israel and its population to give it context immediately. So today, Mosul is back in the hands of the Iraqis, Raqqa is in the hands of the Syrian democratic forces supported by American Special Forces. Deir ez-Zor is back in the hands of regime forces and elements of the regime have pushed all the

down to the Iraqi border at a place called Abu Kamal. And Iraqis have pushed up to the border at Al-Qa'im. So at this point, Daesh has been largely fragmented in the region.

But Yonit, your point is a really important one. We all need to remain focused on this because Daesh became a three-headed monster. The physical Daesh that we attacked as an international coalition to defeat on the ground in what we call the core Daesh in Iraq and Syria. But it also became provincial in the context of existing Salafi jihadist organizations that put their hands up around the world, ran up the black flag, and sought to franchise themselves from Raqqa from Daesh. And they did in many places.

And we're very worried about that still to this day because while the international coalition was willing to pool its resources to go after them in Syria and Iraq, there's much less enthusiasm to go out of area. So the United States -- now in a different political environment, the United States was to lead local coalitions to deal with groups like Ansar al-

Sharia in Libya, Boko Haram in Nigeria, Ansar Bait al-Maqdis in Sinai, and so on going east until you get down to Mindanao in the Philippines where you have Abu Sayyaf.

That's provincial Daesh and it's going to take a while to reduce that threat. And then the third of the three ugly heads of this monster is the global network of this entity which rides on the back of the Internet of things and is powered by the encrypted phone applications that gives them the capacity to plan globally in a secure environment, what Director Comey would call being dark.

MS. LEVI: So what can be done to combat that?

GENERAL ALLEN: We have to pool our resources. And there are no two intelligence organizations greater on the surface of this planet than that of Israel and the United States from my perspective. And we have to be bearing down on this network in every way possible. We don't have to defeat the network everywhere all at once. But

through the kinds of analysis that I know we do regularly, we're going to have to go to places where we can inflict outside damage and disruption on that network and be prepared to move quickly and decisively to destroy those nodes or those critical pathways.

MS. LEVI: But you yourself say that you're fearful of the fact that one day a group could come, you know, along that will be worse even than Daesh. And if Daesh is in a way Al-Qaeda 2.0, how do you prevent the next group, the next Daesh 2.0?

GENERAL ALLEN: Well, our collection is going to have to be focused on these groups in even a greater way than we've seen before. Daesh, of course, was a direct lineal descendant of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. We will see something that is a direct lineal descendant of Daesh. And what powers them even more and where we need to be very attentive is how emerging technologies may end up in the hands of an organization like this. This is, frankly, one of the great challenges that we have.

As we see organizations like Daesh increase

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their cyber capabilities -- they have a cyber-unit within the Islamic state that actually penetrated the unclassified computer networks at CENTCOM. So as we see that entity and organizations like that ultimately become more virulent, we just have to be very attentive in our intelligence collection on those nodes and critical pathways, be attentive to the technologies that they are going to be employing against us, and in every possible way either preempt them or be prepared to strike at a moment's notice globally to reduce the threat.

MS. LEVI: Now if we focus on Syria. So the military aspect of it and trying to concur Daesh or to win Daesh, that has been successful. The political aspect, what the United States wished to do with Assad, either to topple him or to move him aside or to grow a Syrian opposition, a serious challenge to that, that has not happened. Could you tell us if you think that the Obama administration missed the opportunity to change the political situation in Syria the way you see it today?

GENERAL ALLEN: Well when I became involved in this process and we began to put together the strategy to go after Daesh in Northern Syria, our options were very slim, frankly. We had very, very few options. As I mentioned on a previous occasion, the entire border of Turkey and Syria had what we call, had blackened up. Daesh occupied virtually the entire border. So we had very few options.

But eventually, over time, as we empowered the Syrian Kurds, the PYD, and began to form a coalition of Syrian tribal and national elements, the Syriacs, the Christians, the Turkmen, the Sunni tribes, with the Kurds and create the Syrian Democratic Forces powered and supported by American special operators, more than 2,000, we began to make real headway. And ultimately, the collapse of Raqqa, the seizure of the rest of the border, was a direct result of that.

The problem, Yonit, the problem is that while we had a strategy in Syria to defeat Daesh as a military force, and we had a political aspiration to

remove Bashar al-Assad as the President of Syria, we had no connective tissue between the two. That connective tissue conceivably, early along in the conflict, and this is controversial in the United States. That connective tissue would have been a horizontal connection where we armed and empowered elements of the so-called free Syrian army initially. It's extinct now for all intents and purposes. And those moderate Syrian elements that would both help us to fight Daesh, but also we could help them to defend themselves against the regime. That's the horizontal piece of it.

The vertical piece is, while there was a government in exile in a hotel at Istanbul, we should have connected vertically the political element of the Syrian resistance with the horizontally well-armed U.S. supported element.

MS. LEVI: That was feasible. There could have been a moment in time where either a leader, a Syrian democratic representative could have, you know, been brought forth.

GENERAL ALLEN: You're asking a hypothetical, but my sense would be, had we provided the kinds of support necessary to some of those elements, it would have changed the balance dramatically. But there were decisions made in the administration that we would not provide weapons, ultimately, to those groups, where we could not control where those weapons would end up. And frankly, I think all of us recognize, there will be some leakage of this from time to time. But if you can keep the vast majority of those weapons in the hands of those that we sought to empower, empower to defend themselves from the barrel bombs and empower to help us to fight Daesh, and then be a credible military force defending a large segment of the Syrian population while we bring the government in exile in alignment with it, that would have bought us a seat at the table for credible Syrian opposition to be part of a political process. But that didn't exist.

MS. LEVI: So what happened? What happened? The administration wasn't courageous enough? It

didn't want to deal with the mess? I mean, what was the --

GENERAL ALLEN: The administration's plenty courageous. But the decision-making process, we ultimately chose not to. And you'll recall, we sought to create a number of training sights. About \$500 million that Congress appropriated very quickly, and they did a great job doing that. About \$500 million to power up a site in Turkey, a site in Jordan, a site in the Kingdom, and a site in (inaudible) where would train Syrian forces, equip them. We had battalion sets of equipment ready to go. The problem was, we created a requirement that the Syrians commit themselves only to fight Daesh and not defend themselves against the regime.

Consequently, almost no one showed up. Now that \$500 million didn't go to waste because eventually when the American Special Forces began to organize the Syrian Democratic Forces, that equipage and that money powered what has now been the defeat of Daesh along the Euphrates River. So a decision was

made in the end which precluded our being able to empower the moderate Syrian elements. And what happens, of course is, you're not going to stand unarmed in the face of the regime or in the face of Daesh.

And so much of that element that we would have called the moderate Syrians melted to one side or the other. They went to Jabhat al-Nusra or Jabhat Fateh, I think it's called now, Al Qaeda, or they went to other groups, Ahrar al-Sham, and others. They went where they would be given weapons. They went where they would be supported. They went where they could protect their families. And we lost a lot of leverage.

MS. LEVI: So now what you have is Assad emboldened by Iran and supported by Russia after slaughtering hundreds of thousands of his own people. And now what?

GENERAL ALLEN: Our options are really quite limited to be honest with you. When I look at the region and I pine for a coherent policy, the number

one policy objective of the region should be the security of Israel. Then after that, the reestablishment or the security of the Sunni states, preventing Iran from having a nuclear weapon. And then, in that context, begin the process of limiting Iranian activity. The problem is, we have little diplomatic influence in this process now for a variety of reasons and we have virtually no military options in the process.

And while we always said that there's no military solution to the outcome in Syria, and you're right, we have now passed over 500,000 dead on the way to 600,000. While there conventionally was no military outcome, the Russians knew that you could ultimately facilitate your political outcome if it was to stabilize Bashar al-Assad with military force. And that's when they intervened in the fall of '15 and ultimately stabilized Bashar al-Assad, aligned themselves in this conflict with the Shia side of the conflict.

So they were aligned with Iran, the IRGC,
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the Quds Force, with Hezbollah, with the other Shia elements, and of course, the Alawite leadership in Damascus. And so the military outcome has not been decided by the Russians, but in many respects, the political trajectory has been decided by the Russians. And sadly, the United States has little capacity now to exert leadership in this process or to participate.

And, you know, we would love to see a return to the Geneva process. But I think with the Russians and Bashar al-Assad in the driver's seat, we'll see the Astana process unfold.

MS. LEVI: How do you prevent the nightmare scenario that Israel thinks is the nightmare scenario of Iranian influence, I mean, through Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, almost up until Turkey? How do you prevent that? What do you do?

GENERAL ALLEN: Well --

MS. LEVI: Pray, but besides that?

GENERAL ALLEN: Sadly, there is some of that already. There is the makings of that presence. When I was a commander in Afghanistan, I was always very

attentive to roughly the left or the western third of Afghanistan, there was a very strong Iranian presence. And as we tracked and we traced the portfolio holdings of a fellow by the name of Qasem Soleimani, who is the head of the IRGC Quds Force and largely has the portfolio for the region, it was clear that it was the intention of Tehran with Qasem Soleimani being the hand maiden for the process, to create an unbroken bridge of Shia influence, or Iranian influence, from roughly the western third of Afghanistan all the way across Iran, across Iraq, across Syria, across into Lebanon, ultimately Lebanon supporting Hezbollah, which is a strategic threat to Israel.

The last administration took some action but not sufficient action ultimately to push back on Iranian behavior across the region. Iran remains the principal destabilizing influence and whether it's in Yemen supporting the Houthis, or it's the destabilizing support to the Shia elements in Bahrain, or the eastern Shia elements in Saudi Arabia, or in the consolidation in Iraq, obviously, in Syria,

continued support for Hezbollah, we're almost there with that contiguous coherent Shia-Iranian bridge.

Stabilizing the region, first and foremost means we have to protect and cooperate with Israel for the protection of Israel. Stabilizing the region means the U.S. needs to exert leadership with our Sunni allies to begin to push back on Iran in certain areas. Now, you know, each one of those places, and I just listed them -- Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and other places, Sanai -- each one of those places is going to require a different menu of players and a different menu of options. But if the administration fulfills its intent with respect to its policy of the region, which is to push back uniformly across the region helping our partners in this process, we've got to get pretty aggressive and we've got to get going here pretty quick. That needs to be led by an aggressive coherent process of diplomacy and then supported ultimately by the kinds of relationships necessary to build capacities with our partners to begin blunting Iranian influence, empowering

indigenous forces to begin to roll them back.

Easy to say here, but I'm telling it is very difficult.

MS. LEVI: But do you see a coherent Middle East plan by the Trump administration? Can you help us carve out what it is?

GENERAL ALLEN: No. But that doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. It just means that I haven't seen it. But when I talk to leaders, there are pieces of it that are out there. First and foremost, we have to decide what's the most important American interest in the region. For me, and I think I speak for the administration on this issue, it's the security of Israel. Then thereafter, it is stabilizing the region to the maximum extent possible.

Now that comes in several forms. Strengthen our relations with the Sunni elements. Push back on Iranian influence, revolutionary or terrorist or military support across the region which is destabilizing our partners and prevent Iran from having a nuclear weapon. Then below that, do all that

we can do -- and we've already decided we don't have many policy options. Do all that we can do in Syria to end the fighting on just a humanitarian basis if possible.

MS. LEVI: Well you know, we spoke about Iran and Daesh and Syria. Let's move on to lighter topics like the Israeli/Palestinian peace process. You were obviously the one who worked out the details of what has been called the Allen Plan and the security arrangements between Israel and the future Palestinian state. Obviously, you've never completed it. It did win support from Israel's top army brass, but not from Israel politicians.

What can you tell us about the plan and about the security details? I mean, you didn't cross the t's and dot the i's, but what is an important thing that we should know about the so-called Allen Plan?

GENERAL ALLEN: First, we shouldn't call it that. But I had really two bites at this apple, and there are some folks in this room on the Israeli side

who should be proclaimed heroes just by virtue of the things that they did to assure Israel security at infinitum.

We began with something called the Barak Eight from the era of Ehud Barak. We would ultimately take those stipulations on Israeli security and the two-state outcome. They would be rendered into six broad areas. And within those six broad areas, we and Israel agreed to 26 security requirements which, if met by a variety of mechanisms, whether it's training of the Palestinians, or the building of infrastructure, or the employment of security, or the employment of American advisors to keep the Palestinians in form. If we met those 26 requirements, then theoretically, we had now before us a security platform from which then political negotiations could move forward on the final status issues -- end of conflict, end of claims, return of refugees, capital the Palestinian state.

The second time I did this, we ended up making a lot of progress in these areas. And the

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areas were airspace control, water space control adjacent to Gaza -- Gaza was really off the map for us at the time -- the electromagnetic spectrum, strategic sites, the border, and the non-militarization of the Palestinian forces. Those six areas had 26 requirements. And my conversation with the military leadership and with the civilian leadership was that there isn't a plan -- I'm not going to put a plan down on the table which, if you don't fulfill that plan, then we will not have Israeli security.

The plan was built in a very particular way, as I said to General Yaalon and to my Palestinian counterpart, if you can get to this where Israel and Palestine agree on a particular dimension of the security platform, then you don't need my plan. You don't need the U.S. support. But if you get to here and it's a function of assurance for Israel that the Palestinians will be ready and ultimately prepared to take over a security requirement, or if it's the Palestinians are looking for infrastructure they can't afford to build themselves, the plan was designed to

build all of the bridging aspects so that Israel and Palestine with U.S. support can get to yes in those categories.

MS. LEVI: In the current climate, is there any possibility that you see anyone returning to this plan?

GENERAL ALLEN: I think it'll be very difficult. But let me just say that if a willingness breaks out again on both sides between Israel and the Palestinian authority to undertake this, we're not going to try to do it in Indonesia. We're going to try to do it again on the West Bank. And I would suggest, first and foremost, this administration needs to commit itself one way or the other on whether it supports and desires a two-state outcome. That ambiguity makes it very difficult I think to put together a coherent security plan.

But let's just say for argument sake that the administration commits to a two-state outcome, so much of what we have done was catalogued, categorized, digitized, and is ready to go because almost, under

any scenario, much of that is still useful. And I'll make one final comment.

As I have done with about five countries where we did major reform through the military, we did a complete assessment of the Palestinian security forces, what I called an institutional assessment of the Ministry of Interior -- they're all police, actually -- operational assessment of their organizations, and a functional assessment of their capabilities -- their marksmanship, their capacity to deliver medical support, their supply. And there were several hundred Americans involved in doing this.

Israel supported our doing the plan. The Palestinians supported being evaluated. The numbers of recommendations that came out of that plan, there were many. And this was ready to be deployed as the Gaza war really drove a stake through the heart of much of what we were trying to do. But the conversations I would have with my Israeli counterparts was that, of the many recommendations here, a large number of them were not -- and this was

important to me. These recommendations did not require giving the Palestinians a lethal capability which could decrease Israel security, but we could undertake activities to give Palestinians capabilities today even though there was no political process for the maintenance of their vehicles or how we would integrate the Ministry of Health's clinics with the Ministry of Interior so there's always medical support for a policeman that gets run over by a car or something like that.

There were many of those that could be undertaken. We've actually done some of that in the meantime which means we don't have to do it again if this process kicks off. So the combination of the work that we had done which was on the shelf ready to go and the assessment which exists with a whole series of recommendations ultimately to be implemented to get the Palestinians to a point where they are credible security partners for Israel, that's out there and it's waiting.

MS. LEVI: I have a lot more questions to
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ask you, but I think we're being polite and opening it up to other people who want to ask.

GENERAL ALLEN: Okay. I think that's David. I've got a face full of light so I'm not entirely clear, but I just -- that handsome profile.

SPEAKER: General, thank you very much. Thank you for your service --

GENERAL ALLEN: Thank you, David.

SPEAKER: -- to our country. I would just want to ask you, if you look at the post-war in Syria, can I just ask you, do you see any divergences between Russia and Iran and the post-war in Syria, or that same coalition that solidified Bashar's control will continue? And when General Mattis said last week, which seemed news to me, that for the first time that after Daesh, after the victory, he said well maybe the U.S. won't leave so quickly. We'll see how the Geneva process plays out. Israel's been very concerned as you know about will there be a vacuum with this land bridge that you referred to in the aftermath in Eastern Syria?

GENERAL ALLEN: That's two questions. The one with respect to Russia and Iran, they're not easy bedfellows from my perspective. And my sense would be that Tehran's long-term objectives in Syria will not necessarily be Russia's long-term objectives. How that plays out, for now they remain closely aligned because there's still a lot of fighting to be done. And as you know David, better than many, lots of that fighting occurred on the ground with no real regime present. I mean, it was Hezbollah fighting as foot soldiers advised by IRGC Quds Force advisors or Russian Spetsnaz and they accomplished a lot.

I think there's still enough of that fighting that the potential fracture between Russia's long-term objectives for the region, which they can't be achieved because of this. When I was in the final throws of my duties as a special envoy and I was making my final rounds through the Arab capitals, the Russians were either ahead of me on the schedule for that leader or behind me.

And what they told the Arab partners was,

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look we have to get -- we're coming down for now on the side of the Iranians and Bashar al-Assad, but we assure you that over the long-term, we recognize that our Russian relationship in the region will be defined not by the Iranians, but by the Sunni Arabs. Now I'm not sure that any of our partners really believed that, but I think just an objective consideration of the Iranian needs of Syria and the Russian desire to have a long-term credible relationship with the Sunni population and also to bring the Sunni population inside because of the restive Sunni population in Russia, it makes sense that they're not going to ultimately be -- they're going to have the common interest involved.

So I would say stay tuned to this. I think we'll see that there will be a break eventually. The Iranians I don't think have any doubt -- we should not have any doubt that the Iranian intent is for whatever comes after Bashar al-Assad that that leadership in Damascus will still permit Syria to be a pass-through for both technology and weapon systems to Hezbollah in

Lebanon to continue it's being a strategic threat to Israel.

Now in a perfect world, we'd have something to say about that. We'd have diplomatic options that we could bring to bear perhaps with even military options to support our diplomatic options. But it doesn't look like we have much to say about that right now.

And you had another question, David, I'm sorry.

SPEAKER: About the U.S. (inaudible).

GENERAL ALLEN: Yes, thank you, very important question.

The intent was not to leave until we were satisfied that the political process -- this was when I was -- it was still going great when I was doing this. We talked about what we would do with liberated populations. And the conversations that I was having with the coalition was, we are going to defeat Daesh. There's no doubt about it, and we were well on the way. It was just a matter of time. And we were going

to do it through indigenous forces, not American main force unit, but empowering indigenous forces, which is really the defeat mechanism, and we'll be there after we should leave. But we'll stay for a while.

But the point that we made was that after we conducted military operations to defeat the Islamic state within the population, we had to follow instantly with stabilization operations to stabilize the population, to build the clinics, to care for the women and the children and the minorities that have been so horribly treated by Daesh, and to get the food flow, get the humanitarian flow going, because we couldn't expect that the regime was going to do that.

So frankly, this is a high-risk strategy with the Russians and the Syrians on the one side always saying that they're going to restore full control over the territory and the territorial integrity of Syria. At some point, they're going to push up against forces that we support. And so this administration has in its future, if it's not decided already, they're going to have to answer the question,

are we prepared to use military force to prevent the regime from attempting to extend its control over those areas that we assisted to be liberated? And we have already seen on occasions where the regime went rolling into a village that had some even distance relationship to our forces, we have seen horrible atrocities perpetrated against those populations.

This is a high-risk outcome for us because it potentially faces the United States directly against Russian military capabilities. The regime has never been a factor in this. It's about the Russians which is then about the region which is then about Crimea which then about the Donbass which is then about our relationship more strategically with Russia. So this is going to unfold in a very interesting way and I would say just stay tuned. Yes, sir.

Mr. Saban.

MR. SABAN: You want me to stand? I'll do it. Can I have two questions?

MS. LEVI: Let me think about that. Yes.

MR. SABAN: Thank you.

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GENERAL ALLEN: In six parts.

MR. SABAN: Isn't it a mistake on behalf of this administration to have not supported Kurdish state even after the elections? Doesn't it create a situation where basically Iran expands ever further it's control? That's question number one.

Question number two is this. It was always clear that this coalition of many nations fighting ISIS, a bunch of lunies on, you know, trucks with machine guns, will eventually militarily prevail, whether it will take three months, six months, it took a couple of years --

GENERAL ALLEN: That's right.

MR. SABAN: -- was clear that there would be. How does one deal with the ideology of ISIS when a kid in England somewhere that has never even been to Syria or to Iraq, has never been in contact with ISIS military forces, gets up and blows himself up based on that ideology? I have never heard any head of state, I have never read of any plan to deal with that aspect of it. Because that aspect of it hasn't been

defeated. Militarily, they have been defeated, but that aspect of it is alive, well, and thriving and extremely dangerous to the Western world much more than they were dangerous, you know, to the Western world when they had trucks with machine guns.

GENERAL ALLEN: Sure.

MR. SABAN: So how does one address that?

GENERAL ALLEN: Your first question is about the Kurds, I'll come to that in a moment. Let me hit the second one which is very difficult.

In June of '14 after Mosul fell, the head of Daesh at the time, the Islamic state, went to the Nur al-Din Mosque in Mosul, ascended the pulpit and declared a caliphate which was the fulfillment of the prophecy that he as the caliph, the great warrior leader, and the caliphate, would ultimately extend both its influence of the ground and influence over populations to achieve the long-term objective which is the return to something called the Rashidun, the period of time where the four rightly-guided caliphs who were the companions of Muhammad were supposedly

the Muslim world lived in perfection. And that community was called the Salaf.

So when you hear somebody talk about being a Salafi, it's a desire to return to the time of the Salaf, the perfection of Islam. That's the doctrine. And his proclaiming himself the caliph, Caliph Ibrahim and the caliphate, gave him a spiritual capacity to motivate fighters from all around the world, and they came by the thousands.

Now the problem was in the West, we didn't recognize the power of that proclamation. And to you point, it's a very good point, because we are so disparate in our cultures and in our freedoms, and our capacity to both monitor and intrude and to influence information, it was difficult for us to have a more powerful counter narrative for those who were easily influenced than that of the caliph calling you to fight on behalf of the caliphate to achieve the perfection of the Salaf.

We couldn't develop a counter narrative that was sufficiently coherent globally to be able to

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penetrate into those neighborhoods or into those populations ultimately to defeat that narrative. So we would eventually seek a strategy that called for us to try to discredit the narrative of the caliph, to have a more powerful counter narrative, and to deal with the technology. And frankly, that was an area where we had some success.

But the issue is not about the doctrine. The issue is, sir, and I think we all know this, the problem or the basic causal factors in the lives of tens of millions, hundreds millions increasingly, of young Muslims where they have no hope. They are not living in an inclusive government. They have no access to education. Their women are disenfranchised from the population. They have very little economic prospects. And so it ends up being more attractive in an environment where you have no hope and if tens of millions of these people live that way every single day to strap on a suicide vest and go to paradise as a warrior of the caliph than to continue this grinding miserable life in so many places in the Arab world

perpetrated by weak and corrupt governance.

So the challenge for us in the short term, the tactical challenge, is to take that narrative on and try to defeat the narrative at a tactical level. But the strategic outcome from us has to be one where we seek, as a community of nations, to understand these underlying causal factors and begin to address those in a systematic way. Because until we change the environment in which these kids grow up, we are doomed to fight forever, forever. And after being 16 years at war, and this nation's going into the 17th year of war, this can't be the outcome that we choose.

We're going to have to fight to defend ourselves. We're going to have to work with Israel to defend our interests in the region. But fighting forever against an unaddressed system of human misery can't be the outcome that we choose. It's going to require in the manner of the Marshall Plan, frankly, in my view, it's going to require the community of nations be prepared to organized in ways in these countries that are extraordinarily fragile,

extraordinarily vulnerable, to begin to work with the leadership to change the human condition. So that's an issue associated with the narrative.

The other piece that I would offer you on the Kurds, you know, I don't think it was a surprise to anyone that Masoud Barzani wanted to have an independence referendum. We always expected it. In fact, when Daesh invaded Iraq in '14 and it looked like Iraq was going to go under, frankly, we thought for a moment that the Kurds were going to run a referendum at that particular moment and go independent. We talked them out of it at that particular moment because we needed for Iraq not to become much more fragmented. We needed to create the environment of unity.

You know our view was this is not the time for the KRG, the Kurdistan Regional Government, to go independent for a variety of reasons. The region probably doesn't need another microstate, a state where in the view of the Turks, for example, it could become a platform for continued operations of the PKK

against Turkey. The Iranians would be very concerned about that microstate becoming a platform for influence that might operate with respect to Iran.

And the Kurds and Iraqis are going to still need to be able to reconcile the outcome of the fighting. And as I think we all know, the Peshmerga, brave Kurdish fighters, pushed out of the KRG and took a lot of Arab territory and they were very clear to me when I went to Erbil to talk about it. Wherever Peshmerga blood was shed, that remains Kurdish territory. And if they had gone independent, I think we would probably have seen a great deal more fighting.

So between the pressure of Turkey, the unreconciled Iraqi relationship with Erbil, the potential for Iranian influence in the KRG, our view was this is not the time to do this. And frankly, when the referendum went and the referendum succeeded, we all breathed a sigh of relief that they chose not to try to implement it at that particular moment.

That doesn't mean they shouldn't be

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independent someday. But for now, the last administration chose to restore the territorial integrity of Iraq, which included the KRG. The referendum has said let's become independent. Now the issue is choosing the time and the circumstances under which that occurs. Right now, I think it's far too unstable politically and militarily for that to occur. But the Kurds are magnificent, frankly. They're magnificent. Yes, sir.

SPEAKER: General, thank you very much. I'm the Turkish Ambassador in Washington, D.C., and we had a number of occasions that we could be able to meet and work on a number of issues pertaining to the situation in Syria. First a comment as to how we are going to fight or how we are going to be successful in our fight against Daesh. Maybe we should start with the terminology.

We shouldn't refer to them as Islamic state. They are not an Islamic state. They are just a bunch of terrorists and we should treat them as such. And we should present to the region, especially the Sunni

population and the regime as such. That should be the first step.

General, I listened to your words praising the U.S. support to YPG-PYD in Syria and the success achieved as a result of that support. Well, you know better than I do that YPG-PYD is radical offshoot of PKK, which is also recognized as a terrorist organization by the United States. And given that there are reports of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other humanitarian organizations working in Syria that YPG-PYD is conducting ethnic cleansing forced exile of people in the areas of their control and forceful recruitment of children on their ranks.

And given all this, do you think that it was really a good idea on the part of the United States --

GENERAL ALLEN: Sir, can you slow down just a touch? I've got an echo here. I just want to make sure I get your question.

SPEAKER: Okay. So do you think it's really a good idea supporting YPG-PYD militarily, providing

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them weapons, ammunition that might be used in the future to further solidify the areas of the power they already exert in the areas that they have liberated? So-called liberated, I should say, because I mean, they are trying to change the demographics in the areas that they liberated with the assistance of the United States. So are we laying down the seeds for future crisis in the region by supporting YPG-PYD while you had an ally with 800,000 shoulders and that have offered the United States as much troops as necessary to liberate Raqqa and to help you achieve the future stability, a long-lasting stability and security in Syria? Thank you.

GENERAL ALLEN: Okay. First thing I'll say is, from the very moment that I became involved in this, it was clear to me that without the help of Turkey, we weren't going anywhere. And Turkey was a very important -- I didn't get your position.

SPEAKER: (off mic)

GENERAL ALLEN: I thought so. Thank you. I did recognize the accent, but I can't see you because

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of the light.

Number one, it was clear that we were not going to be successful without the support of Turkey. When President Obama sent me to Turkey to negotiate with the government in Ankara to relocate our strike fighter aircraft to be able to bomb Daesh immediately south of the border through a process that was very productive I thought, Turkey granted us access ultimately to Incirlik and Diyarbakır and elsewhere if we needed it. And we haven't needed it.

But I think you know that it was very clear that we were not going to get -- as you heard me say the blackening of the border. And we used your maps which had a black border. We weren't going to get Daesh off that border unless we did it from inside Syria. Because, as you well know, Turkey was unwilling to use military force to come across the border at the time.

So our options were to use indigenous forces and we didn't have any options there. We didn't know what indigenous forces were going to be available

until the Battle of Kobani, where Turkey actually was quite helpful initially in that battle, providing some artillery support and medical support, but didn't come across the border to deal with that issue. Kobani, for those of you don't know, was a Kurdish town and Daesh intended to overrun that city and kill the population and President Obama determined that American fire power in conjunction with the Kurds and some free Syrians and actually a Dutch motorcycle gang that showed up --

MS. LEVI: You're making that up.

GENERAL ALLEN: We were going to support them. And, Mr. Ambassador, that's where we first came to see that if there were going to be fighters in Syria, the fighters in Syria were going to be the PYD and the YPG, the armed wing.

And the administration differed with the Turkish administration over this issue. You know, you said that PKK and the PYD are synonymous. There was a difference of opinion in Washington on that issue. Now that has been a source of real friction between

Ankara and Washington. And how long we ultimately support and provide support to those forces I think is going to be a direct result of the consultation between this administration and Ankara.

Go ahead.

You speak up. I'll repeat your question.

SPEAKER: General, two corrections if I may. Well we have conducted the operation not in Syria, but with our forces crossing the border from Turkey to Syria to liberate more than 2,000 square kilometers of area from YPG, PYD, and Daesh --

GENERAL ALLEN: Not at the time I was dealing with it, though.

SPEAKER: I mean at that time, you were not supporting YPG-PYD.

GENERAL ALLEN: That's right.

SPEAKER: That support came later.

GENERAL ALLEN: That's right.

SPEAKER: So we cleared 2,000 square kilometers from Daesh. We killed 3,000 Daesh militants in that area and people actually started to

return to their areas from living from Turkey -- they Syrian refugees. The success was there. But you support of YPG-PYD to liberate Raqqa came after the operation in Euphrates Shield conducted by Turkey.

And I don't think that there's a difference of view as far as what YPG-PYD is in Washington, D.C. I have seen the reports of U.S. generals, U.S. commanders in that regard, in which they say that well, we knew that there was direct affiliation between YPG-PYD and PKK, so we advised them to change their name to SDF and they came up with the brilliant idea of naming themselves Syrian Democratic Forces.

So there was no difference of view in that regard. You knew what YPG-PYD was, but you opted for that. You opted to fight with a terrorist organization with the help of another terrorist organization. I don't think that you are going to be (inaudible) in the (inaudible). Thank you.

GENERAL ALLEN: I differ with you on that issue. We did not consciously choose to support the PYD as a terrorist organization that would take its

terror to Turkey. I will tell you that. I was part of the negotiations with Turkey on that issue and we were often very cautious about the issue. And I'm not diminishing at all the effect of the PKK in Turkey, the damage that they have done, the struggle that you're undertaking against them, and we don't want to have a long-term relationship with the PYD. But I will differ with you on that point.

MS. LEVI: I think we're out of time.

General Allen, thank you so much for talking to us.

GENERAL ALLEN: My pleasure.

MS. LEVI: Thank you.

Finally, you've been the President of Brookings for almost a month. So how would you rate the experience from one to 10?

GENERAL ALLEN: This experience?

Well, the Turkish Ambassador and I will hopefully go out for a drink or something tonight for some Koolaid. That'll be a great experience.

MS. LEVI: If we could still document that as well. Thank you so much, sir.

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GENERAL ALLEN: Thank you. Great honor to
be with you. Thank you.

MS. LEVI: Thank you.

* * * * *

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