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WEBINAR

IRAQI-US RELATIONS UNDER CHANGING ADMINISTRATIONS

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. MALONEY: Good morning, good afternoon, and good evening to those who are joining outside the Washington area. My name is Suzanne Maloney, I'm the vice president and director of the Foreign Policy Program at The Brookings Institution. It's our pleasure to welcome you on behalf of the program and our Center for Middle East Policy to today's event on Iraqi-U.S. relations under changing U.S. administration.

This morning's discussion of the relationship between Iraq and the United States comes as the administrations in both countries mark important milestones. The Biden administration has just completed its first 100 days in office, and Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi has reached his first anniversary in office. On April 7, the two governments held the first strategic dialogue of the Biden administration discussing topics including bilateral security cooperation, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the protection of democracy and freedom of speech.

As is often the case, there are signs of opportunity and progress in Iraq and the region, but also developments even today that highlight the perils still facing the country and the region. For that reason, we are especially excited to have such a wonderful lineup of speakers today to examine the course of the relationship between Iraq and the United States.

I'm delighted to welcome Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Middle Eastern Affairs Joey Hood, who in his keynote remarks, will provide the Biden administration's view of this important relationship. Before taking on his current responsibilities in January, Acting Assistant Secretary Hood served as principal deputy assistant secretary of state for Middle Eastern affairs from 2019 to 2021. He has held assignments throughout the Middle East during his career with the State Department including as deputy of chief of mission in Iraq from 2017 to 2019.

Following his remarks, we have an excellent panel scheduled to join us here today. I'm thrilled to welcome to the Brookings virtual stage, Abbas Kadhim, who is the director of the Iraq Initiative and resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council. Joining him from Baghdad is our very own Marsin Alshamary, who is a post-doctoral fellow here at Brookings Foreign Policy. And finally, moderating our panel today is Louisa Loveluck, who was the Baghdad bureau chief at the Washington Post.

With that, I will turn the mic over to Assistant Secretary Hood for his remarks. Welcome and look forward to hearing what you have the say to us today. Thank you, so much.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HOOD: Great. Well, thank you, Suzanne. Can you hear me okay? All right. That's the way of the pandemic I suppose. Well, it's great to be here, especially today as we just get ready for Eid and we just, in my case, just come back from a trip to the region including Baghdad and Erbil. So it's great -- it's good to see you, Suzanne. It's good to see Dr. Abbas and Louisa as well.

It's excellent timing because not only was I on the trip, but our new counselor in the department, Derek Chollet was on the trip as well, Brett McGurk, who is no stranger to those who follow Iraq, as well as deputy assistant secretary for the Middle East at the Defense Department, Dana Stroul.

And I guess if I could just say one thing about the trip, it just -- it felt like a new honeymoon. It was very positive. We had a lot of optimism coming out of those meetings. And I guess that's just the way it is in Iraq. A lot of times when you look at it from the outside, you think, oh, it looks so depressing it's impossible. And then you get there and you talk to people who really have a lot of hope for their country. And it's hard to not support them.

Marsin, I know you're interested in the question of individuals versus institutions. I don't know if my answers here are going to be at all helpful to you because like a good diplomat or an economist, I guess I would say it all depends.

Our relationship with Iraq is always going to be important regardless of who is in power. The success of a country as we know is built on its institutions, but leadership really matters, as we've seen in our country and others around the world.

So what I thought I would talk to you about today, is what the United States government has been doing and is doing now to help build Iraq's institutions so that they are sustainable and they're ready to serve the Iraqi people under the right leadership.

First of all, let me address one thing and move it off the table. There has been so much focus on a couple of thousand U.S. military forces in Iraq, to the detriment of talk about every other aspect of our relationship. Our relationship goes far beyond just that security cooperation. It's really

important.

We got continued fighting together to keep Daesh at bay and hopefully completely defeated someday. And the presence of U.S. forces and coalition forces is really important to do that as they work with their Iraqi partners. Live got really good at doing this together. We should get out of the way and let them do that.

But the question then becomes, what do you do once you have relative security from threats from Daesh from ISIS. Well, it's sort of -- if you think of it as building something together, that just lays the foundation. The question is, what kind of house or what kind of building are we going to build on top of that foundation. And that's where we need to talk about the health care system, economic growth, expanding education and cultural ties so that more Iraqis and more Americans have connections to each other, they have better jobs, they have reasons to hope. I don't think that gets enough attention. So want to talk about that a little bit today.

One of the areas we are very active in, as many of you know, is stabilization; helping rebuild those communities that were devastated by ISIS. We've help restore essential services, helped displaced people, millions of them, get home. That's a big success story. Not everybody's home and that's a cause for concern. But millions have returned home and we need to recognize that. The ability for these people go home and rebuild their lives is a huge component of preventing the conditions that allow for ISIS to arise in the first place.

That's why we are the largest donor to -- the U.N. Development Programme's funding facility for stabilization. Since 2015, we have funded the rehabilitation of over a 130 schools, 57 health clinics, 62 water treatment plants, and 17 electricity substations as well as three major hospitals. The great likelihood, if you're living in an area liberated from Daesh, your water, your electricity, your school, your health clinic, probably came back to life thanks to funding from the United States government and the U.S. taxpayer.

When I was in Baghdad, we also helped announce some much needed assistance for the Ibn al-Khatib hospital, which as we all know was badly damaged in a fire and more than 80 people died. It's a small amount, but I think this is the kind of thing that we need to be doing going forward. We

need to be working on those institutional strengthening. We need to be strengthening institutions, of course, whether that's buildings or training people and professionals. But we also need some quick assistance at times when there are disasters like this.

In the health space, we've also, through our Defense Department, supported the Iraqi Ministry of Health's field epidemiology program. That has helped renovate and equip 24 laboratory suites across the Iraqi government. And just in time too, of course with the pandemic upon us.

We also have, through USAID, a program that doesn't get talked about a lot, but it works with provincial governments to try to improve performance and accountability for those governments that - and those leaders in those governments that actually want to bring better services to their people. So we work on things that aren't really that sexy, water supply, solid waste management, electricity. But listen, if you're in Western Anbar, one of the driest regions of Iraq, you may not have a reliable water supply depending on where you live because of this program.

We also have supported the Iraqi government in developing standard bidding procedures. And those have been used for more than 400 capital investment projects. Those have gone relatively well and relatively transparently. It's not big news, but that's 400 projects that aren't going to be as vulnerable to the type of corruption and other problems that we've seen because of these standards we helped put in place. Again, that's not going to get headline news, but it's really, really important in helping to build the institutions to get services to the Iraq people.

One more -- well, a couple more things. But one thing that really is exciting to me is that Development Finance Corporation, which is a new U.S. government entity that is able to help finance projects like the Pearl Petroleum Gas Expansion Project in the Khor Mor gas field in the Kurdistan region. That project, it's like a quarter of a billion dollars that we helping to provide the financing for. It's expected to help reduce the regions frequent blackouts and support the use of natural gas over heavy diesel and oil fired generation, which will decrease CO2 emissions substantially.

We are also -- in Iraq, the embassy there receives the third-largest public diplomacy budget of any of our embassies anywhere in the world. And because of that, we been able to fund a huge number of cultural preservation and educational projects. For example, since 2017, we've funded

the Smithsonian Institution's Nimrud Rescue Project to help salvage the ancient site of Nimrud, which was, as you know, demolished by ISIS.

So far, that project has photographed, tagged, cleaned and stored over 8,000 architectural fragments. I was there myself a couple of years ago to announce another installment of a million dollar funding projects for the restoration of the tomb of the prophet Nahum in Alqosh. That's nearing completion now.

This has a lot to do with institutions because we are – for every project that we fund, that's archaeologists, that students who are able to get this important training and get those important connections to professionals and experts from the Western world.

One more thing about education. Before the pandemic we had more than 1,200 Iraqi students studying in the United States. And we look forward to welcoming more back after COVID-19. Through the Liberated University's initiative, we are also helping to rebuild universities in Mosul, Tikrit, Falluja, and Anbar.

And since 2007, we've had a youth leadership exchange program that has by more than 3,500 Iraqis from the ages of 15 to 22 for the United States – to the United States for an intensive four-week summer exchange. Some of those people now are running nongovernmental organizations. They are entering the Iraqi military as officers. Or they are doing things like fighting fires.

You know, when the embassy was intact in December 2019 and January 1st of 2020, it was chaos out in front of the embassy. But one of the entities that came and really helped us was the Baghdad fire department. Why? Because we had brought them to the United States. We had welcomed them for Thanksgiving dinner in people's homes. We trained together and we worked with them week in and week out with our own little fire department at the embassy to help whatever we would need them. And thank God they were there when we did to help prevent a bigger disaster.

We've got \$10 million appropriated by Congress for the American University of Iraq in Sulaymaniyah. We've provided training to hundreds and hundreds of journalists including members of smaller Iraqi components and women in Baghdad, Anbar, Nineveh, Salahuddin, the Kurdistan region. I could go on and on. But these are different parts of what we call the strategic relationship which comes

under the strategic framework agreement.

There is a tendency I think of some in the media, and maybe in academia, to think oh we just launched this strategic dialogue last year. Well, we didn't. That agreement's been around since 2008. And while we haven't always quote/unquote activated it the way that some of our Iraqi friends would like us to do, this is the fourth U.S. administration using the same agreement and the same structure to try to move forward our strategic relationship.

I think we have done a lot of things together. I think there's a lot more to do. And based on my visits to Baghdad and Erbil last week, I think there was a lot of optimism and willingness in the central government and the regional government to do more of this cooperation.

So I will stop there and look forward to the discussion. I promise I will be much shorter in the Q&A session.

MS. LOVELUCK: Thank you assistant secretary for those remarks. To introduce myself, I'm Louisa Loveluck. I am the Washington Post's bureau chief here in Iraq and I'm delighted to be hosting this panel today. We have a great lineup. Of course we have the assistant secretary. We have Dr. Marsin Alshamary. We have Dr. Abbas Kadhim. And it's going to be a great discussion.

Marsin is a post-doctoral research fellow with the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings. She's a non-resident Fellow at the Institute of Regional and International Studies. And her research focuses on Iraq keep politics come on the Iraqi-U.S. relationship and Shiite Muslim activism.

Dr. Abbas leads the Iraq Initiative within the Atlantic Council's Middle East Program. He is a long-standing Iraq expert and the author of, "Reclaiming Iraq; The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State."

Now, I'm going to keep my housekeeping notes brief. We are slightly short on time. I'm going to first ask our guests on the panel to expand on the thoughts that Assistant Secretary Hood as outlined in his speech, especially after coming back from Baghdad and you heard him say you're witnessing the new honeymoon. I'm really going to be looking at questions of sort of how individual – individuals or individual administrations can or indeed do change and shift U.S. policy towards Iraq.

President Biden may be a new face as the president, but much of his Iraq team has sat

across multiple administrations and been present for multiple successes particularly in the fight against ISIS. They've also been present for policies that have drawn significant criticism. And I think that will be the basis of an interesting discussion today.

We welcome your questions and in about 20 minutes we're going to turn this over to that. If you have anything you would like to say, please do email us at events@Brookings.edu, E-D-U, brookings.edu, or please Tweet at us at #USIraq.

So to get us started, I think one of the key challenges that the Biden administration has faced in its foreign-policy right now, not just in the Middle East, but also in critical issues like environmental policy, is the fact that other states, particularly after this recent transition have had bigger, harder time trusting the U.S. to maintain its position in the long run past the tenure of an individual president.

Marsin, I wonder to what extent do you think the sentiment is -- or this is a sentiment reflected by Iraqi policymakers? Is it a major concern; and is there anything that American policymakers can do about that?

DR. ALSHAMARY: Thank you, Louisa. I do think this is the problem we might be seen with a lot of other states in terms of their interaction with the U.S., possibly because they've had experiences with the cyclical nature of the U.S. administration. And so they've had experience with this. Whereas Iraq I think has had relatively newer experiences with the U.S. administrations.

I mean, our first experience post-2003 was obviously the Bush administration, which was quite unique. And then after that, the Obama administration came as a bit of a whiplash and that it was so different than anticipated. Following that of course the Trump administration was a different form of whiplash and it was quite different than other Republican administrations and what Iraqis were expecting. So I think in a – ironically, Iraqis are used to changing U.S. administrations by now and have grown accustomed to this.

I think with regards to the Biden administration, naturally the closest comparison would be made to Obama. I think we've moved past the point of the cliché of, oh, President Biden wants to divide Iraq and Iraqis are worried about that. I think that we can set aside for now. But I do think the

closest we've seen is the Obama administration in terms of a staff and in terms of this is the last time we've seen President Biden in similar roles and the like. But I don't think that would really impede any -- or impede any desire to interact whether to cooperate with the U.S. in any way.

I don't know if Dr. Abbas Kadhim has any additions to that.

DR. KADHIM: I fully agree with you.

MS. LOVELUCK: Mr. Secretary, you know, to what extent is that an experience that you are having right now? You know, sense that there is either a consent or a lack of confidence that there will be that the policies the next four years will (inaudible) on that. And to the extent that you are experiencing that, what can you do to overcome that?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HOOD: Well, one thing that we can do is to travel to the region and to reassure our partners that we are remaining engaged. And that is what we have done. And when I say that it was sort of like a honeymoon, it's because they were really happy to hear that. And we were pleased to hear as well that many of the interests expressed by our Iraqi interlocutors dovetailed very well with what we see as U.S. interests, meaning a free and fair election in which the voices of the Iraqi people could be accurately reflected and fully reflected. We're going to support that as much as we can, continuing the fight against ISIS as we are invited by the Iraqi government to do so.

And in terms of what the configuration and the number of our military forces there and coalition forces. That's been referred to experts as we discussed at the last strategic dialogue, as it should be.

And then talking about what kind of deals are we going to put in front of the Development Finance Corporation to get more financing for. Everyone was very happy to hear that this is what we should be talking about. How can we bring business delegations to the major cities to see what projects are going to be on tap after the restrictions of the pandemic have eased a little bit?

These things, I would say, really haven't changed from one administration to another. Obviously I'm not saying that administrations are all the same. They are not. We just heard that one president decided to invade Iraq and another president might have decided to remove military forces. So elections do have consequences for all of our countries.

But I think that what you can see is that broadly over the decades there are different periods of U.S.-Iraqi relations. You can go back all the way to the beginning and see that generally, for 20, 30 years there is quite a bit of continuity until historical events move those in a different direction. And they are not always events that the United States controls or that Iraq controls, frankly. So I think that we just need to make sure that whatever we do, we have relationships, institution to institution, and people to people, university to university, so that no matter what the changes are at the political level or the geostrategic level, those connections will be able to bring our countries through to the next phase.

MS. LOVELUCK: If I can just come back on that, I think certainly under President Trump we saw Iraq very much being subordinated as a file to sitting predominantly under the Iran file. The Trump administration was very, I suppose preoccupied with Iran's role in the region. So Iraq often slipped and fell down the list as an individual focus.

To what extent is that sort of – I suppose Iraq sitting slightly below Iran kind of in the policy peck order, still an issue for the administration? And what discussions can you have with the Iraqis about this? Do they feel that they are sort of being treated with this one facet of the Iran policy? Or do they – did you feel that they actually saw there was a separate, emerging policy towards them?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HOOD: I mean, nobody wants to see Iraq as a battleground, at least not from our side. And no one who is serious in the Iraqi government wants to see that either. So -- but to say that Iraq is somehow divorced from the rest of the region and is kind of like its own Switzerland, I think is not accurate either.

It is that it has been a major part of the region since time immemorial. And it will always remain so. And so we need to embrace that and help the Iraqi government to embrace that as well, which I think we've been doing with our support for conversations between different belligerents or adversaries in the region that Iraq has been able to bring together. That's great.

Building ties between Iraq and the rest of the region, not just Iran, but with the Arab countries and with Turkey as well, relations that are beneficial to Iraq, I think is only going to help the country. We don't think that Iraq should never have a relationship with Iran. It should just be one based on Iraqi national interests and not those based exclusively on Iran's. So culture, education, trade on a

level playing field. These are all developments that I think we support. So Iraq as part of the region and as a critical convener of parties in the region, yes. Iraq as a battleground, no.

MS. LOVELUCK: Thank you. Abbas the – so of course you had this high-level delegation in Iraq last week with the Assistant Secretary. One of the people on that delegation was Brett McGurk, obviously an individual who served under Bush, under Obama, under Trump, and now under Biden. I wonder what you think – I mean, I wonder what does the fact that there are key individuals who have come back to Baghdad time and time again that these conversations say to you about how American foreign policy is shaped in Iraq? And can it fundamentally change now?

DR. KADHIM: Well, thank you, very much. This is an important question. I think first to understand the role of people like Brett in this assignment, the U.S. -- the nature of U.S. administration, is normally it is a lot of people like Brett and others are there to implement the larger strategic plan. Whatever the plan is from the administration's perspective. They are not there to make policy. They go there to perform their part in the overall policy.

But on the other hand, they have the power to give -- to feed their own experiences, and their own views into the process. And so they are important, but they are not the decision-makers. And we saw different Bretts in different administrations. I wouldn't count Brett's role in the Bush administration as an important one. Brett's role became very important during the Obama administration. But later on with the Trump administration he was – he served for a short time and then he resigned. And now he is back.

So I think it is – I wouldn't call this as a continuity even though we would like to see continuity. You know, we see that you just mentioned earlier in the discussion about the Iran policy and how the individuals or institutions are the ones that affected the situation of an Iraq versus Iran policy. And this is a great example of what we have seen. An individual – President Trump can in fact steer institutions away from their long-held institutional memory, if we were to call it that way.

To create positive change, relations, to establish positive relations, you need institutions. But also individuals can be instrumental in ruining relations. In the United States, the presidency has a huge scope of power. And this is kind of not probably our own scope of discussion. This goes into

understanding how the U.S. system works. But the presidency over the years have acquired a lot of power. And the president himself can in fact rearrange the institutions the way he wishes them.

One example I can cite in this sense, we always had an Iraq desk and an Iran desk. And under President Trump, they combined these under the same deputy assistant secretary. And because of the interest of the president and the secretary of state in Iran, these people were pretty much doing nothing but Iran. And then when they do Iraq, it's how does it fit in the overall Iran policy. Even things -- small things like waivers for purchasing fuel from Iran came to be manipulated. Once they give them 60 days, 90 days, or 45 days. And there is a deadline within those 45 days to pressure the Iraqis to do something or the Iranians.

So the full situation here is that you can have people -- I mean, Joey is a great example. I know Joey. I have met him both in the United States and also in Iraq when he was leading actually the U.S. mission at the time between two ambassadors. And Joey, who is well received in Iraq, was really liked by every Iraqi politician and administrator I've spoken to.

But sometimes you get situations where they really overwhelm everyone, even with the goodwill of the people, from the Iraqi side as well. I mean, I must say that U.S. and I will conclude with this. U.S./Iraqi relations don't suffer from government to government animosities. In fact, the two governments are doing very well. Under Trump and under Biden administrations, they had three dialogues that were all amicable. The problem is that the Prime Minister of Iraq, and the cabinet are not the only decision-makers or influencer in Iraq.

When you have dialogues, when you have agreements, sometimes people who are not at the table, who are not signatories to these agreements have more influence in Iraq on the outcome than the people who signed them from the Iraqi side. And same thing here from the United States. One Tweet or one interview by the U.S. president at the time of the Trump administration, and all bets were off. So you really -- I mean, it's both. I agree with Joey, but also both of them, the individuals and the institutions influence these relations in different ways.

Institutions, you need them for the creating, and establishing and maintaining positive relations. But individuals, sometimes their role unfortunately has been the other way, more on the

negative rather than on the positive side.

MS. LOVELUCK: It's not solely U.S. question. It's important with that's because we looking at U.S./Iraqi relations. We're talking a lot about the role that America has played, but America secretary does not to make policy in the vacuum and set the Iraqi policymakers in southern country have a vast degree of agency as well. So I would like to come back to that question.

But Assistant Secretary, I just would like to get your view on the role of individuals as we move on to the Iraqis.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HOOD: Well, let me just say, just talking about the topic that Dr. Abbas so eloquently addressed there. Sometimes the United States can be fully focused on what we want to do with Iraq in terms of everything that I talked about earlier. But it's Iran that imposes itself as a focus of Iraq policy.

Rockets are getting fired at everybody. Who's that? The Iranian backed militias. Protesters are getting killed in their hundreds. Who's doing it? Iranian backed militias. They are taking our embassy. Who's doing it? The Iranian backed militias. They are getting involved in business deals and dumping agricultural products on the market and driving Iraqi farmers out of work. Who's doing it? Of course the Iranian backed armed groups and political parties. So we can't ignore that all of that is happening. We have to take that into account and we have to help Iraqi nationalist institutions and leaders stand up for the country.

Why do you think it was a motto of the protesters last year to say nori watem (phonetic)? Not their own country. They want to be able to make their own decisions and not have that be done from another country. And that's what we're trying to do through our help and our scholarships and our trainings and all of this non-sexy stuff I talked about earlier that doesn't get any headlines at all, which can only be possible if we had that foundation of security and Daesh is not 60 kilometers away from Baghdad threatening everybody.

MS. LOVELUCK: Thank you. I think – I mean, the question of the Iranian influence here is an important one. And I think we're running out of time slightly on the panelists. We are going to come back to that on the Q&A. I can see is a pretty significant focus of the questions. So we will get there.

But Marsin, as I say, we're talking about the – sort of the U.S. policymakers, but of course Iraq also undergoes regular change in its executive, it has a Prime Minister has been in for year now. He will be up for election in just a few months I believe. So wonder to what extent you think the individuals at the top of the Iraqi politics at least within this formal structure of the state, the Prime Minister in particular, shapes Iraq foreign policy. Have there been patents of continuity, of change from previous premiers? Yeah, what do you think?

DR. ALSHAMARY: Thank you Louisa. I think that when it comes to individuals in Iraqi office and Iraqi high office, they aren't able to operate without an agreement whether direct or informal with an entire set of political elites who also compose the Iraqi state and who also control significant resources and other governmental offices. So one of the things we've learned from the past few cycles of elections and one of the things that I'm taking about as elections are scheduled to occur in October, is that we've seem both the kinds of prime ministers who come from established political parties and we've seen independent candidates.

And one of the things that we are learning from this process is the unfortunately when you look at independent candidates, the Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi or Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi before him, the lack of a – a sort of legislative block in parliament to support them really cripples them and makes them unable to – particularly with Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, unable to really commit to any of the promises that he has made or any of the things he was brought in to office partly by protesters to do.

I mean, if you look at the budget process, if you look at the inability to actually implement economic reform. And most basically, you see this decline in freedom of speech in Iraq. You see this violence against this discriminant violence against activists. And one of the basic demands of the Iraqi -- they've been addressing this and him being unable to do it even though in the beginning of his premiership he made an attempt to, but it was quickly brought back and it really never addressed again. And one of the basic goals of this administration of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi's administration was to address these things. And he has been unable to.

And I think a large part of that has to do with the fact that no matter which individual, regardless of whether it's domestic politics or foreign policy, you don't really operate in a vacuum in Iraq.

You operate with a network of political elites that you have to navigate. So you are either a strong candidate, kind of a strongman candidate, or strongman premiere, and you get things done, but you get things done at a certain price, or you are someone like Mustafa Al-Kadhimi who isn't really able to do much but the balance between different interests. And this applies to foreign policy as well.

I mean, saying all that, I will say, like Assistant Secretary Hood said, there is continuity in terms of high-level frameworks and things like that. It's not all individuals to go all based on administration. I mean, even in Iraq if you look particularly at developments of Saudi Arabia, for example, which are very much highlighted these days, they have been a project of various administrations working towards this. I mean, the Saudi Embassy in Iraq reopened under Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi who was the first one to do the overtures toward Saudi Arabia. And even in (inaudible) attempted the like. So there is some continuity there.

But it is really important to remember that – you know, Dr. Abbas Kadhim was saying that the president is increasingly more powerful in the U.S. and that's something they been talking more and more about the U.S.. But in Iraq, the Prime Minister's power does from a large part come from a political party and the legislative block. So with that, I will conclude. I think it's time for, I'm guessing for the Q&A.

MS. LOVELUCK: Thank you for that, guys. We have some questions coming in. If anyone wants to send them through, they come to events@Brookings.edu. Or on Twitter, it's #U.S.Iraq. If I may just pick up to begin with and then we will sort of move on to the audience questions.

Just in terms of what you are saying Marsin about the way in which anyone engaged with Iraqi politics is not to – no individual decision comes in a vacuum. As you say, there is a network of political elites to be managed. A lot of them are connected.

And Assistant Secretary Hood, when you raised the other stuff, the stuff we don't talk about, the building of health institutions, the upgrading of sewage management systems, I guess one thought that comes to my mind is that the U.S. has done a pretty outstanding job at providing buildings and equipment. But of course I think what the Ibn al-Khatid fire showed a couple of weeks ago where 82 people were killed in that coronavirus ward when a big fire ripped through it, is that giving these buildings is one thing, and keeping them going is another. Immediately the institutions become engaged in a

system which is pretty riddled with corruption, with mismanagement.

And I guess I wonder how you engage on those issues. Right? You can build a hospital, but it's not necessarily the case that the hospital you build will ultimately sort of be able to fill its function as you would like. And I wonder how the U.S. can engage on these very structural factors.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HOOD: That's a good question, Louisa. First of all, I think that's where our training programs and our technical advisors can benefit Iraq over the course of years. So someone that we may have sent to training programs or university back in 2005 or 2006, well now it's 15, 16 years later. These people have taken the expertise and hopefully they've been – that's been recognized and they've moved up to the Iraqi system so that they are in positions of responsibility. That requires a meritocracy and not a party-based system of well, you get this ministry and you get that ministry. It's got to be a really professional civil service.

That's not something we can do for Iraq. They've got to have – the political leaders need to have the courage to be to say, no, we're not going to reward party loyalty. We are going to reward expertise. So that's one thing.

Free and fair elections that actually reflect the will of the people, that's the way that you are going to get there. And we have not seen a perfect example of that yet in Iraq. We hope that it's coming for these early elections in October. We're certainly going to do everything we can. We've allocated millions and millions of dollars to support the United Nations in helping the Iraq is get ready for this election.

But I think that's the key. If politicians don't feel that their decisions have consequences, that their mistakes have consequences, well, you'll just be like Lebanon where like a gigantic blast can happen in your port and you still don't form a government. You still don't making reforms because your political future has nothing to do with actual people.

That's what hopefully these elections in October will do, is make the political parties and their leaders directly accountable to the Iraq people. Then, I think you will see some change. And our people that we've been training and educating and helping making relationships with for the past 20 years, they will be ready to help.

MS. LOVELUCK: Thank you. We have a question from Mara Raskin at Georgetown Law. She says Iraq will soon start the process of repatriating more than 30,000 Iraqis believed to be associated with the Islamic state who have been stranded in a hold camp in Syria for years now. She's asking kind of about what support can be offered to these people, to the displaced who are coming back from Syria to Iraq.

I think Iraq has largely tried to close its displacement priority saying that most people have actually gone home. But these people coming back now are probably among the most stigmatized population among the displaced that we would have seen to date. So I think Mara is asking what can be done.

I will direct this that you Abbas. What can be done to support these people? And also what can be done to sort of work on the judicial system? The system of trials that some of them will go through when the return or when people they are associated with are arrested?

DR. KADHIM: Well, this is a hot potato for the Iraqi government, in fact, for the international community, not only the Iraqi government. On the one hand these are people who are – it's a mixed bag. There are people who are involved in criminal activities and there are ISIS and terrorist activities. And there are people who are captive audience like children and women. And there is some of the women of course are completely innocent. Some of them did perform roles at ISIS.

And to sort through that, it takes a lot of effort, a lot of expertise, a lot of resources that Iraq doesn't have currently. So that's why I mentioned the international community. So one side is you really need to have an efficient system to integrate them safely, legally, morally, and put them back into society. Look, the last thing you want to do is to bring a bunch of extremists or terrorists and dump them in the middle of a society that is post-conflict.

But on the other hand, there is another aspect of this, which is really the logistical part of it. It is not just these families (inaudible) but also let's remember that Iraq had at one time more than 2 million people who were displaced. And still we have about 1 million displaced people all over Iraq that are unable to go back to their homes and the places where they lived before the crisis.

The bill for that is huge. You have to really rehabilitate the cities, and villages, and towns

where they live. You have to provide an environment where they can come back. Right now they are provided for in camps, basic life, not really what you hope for in a human being. But at least something is provided for them. But if you put them back in the cities where there are no jobs, there are no services, no running water, no electricity, a lot of these areas probably sometimes up to 80% damage for the infrastructure. And then in many places where they are supposed to go back, the landmines and the ordinances have not been cleared some places there are even dead bodies under the buildings.

So this is a huge effort. I'm afraid it's larger than the capacity of the Iraqi government. And Iraq barely is able to run the government and pay the salaries. Where you going to come up with up to – it depends on whom you ask and what the scope of the rehabilitation or rebuilding, reconstruction, up to 135 – \$150 billion minimum of \$80 billion that you need to make natural or welcoming habitats for these people. So it's really two sides.

Mara, I know you are interested in the legal side as a legal scholar. And this is highly important. The security side is highly important. But also I think sometimes it boils down to logistics because can you really put them – is there a place that can welcome them and be able to help them lead a natural life with schools, and jobs, and markets and safe life, to be honest.

And not to mention the rejection of the locals. There is a stigma on many of these families. And there are tribes that do not want these people back in their areas. So if you put them back in there, probably you will really set them as sitting ducks for anybody who would like to shoot them.

MS. LOVELUCK: Marsin, I wonder what you think. Obviously, this is incredibly thorny issue. Not just for the people want to go home, but also people who are where they came from. People who also themselves have suffered often a vast amount at the hands of the Islamic state. What more can the Iraqi government do to try and get them home? What meaningful support could any external actor offer them?

DR. ALSHAMARY: I will provide a broader answer to this, but it's something that's been on my mind the more and more I think about a right because we truly have a lot of Iraq vessel dialogue and national reconciliation, not just with regards to what happened with ISIS, but even before that. In every crisis we have in Iraq, we tend to just sweep it under the rug and move on and not really provide

any resources to victims and not really invest in any dialogue in local communities in trying to understand what it means to be Iraqi, what it means to be oppressed, what it means to be an oppressor. And we've missed our opportunities to do that repeatedly in Iraqi history in contemporary Iraqi history.

And one of the things that I fear would – and I know a lot of members of the international community and a lot of international aid is being directed towards a lot of these discussions about dialogue, particularly at community levels and in smaller levels. And I know there is a lot of energy and a lot of thought that's been worked towards that. And I also know that after the pope's visit, the prime minister did declare a day of national reconciliation and dialogue.

So there is a lot of thoughts and efforts on the periphery percolating about this. But I think it needs to be more sustained and more deliberate because you can see crises feeding into one another. If someone who has undergone a crisis doesn't really have it addressed or is told to move on quickly, if there is no resources spent on this. And it really comes back to Iraqi identity and what Iraqi national identity means. And not addressing these issues is part of not really cultivating Iraq in national identity in this time period.

MS. LOVELUCK: And assistant secretary, Monalisa Freiha, I hope I'm saying that right, asks how does the Biden administration look to the Iranian-Saudi talks in Iraq? And is the U.S. playing any role in it? And how do you think it will affect the tensions in the whole region including in Lebanon?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HOOD: Well, thanks for that question. I think Winston Churchill said it best when he said it's better to jaw-jaw than war-war. And of course as a diplomat, that's what I'm always going to say, that dialogue is better than war up until the last minute. And even during war it's very important to have an open dialogue to try to get things deescalated. So we support these talks. We don't have anything to do with them, but we certainly support the Iraqi government's outreach and reintegration to all different parts of the region and playing that role as a convener rather than as a battleground as I said earlier.

If I may say on a whole, briefly I think we've lost a lot of time. Two years ago we were pressing the Iraqi government to start bringing back at least the people who were in Northeast Syria long before Daesh and who ended up in Al-Hawl. The elderly, the sick, the orphans who were very, very

young babies. This could at least reduce the problem by a few thousand and start to get the system working and starting that national dialogue over the need to bring these Iraqi people back home. Unfortunately, that didn't happen at the time. It seems to be happening now, which is good.

What the United States is doing to help that, we provided along with the U.K., the first funding for the – for UNITAD, the U.N. commission that is working on investigating possible war crimes. We've provided humanitarian assistance in the form of food and water and medicine to millions of people, the stabilization programs I talked about earlier. De-mining, we are the largest donor to the country. We fund also reconciliation programs to the U.S. Institute for Peace. We are doing our best. We can always do more, but we are involved in every aspect of trying to help create the conditions for these people to come home and live peacefully.

And I think that's what most Iraqis want. You saw it in the visit of the pope. He mentioned it. He was welcomed by all components of society. People were worried about his security. I wasn't; I said if there is any problem whatsoever, all the other Iraqis in that crowd will snuff out that person threatening the pope because they don't want anything to happen here. And I was right.

MS. LOVELUCK: Marsin, I wonder if -- two things you said. On the Iranian-Saudi issue, how do you see, I suppose the genesis of these talks? How successful can they be? And what does it say about Iraq's role in the region right now; the fact that they are actually here -- they were here. What do you think about that?

DR. ALSHAMARY: Well, now we have confirmation from the Iraq president, though not from any other side, but I think that's confirmation enough for most of us. But like I said earlier, the genesis of these talks I think, you can trace it back to previous Iraq administrations creating overtures towards Saudi Arabia and rekindling the Iraqi-Saudi relations. Iraq obvious has always had a relationship with Iran. So that was just the other part of the equation. But I also would credit that to personal efforts and personal ties from President Barham Salih or Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi to the extent that as be said as well.

From what I hear so far, the limitations of these talks revolve around Yemen. And I don't necessarily think that's a bad thing. I think it really just puts Iraq in a position where it's mediating in the

region about something that's outside of its own geographical scope, which actually is – makes the definition of mediation when it doesn't really concern you or a third party in this. So I think that is a positive sign. I think if Iraq taken its place in the region.

Iraq can't be ignored in the region for long. For years it was a threat to the region under Saddam Hussein. Then after 2003 became really a state that a lot of other states didn't know quite how to deal with. But I think it's now just fallen into its natural position, and that – it's a state that has a lot of cultural and religious affinity too. Most states in the region could use that to play an important role, which we are seeing right now.

I don't know what the outcome politically of these talks will be, but I think regardless of what will happen as a result of them, I think it's setting a precedent of Iraq being a place where these talks can take place.

MS. LOVELUCK: Thank you.

Abbas, I wonder what you think, you know, works kind of well as this sort of either mediator, or broker, or facilitator says about the sort of sort of (inaudible) governance emerging from policy, what -- how it wants to see itself and perhaps what it actually is trying to achieve as a regional player?

DR. KADHIM: Well, it is a positive thing to see talks. And I agree with Joey and Marsin on that. Talks means that the arms at least will temporarily keep silent and then we hear the voice of reason of skilled diplomats behind closed doors. They can get angry at each other, but people at least don't at least get killed hopefully while this is happening.

Now the test most of the misery in the Middle East has been done or caused by the Saudi-Iranian conflict. For more than five years the Saudi's have been waging this atrocious, failing war on Yemen. They have not cited one thing that has to do with Yemen, but always they cite the Iranian influence. Bahrain, that has been the only Arab Spring revolt that was crushed. The only citation was not that the Bahrainians or wrong or the government is wonderful, it's just because they said it's an Iranian instigated revolt.

Syria has been in this also; Iran had this idea to prevent Iran from getting full access, or

continuous access to the Mediterranean. Iraq has always been the question of Iran backed (inaudible) this or that. Lebanon is always in the same situation.

So wherever there is a crisis, or wherever people are dying, you really the this is the Iranian/Saudi conflict and its aftermath and everybody is trying to score points against the other. And it is very convenient for the Saudis and the Iranians to fight in these wretched places rather than fight it on their own soil and get their own citizens killed. It's immoral, it is wrong and pretty much, I think I would love to see an international entity that would hold both accountable for every death that they cause.

But unfortunately, the way the world works is that at the end of the day probably they will get away with it and they will sit down and here we are praising them for sitting and talking after all of the mayhem and death and destruction they have called. But again, given what the world has to offer us this is much better option as ugly as it is, but it is a much better option than continuing the conflict.

So it is important. I think Iraq has done a good job. You know, could it -- Prime Minister Kadhimi is credited for little because everybody wants his job so they tried to bring him down as much as they can, like with other premieres before him. But I think he deserves a lot of credit for putting his people together.

He made several talks. He is one person who can talk and is trusted, both in his previous role as the head of Iraqi intelligence and his current role as a premier to -- he is trusted by all parties involved and his series of visits helped create this dialogue and it is one thing, ironically, he could not get the Iraqi factions to talk to one another. But he got the Iraqis, the Iranians and the Saudis to talk to one another. And hopefully, we will have a solution.

And this again, will situate direct as a place where people come first and can see us as an honest mediator. Iraq has held -- or helped -- posted talks between the Americans and the Iranians in the previous nuclear deal. Probably now, is able to come back and help both Americans and Iranian speak over Syria, over Saudi, over Iraqi issues as well.

So it is a good thing, it's a great sign to see, and we hope that it will be not just talks but there will be some resolution of some of these issues that have gone madly overdue and it's time to time to bury them and come back to the same foreign policy, and regional policy within the Middle East.

MS. LOVELUCK: Thank you. That was a very distinct note on which to end, I think. We are out of time but I would just like to sort of offer everyone a chance to go to some final thoughts. You know we've talked about today – we talked about some personalities and presidents, peace talks, displacement. We've gone all over the place. So I want to, you know, Assistant Secretary to begin with, you know if you have any concluding remarks, anything you'd like to draw out from the discussion today that you would like to leave us with?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HOOD: Well, thank you for having me here. I really appreciate the opportunity, especially so soon right after getting back from a visit to Iraq. As I said, I think there's a lot of optimism here. The United States clearly is going to remain engaged in the region and in ways that are far beyond just the very important fight against our common enemies in Daesh.

So now starts the really difficult work of trying to make sure that everything is in place and all the support that Iraq needs to have free and fair elections in October is done. And that we can help bring those people back home from Syria and integrate them. We can help create opportunities for our businesspeople to create jobs and wealth in both countries. And so that people can live in peace. That's what we want. That's in the best interest of the United States, and so that's what we are going to work for.

Thank you very much for your work, Louisa, reporting on conditions in Iraq. I follow it very, very closely, as well as the academic research that we see from Dr. Abbas and Marsin. Thank you so much, and thanks to Brookings for bringing us together today.

MS. LOVELUCK: Marsin, any final thoughts?

In fact I can't see Marsin so Abbas, final thoughts?

DR. KADHIM: Well, thank you very much. Hopefully we will see Marsin back. I would like to thank Brookings for convening this time the important panel. I would like to thank you, Louisa, for always excellent moderation and meeting and discussion in a fruitful way. It's so great to see my friend Joey again. And I've seen him in many roles and I'm glad to see his leadership within the State Department and the U.S. diplomacy.

What really gives us a lot of hope is that we are now back to having a very good team

leading the United States Middle East policy in the State Department, even in the White House and elsewhere in the Pentagon has always been people who are working hard to do their best. Not without challenges, but definitely that's great to see U.S. foreign policy in U.S.-Iraqi policy is back to where we hope it to be. And hopefully, they will overturn many of the glitches that were created in the past few years. And we have good trust in that.

And again, thank you very much. Thank you for the audience, and I appreciate your invitation, and thanks to Brookings for always doing this great work. Louisa, back to you.

MS. LOVELUCK: Well, thank you both, and also to Marsin, who I think has been disconnected. But we're very grateful for her thoughts today. It's been a great discussion. Thank you to Brookings for organizing this. And thank you to the audience as well for sort of (inaudible) the audience for bringing in discussion that was not just about this conversation. The role of geopolitics, the level of geopolitics but also a discussion about people. (inaudible) civilians that it impacts. I think that's been pretty clear.

And thank you, and thank you for watching.

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