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PARTICIPANTS:

RANJ ALAALDIN
Nonresident Fellow, Foreign Policy
The Brookings Institution

KATHERINE HARVEY
Adjunct Professor, Center for Security Studies
Georgetown University

KEN POLLACK
Resident Scholar
American Enterprise Institute

BRUCE RIEDEL, Moderator
Senior Fellow and Director, The Intelligence Project
The Brookings Institution

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. RIEDEL: Good morning. Welcome to the Brookings Institution. Today we are joining a panel discussion on the subject of Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Iraq and Saudi Arabia are the two most important Arab states in the Persian Gulf. Some would argue they are the two most important Arab states throughout the Arab world.

They have a long history interacting with each other including, for example, in the 1980s in the war against Iran. And then going through a long period of hostility, sending a half a million men to the Middle East in 1991. George H.W. Bush embarked upon the liberation of Kuwait followed by a long period of hostile relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

2003 invasion of Iraq led to a strained period in their relationships, which we will talk about some today. More recently, they have become starting to reconcile, which opens up the significant new developments in the region.

To discuss these issues today, we have a terrific panel. I'm Bruce Riedel. I'm a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and have been there for the last 15 years. I've written a book about Saudi Arabia. Prior to that I spent 30 years in the Central Intelligence Agency including eight years in Security Council.

My first guest today is Katherine Harvey. She is a professor at Georgetown University. She is a United States Navy veteran and got her Ph.D. at Kings College in London. She is the author of a spectacular new book entitled, "A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: The Saudi Struggle for Iraq."

Next, we have Dr. Ken Pollack. Ken is also a veteran of the CIA and also, a veteran of the National Security Council. He went onto get a Ph.D. and then to work at a National Defense University, the Brookings Institution, and now the American Enterprise Institute. He is working on a book on the United States relationships with Iraq.

Ranj Alaaldin is a nonresident fellow at the Foreign Policy program at Brookings Institution. He is the director of the Crisis Response Council and a Carnegie Corporation from New York focused on peace building in the Middle East region. He is also working on a book on

Shiite militias and Iranian influence in the Middle East.

With that introduction, let me turn now to Dr. Harvey and ask you, Katie, if you would say a few words about the arch of Saudi relations with Iraq particularly in the post-invasion period and then coming up to date to more recent events. And also, maybe a word or two about the emerging Iraq, Jordan, Egypt access in the Middle East.

MS. HARVEY: Am I unmuted? Great. Thanks so much, Bruce. I'm delighted to be here with you all today to discuss this topic of Saudi Arabia and Iraq. And my new book really looks at the relationship when relations were exceedingly poor and that was the period -- you know, I look at it in particular the period when Nouri al-Maliki and King Abdullah were both in power in Baghdad and Riyadh respectively.

But since the passing of Nouri al-Maliki and Abdullah in more recent years, there has been really an important shift in the relationship. And there's new momentum. You know, it's still a developing relationship, but there's new momentum. You know, corresponding to Mustafa al-Kadhimi premiership in Iraq.

But so, backing up and kind of looking at where we've come from because for 25 years there really was not a diplomatic relationship between the two countries. So in 1990, the Saudis broke relations with Iraq following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

Fast forwarding to the post 2003 period, you know, there's a widespread perception, you know, kind of just in general out there that, you know, with the empowerment of the Iraqi Shia following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. You know, that the new Shia that Iraq was sort of, you know, naturally aligned or even automatically aligned with Iran. And I pushback on that.

I argue that actually Iraq's alignment with Iran was not a foregone conclusion. I argue that in fact, you know, the fact that Iraq did very much align with Iran really came as a result of a self-fulfilling prophecy created by the Saudis. And if you look at the period of the mid- to late-2000s, and we're talking like 2006, 2007, 2008. There were a range of Iraqi leaders reaching out to Saudi Arabia and these were Sunnis, Shia, Kurds. You know, a whole range.

And you know, they very much saw Iraq as an Arab country and that it had a

rightful place in the Arab world. And they were looking for reintegrate into the Arab world. You know, and in order to do so, you know, of course what you do is to engage with the most important Arab state and that was then and continues to be Saudi Arabia.

And so, meanwhile there's also, you know, just sort of a general perception that Nouri al-Maliki, you know, who became prime minister in 2006. That Maliki has always sort of been a close ally of Iran. And I argue that that's also actually really not the case. I am not looking to defend Maliki, who, you know, of course did plenty of questionable and horrible things during his premiership. But actually, you know, I think that it's not the case that Maliki was, you know, even particularly close to Iran in 2006.

You know, in fact was looking to reduce Iran's considerable influence in Iraq at that time, which also came, you know, as a large -- a result of the fact that, you know, the Arabs were, you know, sort of absent from Iraq at the time.

And, in fact, Maliki on its first trip abroad as prime minister in the Summer of 2006 went specifically -- went to Saudi Arabia. You know, and that trip was a signal that, you know, the Iraqis saw Iraq as an Arab state and, you know, were looking to be integrated into the region.

And meanwhile, there was considerable pressure coming from the United States on the Saudis to engage with Iraq at this time. And, you know, this was the case during the George W. Bush administration and then subsequently with the Obama administration. And, you know, George W. Bush actually personally weighed in with King Abdullah to push Abdullah to engage with Iraq. Abdullah being the ultimate foreign policy decision maker in the Saudi system at that time.

And, you know, Abdullah wouldn't do it. Abdullah was dead set against engaging despite the Iraqi outreach and the U.S. pressure. And so, the question of course is, you know, why? Why was Abdullah so against engaging? And I reviewed that deeply engrained beliefs that existed for a long time within the Saudi leadership. Predisposed Abdullah to seeing, you know, Iraq -- the new Iraq as, you know, a client state, even a vassal state of Iran.

And these beliefs are that, you know, Iran is inherently expansionist. That Iran inherently seeks to expand in the region. And also, the view that the Arab Shia tend to be loyal to Iran. And of course, that's pretty typical stereotype of the Arab Shia among Sunni Arabs. But those beliefs predispose Abdullah to seeing the new Iraq as effectively an extension of Iran.

You know, it's also worth pointing out that Abdullah himself accused Maliki of having lied to him. The story goes that Maliki went to the kingdom, again on that first trip abroad and as prime minister that Maliki went to the kingdom and, you know, made a whole bunch of promises to Abdullah that he then didn't keep. And, you know, long story very short. And the longer story is in my new book. You know, I don't believe that Maliki made promises that he didn't keep or that even that Maliki made promises to Abdullah in the first place.

Again, this isn't to defend Maliki, but, you know, I think that, you know, Maliki in essence became sort of a scapegoat for Abdullah's deep grievances. You know, those grievances that Abdullah had, you know, existed before Maliki became prime minister. And, you know, and then once Maliki did become prime minister, you know, he served as a convenient target of those grievances.

But in any case, the Saudis did not engage. And I argue that ultimately created a self-fulfilling prophecy that, you know, the Saudis, Abdullah in particular, saw the new Iraq as an extension of Iran. But which was not the case at first. Certainly not the case that the Iraqis were looking to be an extension of Iran.

But, you know, in time, you know, the Iraqis being isolated by the Saudis. You know, that first of all really cutoff, hindered their access to the Arab world, which made them, you know, increasingly reliant on Iran. But in addition -- and I think this is the really important point -- you know, the Iraqis -- at least many Iraqis -- really began to interpret this Saudi stance as, you know, deep Saudi hostility and even a Saudi intention to reverse Iraq's post-2003 Shia ascendence.

You know, and the Iraqis, again at least many Iraqis, tend to feel very threatened by the Saudis. And, you know, it's that sense of threat, I believe that, you know, that

compelled them. You know, the Maliki government and Nouri al-Maliki himself to pursue an increasingly close relationship, you know, with Iran.

But so that was then. You know, fast forwarding to more recent years. Maliki was ousted from the Iraqi premiership, you know, six months before Abdullah passed away. And the passing of Maliki and Abdullah from the scene, you know, has really created an opportunity for a new relationship to develop. And the relationship was, you know, certainly slow to get off the ground.

But, you know, soon after Abdullah passed away, the Saudis reopened their embassy in Bagdad in 2015. Again, that was the first time that their embassy was open since 1990. The next year in 2016, the Saudis sent an ambassador to Bagdad. The year after that, 2017, the Saudis and the Iraqis established a coordination council which was an important step. You know, it's kind of the mechanism to get the relationship really started again.

And, you know, I think in the first couple of years as that coordination council, it was pretty slow moving. But I think what is different today and in the last year or two is that the coordination council and its various committees are meeting and are working. And I think that they've got sort of sustained momentum. You know, even if they're still, you know, there haven't been a whole lot of initiatives taken. You know, there is sort of sustained momentum.

You know, I think what also is new is that the Saudis like Mustafa al-Kadhimi. They like him. They feel comfortable with him. And, you know, that was not the case with necessarily with al-Kadhimi's predecessors. You know, they despised Nouri al-Maliki. They also still didn't really feel particularly comfortable with Haider al-Abadi and Adil Mufti (phonetic).

But I think that it's different with Kadhimi today. They also, it's worth pointing out, you know, they feel comfortable I think with Muqtada al-Sadr. You know, they see Sadr as a nationalist. You know, and if Sadr, you know, forms the next government, you know, which is what it seems very likely. And, you know, particularly if Kadhimi's is granted a second term, you know, I think that there could really be -- this would be very beneficial to, you know, the further development of the Saudi/Iraq relationship.

And, you know, I think what's important is that, you know, whereas under Abdullah, you know, Abdullah saw Iraq, the new Iraq as sort of, you know, lost to Iran. And therefore, chose to isolate. And, you know, that's different. You know, the Saudis today recognize that Iraq is not lost to Iran. And that by, you know, engaging with Iraq they empower Iraq to reduce its dependence on Iran. To, you know, assert more independence in the region.

You know, I think that the Saudis also potentially see an economic opportunity in Iraq. Vision 2030, you know, calls for the Saudis to develop themselves at the trade hub internationally and regionally. You know, and if they're going to be a regional trade hub that means that they need to start trading with at least some of their neighbors. You know, and Iraq can be, you know, an important partner in that respect.

Now, of course, the endemic corruption in Iraq still presents a real obstacle to that. But, you know, there's the potential for Iraq to be a trade partner. You know, and one of the most significant developments in the relationship just took place a couple of weeks ago at the end of January. And has both, you know, an economic and strategic dimension. You know, at the end of January, the two countries agreed to hook Iraq up to Saudi Arabia's electrical grid.

Power is a perennial problem in Iraq as a result of, you know, decrepit infrastructure and a whole host of reasons. You know, and for many years, the Iraqis have imported electricity from Iran. And, you know, hooking Iraq up to Saudi Arabia's electrical grid, you know, will only again allow Iraq to reduce its dependence on Iran and to project, you know, more independence.

The electricity piece is a good segue into Iraq's emerging partnership with Egypt and Jordan. In the last couple of years, this has been an interesting partnership. And I think it's really an important one to watch. The three countries have created this new partnership. They talk a lot about it. The leaders from the three countries have met on a number of occasions at various summits. Most recently the Iraqis posted King Abdullah of Jordan and President SiSi in Bagdad last summer.

Actually, Abdullah and Sisi were in Bagdad not once, but twice last summer.

First for the most recent trilateral summit and then again for the regional cooperation summit that the Iraqis hosted. This is at its core also an economic partnership. The Iraqis supply Egypt and Jordan with oil. The Iraqis are hoping to gain access to Egyptian electricity. The Egyptian and Jordanian construction companies are also hoping to gain access to Iraq, you know, for the reconstruction in Iraq. The Iraqis want to tap into -- you know, particularly Egypt's infrastructure expertise again for reconstruction.

So, you know, there's a lot of economic synergy there. But again, you know, it has its strategic dimension, you know, that this only for the Iraqis, you know, this only reinforces the sense that Iraq is, you know, reintegrating itself into the Arab world. And, you know, reducing its, you know, overwhelming dependence from before on Iran.

You know, but it also -- you know, if it gives, you know, the Iraqis one more option that isn't Iran. It actually also gives the Iraqis an option, you know, that isn't the Gulf countries. You know, it allows the Iraqis and opportunity to develop a partnership that's neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia.

And the same is true for Egypt and Jordan that, you know, this allows Egypt and Jordan also to develop a partnership that, you know, that allows it to sort of gain a little independence from the Gulf countries. And so, I will leave it there.

MR. RIEDEL: Very good. That got us off to an excellent start. Ken, could you address this issue from the Iraqi perspective? And particularly from a perspective of how the different political players in Iraq look at the relationship with Saudi Arabia and what they may be hoping to get out the relationship?

MR. POLLACK: Sure, Chris. And thanks so much for inviting me. It's great to be on such a terrific panel.

Let me start by picking up on a number of the different points that Katie has made. And, you know, just start by saying that one of the reasons I think Katie's book is so important. First, not in just kind of helping a wider audience understand what really happened in Iraq and between Iraq and the Saudis. But I think it's also very important corrective to, you

know, some wider problems that we have in our approach to history and politics and all this kind of stuff, right?

First, you know, Katie's book really helps to kind of stick a pin in that awful balloon of the cult of historical inevitability, right? Where you're looking at something and at the time it can go in a whole variety of directions, right? You know, it can go in a whole variety. And then something, one direction turns out, right? That's the course that history follows.

And forever after everyone says, well, that was inevitable. It was inevitable that it was going to happen in exactly that way. And I think Katie's book is a very important corrective in that because most of which she's pointing out was this really didn't have to happen, right? It really didn't. Arguably, if you were just kind of starting with Iraq and Saudi Arabia's strategic positions in 2003 and what different actors were trying to do. It shouldn't have happened.

It really was about a single actor in King Abdullah who, you know, came to a conclusion and moved Saudi Arabia in a very unhelpful direction that then had these concatenating repercussions inside Iraq. And it was not the only thing that was going on, but it is an important element of it.

In addition, it also is a helpful corrective to this narrative that's taken hold that the Middle East is just hopelessly driven by the Sunni-Shia conflict. And first neither I nor Katie nor I think anybody in this screen is going to try to tell you that there isn't a Sunni-Shia conflict. There is one.

It is important but we Americans, Westerns, we have greatly exaggerated the impact of it, it's importance. It is one of many different factors out there. And, you know, I hate the whole ancient grievances, ancient hatreds narrative. I think that that is utterly mistaken in all of these different cases. But if you really want to believe in that. Again, what Katie's book starts to kind of point you towards is that, well, even if you want to say there were ancient hatreds, there were a lot of ancient hatreds.

And for most of the history of -- the modern history of the Middle East going

back 1,500 years, the more powerful ancient hatred dominating this part of the world hasn't been the Sunni-Shia conflict. It's really been the Arab-Persian conflict, right? And, you know, as Katie points out that has been a much bigger issue.

You know, as we all know during the Iran-Iraq war the longest conventional war of the 20th century, the Iraq's Shia even though Ayatollah Khomeini desperately tried to convince them to see their Shia identity as the most important identity and side with him. They made the opposite choice. They saw themselves first and foremost as Arabs and Iraqis and they overwhelmingly fought for Iraq and even for Saddam Hussein. And very, very few of them went and fought for the Iranians, right?

And even coming into the 2003 invasion, those sentiments are still strong, right? Things have gotten worse by that point in time as people like Fanar Haddad in his brilliant book have written. You know, Saddam does a series of things to the Shia community beginning in 1990 that really do exacerbate the tensions between Sunni and Shia in Iraq that make it a much more prevalent issue by 2003. But even then, there's still a lot of question marks surrounding what was going to happen.

Next point, Katie's point is also terrific and she started to do it by talking about the complexity of Nouri al-Maliki. Now, I can't claim to be a close personal friend of Nouri al-Maliki, but I met him on any number of occasions. I've had long conversations with him for well over a decade.

He is a complicated character. And exactly as Katie is describing, the kind of leader that he was going to be was extremely unclear in the period between 2005 and 2010, all right? And it's really important to remember -- and I'm always struck by this -- on almost every time I've seen Maliki -- I mean it's just a -- there have been a few times.

The last time I saw him he didn't mention this and that was last Spring. But almost every time I see him -- and I've heard this from other people as well -- he always mentions Charge of the Knights.

Now, most of you probably don't remember Charge of the Knights. Charge of

the Knights was in 2008 when Muqtada al-Sadr was the last great Iranian backed Shia militia leader in Iraq. He had more or less taken over Basrah and Imara and Sadr City and a number of other cities in the south. And Maliki hated it. Hated him and he launches a major military operation to retake Basrah on his own.

The Americans don't want him to do it. We are shocked by it but then we are forced to back him up. It works. It succeeds brilliantly. He drives the Shias out of Basrah and then Sadr City and Qurnah and Imara, he runs the table. And this is Nouri al-Maliki's crowning moments, right? And that's where he gets to be the leader he actually wanted to be, which was the great nationalist figure. Which is how he still sees himself, right?

Even in my most recent conversations with him that continues to be how he sees himself. And so worth noting, even after 2010 which is the watershed moment that really is when he decides the Sunnis are against him. And Sunnis both Iraqi Sunnis and the wider Sunni Arab world and the United States, you know, a great ally are against him. You know, he is going to have to forge his own path. Even then he makes an alliance, a tacit alliance with the Iranians.

But it's not something that he is wholly on board with. He is actually very suspicious of the Iranians. He tries to keep them at arm's length. You know, all through the period of 2010 to 2014, the Iranians and the person of (inaudible) Sulaymaniyah are constantly telling him to not be so harsh on the Sunnis. They're saying to him, you are driving the Sunnis into the arms of Al-Qaeda, all right? And he ignores them.

Basically, he says, I know how to run this country, you don't. So this is very important to recognize. Maliki is a much more complicated figure. And, you know, you can argue with his notion of what Iraqi nationalism meant. You can argue with his notion even of democracy. But he truly believes that he is an Iraqi nationalist and a democrat. That's what he always wanted to be. And he does feel that the Saudis were a very important element. He would never put it this way, but that is what convinced him take the path that he did. That he didn't feel like he could take that path.

Okay. Let me bring it to a close by just talking about the present day. And say

that, you know, what we've described, what Katie and I have both described is the history of how we got to this point. But we are where we are, all right? And we can't unwrite that history. And as a result, Saudi Arabia has become a little bit more -- a little bit more of a political football in Iraq.

But you know, one of the good things about Iraq, and it is always important to kind of always keep in mind that there are green shoots in Iraq. Is how the image of Saudi Arabia is changing in Iraq. Exactly as Katie has described it. Since the death of Abdullah and since Maliki's fall from power, we've had a very different approach to Iraq from the Saudis.

And a lot of Iraqis see it. And a lot of Iraqis would like very much to have Saudi. And let's remember, the Saudis are the leaders of the GCC. So Saudi means also UAE and Kuwait and Oman and conceivably even Qatar. Certainly, Bahrain, right? There are a lot of Iraqis who would love to see all of them play a more constructive role in Iraq. And I'm using the constructive as a pun here because they'd like there to be a lot of money flowing in from all of the Gulf states to help rebuild Iraq, which desperately, desperately needs it.

But there are reservations on both sides. On the Saudi side, and I was in Riyadh again in August. There is hope and a recognition that what the Americans were saying all along was the right answer. That Iraq isn't doomed to be a Shia power along with Iran. That it's very much up for grabs and that it could be an Arab power aligned with Saudi Arabia and Jordan and Egypt and the GCC states. And that GCC investment could help move that process along.

But the Iranians have gotten their claws deeply into Iraq. And in particular have not quite a strangle hold but, you know, this huge parasitic relationship with the Iraqi economy. And there is a lot of concern on the part of the Saudi's. They don't want to be giving money to Iraq only to have it immediately go to Tehran, all right?

So that has been their reservation over the last three or four years is you've got to prove to us that if we give you money that it's going to be spent in Iraq for Iraqis and not siphoned directly off to Tehran. And of course, that's very hard for the Iraqis. The Iraqi state is

miserably corrupt, right? It is just suffused with corruption. And so, even when you have very well intention leaders like Mustafa al-Kadhimi, right? Who, you know, is exceptionally well intentioned, his ability to control the entire Iraqi government is limited, and the Saudis know this.

I think Katie is absolutely right. My experience with the Saudis is they're very comfortable with Kadhimi because they think he has both the right intentions and he is smart enough and able enough to try to get control over the system if anyone can if he has the right backing, but they're doing very, very cautiously. And of course, this reflects back onto the Iraqi side where you've got lots of Iraqis vying for Saudi money, Qatar money.

You know, they're looking for all these different places, but they're not sure what it is actually going to mean. From their perspective, the Saudis have been disappointing them for 18 years, 19 years now. The Saudis have never really lived up to their promise. Much of it because of Abdullah's hatred of Maliki.

But even now what they see is hesitance on the part of the Saudis. And while we can say, well, yeah, you've got to understand why the Saudis are hesitant. There are good reasons for them to be so. On the Iraqi side, it's very much a good reasons, bad reasons, it doesn't matter. We just don't see them anteing up the way that we'd like to. And so, therefore, no one is really to just throw in their lot and be Saudi Arabia's champion inside of Iraq because it's not clear how much support they're going to get.

MR. RIEDEL: Thank you, Ken. Ranj, is joining us from London today. Lucky you.

Could you turn to the issue of the third person in this relationship, the Iranians. And particularly Iran's influence in Iraq and the Shiite militia groups that you're writing about in narrative forms in Iraq today?

MR. ALAALDIN: Thank you. Thanks very much, Bruce. Congratulations to you, Katie, on this very timely publication. And I think, you know, we've perched on a number of themes already by way of the opener from Katie and Ken's excellent analysis.

But I tend to be drawn into that discussion, but I'll stick to the mandate that you

have given me, Bruce, by just saying that Iran's influence in Iraq, I believe, should no longer be conceived of as a problem any longer or only a problem, but a reality that is engrained in the country, in the fabric of the society, within the state itself.

And that should trigger at least some thinking about how Saudi Arabia, how the Gulf Arab states can be a bit more proactive, more creative and more assertive with how they engage Iraq both the state, both the society. And I think that's again why Katie's book is such an excellent contribution to the field because it goes into the intricacies of this question. But also, what could have been if Saudi Arabia, if the Gulf Arab states had adopted a different approach in the immediate aftermath of the invasion.

Currently, coming to the presence, I would say Iraq is undergoing a tectonic shift in how it engages its neighbors. That's helped in part by the economic crisis. It's helped in part by the weaning influence of Iran and the PMF, the Popular Mobilization Force, the umbrella militia organization that is dominated by Iran aligned groups.

And it's helped, I would say, in part by efforts on the part of Bagdad and (inaudible) to reformulate how they engage the region at large both to alleviate prices, to bring about de-escalation. But again, as a result of the imperative of opening Iraq up to trade and investment with the Gulf.

Now, I say tectonic shift because three years ago, Iran and its proxy/allies were untouchable in Iraq. And if you look at the polling in Iraq conducted by Iraqian organizations. Very credible polling. In 2017, when the PFM was really at its peak in terms of its popularity. It was drawing on exploiting, capitalizing on the momentum of its battlefield successes, which positioned it very favorably in the elections that followed the year after, which I'll come to in a second.

But today that's at 15 percent so it was 70 percent in 2017. Today that currently stands at 50 percent. So 70 percent of Iraqis had a favorable view towards Iran, particularly the Shia community. Today, that's at 50 percent. And the reason for that is because the militia has turned their guns on Iraqis. On the society at large, but also Iraqi Shias who are urning still are

urning and pushing for reforms for good governance and jobs and so forth.

So you've got a situation now where kidnappings and assassinations are pretty much routine. That's had implications for the standing of these groups. And they're starting to feel the pinch of all that.

Most importantly, I would say the PMF is in disarray right now. You know, history will continue to judge whether the assassination of Qasem Soleimani and Mattheo Mohandas yielded the results, the objectives that were initially intended. And I think that's a story that will continue to be ongoing for a number of years at least.

But what it has most certainly done is inflict a number of dents in the armor of these groups. It's an organization. Iran depends on a proxy infrastructure that can coalesce since it is comprised of different fractions who have a long and bloody history with one another. A history of conflicts, political rivalries and so forth.

And because that proxy network is centered around clicks and personalities, charismatic individuals, I should add. The moment you start to take those individuals out of the picture, you've got the potential for implosion internally. So the tumult that has followed the assassinations has had far reaching reverberations for how they engage their local constituents. They're not as invincible as they once seemed, but also, at the same time, it means they can't unify their ranks.

And I think what we saw -- this also draws on the analysis, the observations made by Katie in her book -- Iran's influence does depend on unifying the ranks of the Shia political class of the militias who are tied to the political class in one way or another. And it most certainly did help when Saudi or Gulf Arab state rhetoric and discourse or King Abdullah's famous or infamous remark on the Shia crescent.

That sort of discourse did provide a rallying call for these disparate divided fractions and groups. And it most certainly also brought the question of the Shia religious establishment into the equation. So you have these three or four dynamics over the past decade, I would say, which has helped Iran and its allies in Iraq immensely.

Now what happened when the likes of Saudi Arabia, with the likes of the Arab world start to rethink how they approach Iraq. Well, it means that rallying call is no longer there. And the absence of a common enemy like ISIS which many Shias regarded as an existential threat and a natural reality arguably was. When those are no longer in the equation, the ability to politically mobile, to culturally mobilize and religiously mobilize becomes undermined severely.

So I think it could be quite a while until those chinks in the armor are addressed and remedied. Now, ultimately it does come down to what the Arab world and Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Arab states actually do about this. It's no so much about Iranian influence and the entrance of the PMF, but rather what those actors -- what the region does. What their rivals in Iraq do when that influence is weaning? When it is on the decline? And I think that is going to be the most telling about what the future looks like for the Iraqi political scene, for Iranian influence and the PMF.

Speaking of rivals, it's somewhat ironic that today, (inaudible) who is a blood-stained cleric by all accounts, complicit in mass atrocities and a huge part of the problem, in fact, is now a potential least-worst option in the country because with every assassination that the PMF undertakes, kidnapping with every drone attack, rocket attack, there is systematic repression. Muqtada al-Sadr stands a chance to increasingly localize the least-worst option in a country where least-worst options are not particularly great.

The options are very limited in Iraq. And I think here's where the whole debate and discussion or the point about polled politics being personal when it comes in. And again, coming back to Katie's book which does an excellent job of analyzing the intricacies of Maliki's tenure, his governance.

Coming back to this question of personalized politics being so integral to this question of Iranian influence, Saudi influence, Arab world influence. There is a momentous opportunity right now with Prime Minister Khomeini's premiership. With his concerted effort I would say by the likes of Prime Minister Khomeini, Prime Minister Barzani, by the likes of speaker Al-Halbousi. But also, other moderate actors like Amal Hakim (phonetic) to actually

unify their ranks.

Not necessarily through action per se, but rather through the formulation of policies, narratives and discourse that can actually bring mutually beneficial advantages and outcomes for both Iraq and Iran, but also for Iran and the Arab world. And I think that's why the next six months as the government formation process unfolds will be so critical to this question.

Coming back to the region at large. I don't think the GCC has yet developed a cogent, long-term strategy just yet. I think we're starting to see the guiding principles for that strategy. It's in the making, but it depends heavily on how the political scene unfolds domestically. So I do think Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab states are starting to look at the past and think about how to more effectively and decisively engage the Iraqi political landscape, which can only be a good thing in my opinion. Particularly because you've still got many actors in Iraq that want the country to have a balanced relationship with both Iran and the Saudis.

So let me just finish by saying that we should never underestimate the resilience of the PMF. It is arguably the only actor, political actor, right now that negotiates with its rivals to drone attacks, rocket attacks and assassinations. So it isn't easy for their rivals to try and circumvent them, to bypass them or to try and defeat them. And I think that's why we shouldn't count the PMF out just yet. But looking it as an organization that could be eliminated is in the first instance the wrong way to go about it in any case.

But rather it's about trying to adopt that holistic approach where you don't really think about taking the PMF out of the picture or the equation. Whether you try to beef up the ability of their rivals to manage the organization as a problem and hopefully in the future tame its conduct, its malign activities and terrorism and so forth. I'll leave it there, Bruce. And I'll happily continue and extend the analysis in the Q&A.

MR. RIEDEL: Right. Thank you, Raj. Katherine, let's come back to you. A few things I would like to ask first.

Let's give our listeners a break on money. Your book is a little bit on the expensive side, but I understand you have some codes that help to make it a little cheaper to

buy. If you could give us the codes?

And then my second question is this. If Abdullah was the reason why Saudi Arabia was so opposed to new Iraq after 2003. Is there a figure in Saudi Arabia today who you can identify is kind of the leader of the let's engage faction? And in particular, is this is the Crown Prince? Or is it other parts? Or is this really an institutional position that the Saudi government always, in its bureaucracy wanted to adopt and with Abdullah's departure, the bureaucracy is kind of mocking what it wants to have?

So if we could get codes? And also, a little more personalities?

MS. HARVEY: Yeah. So first of all, the codes. It's an academic book. Fortunately, it's not a super expensive academic book, but the codes will help. So the book is published by First Overseas and by Oxford University Press here in the United States and North America. First is offering a 25 percent discount with the code Harvey25. That's my last name, H-A-R-V-E-Y 25. And if you buy it through the First publisher's website.

Here in the United States, OUP is offering a 30 percent discount with the code ADISTA 5, that A-D-I-S-T-A 5. If you buy the book through the OUP website.

And then to return to your question, Bruce. Yeah, what was really interesting to me in my research was that, you know, kind of by the mid-2000s -- again, my book really looks at this kind of recent historical period. You know, Abdullah's senior foreign policy advisors by 2007, 2008 really saw themselves, really saw the value in engaging with Iraq.

And from what I understand from, you know, my research and my sources. You know, they would try to bring up the issue with Abdullah that, you know, there are any number of Americans, Iraqis, but also other Arabs from other, you know, states in the region coming to them trying to, you know, get them to encourage Abdullah to take a different approach.

And Abdullah, you know, wasn't even listening to them. So this was really very much Abdullah's decision. You know, taking despite his senior advisors and those advisors were, you know, was Prince Muqrin at that time who was then the head of intelligence was really his Iraq, you know, kind of his right-hand person on Iraq.

But also, Saud al-Faisal, you know, the former, the late Saud al-Faisal who was foreign minister. And also, Adel Al-Jubeir who, you know, ended up being of course Saudi ambassador to the United States.

I think Adel Al-Jubeir was also very much, you know, saw the value in Saudi engagement with Iraq. And I mentioned Adel Al-Jubeir because actually Adel Al-Jubeir was the -- you know, so Abdullah passed away. Muqrin kind of passed from the scene. He was briefly Crown Prince. Saud al-Faisal passed away. There really was just kind of across the board in Saudi Arabia, you know, new, you know, a whole range of new personalities.

And I think the new personalities for the most part were not particularly focused on Iraq. And I think that contributed to sort of the relationship being slow to get off the mark. You know, by 2016 or so, yeah, the Saudis now had an ambassador in Bagdad, but it wasn't clear that they were really, you know, serious about engaging.

You know, I would say that Adel Al-Jubeir, you know, he became for a time a Saudi foreign minister. And I think that he again kind of knowing the background from this -- you know, having lived through, you know, having been a point person in the 2000s period, having recognized that, you know, Abdullah, you know, had been to (inaudible). I think he saw, you know, the value of engaging.

And a real turning point came when Al-Jubeir took a trip to Bagdad in 2017. I think that Al-Jubeir saw the value. He was still hesitant. I think for security reasons. I think, you know, through the end of 2016 Saudi relations with the United States with the Obama administration were poor enough that the Saudis didn't particularly want to give the Obama administration a win.

But sort of at the very beginning of the Trump administration, Rex Tillerson personally, you know, weighed in with Al-Jubeir to take a trip to Bagdad. This was really sort of a symbol to the -- you know, the Iraqis were wanting some sort of symbolic move that the Saudis would take to demonstrate that they were, you know, were intent on pursuing a new approach.

And, you know, so Rex Tillerson asks Al-Jubeir to go to Bagdad. And I think like

two weeks later he did. So I would say that kind of in those early years of the post-Abdullah period that Al-Jubeir was, you know, kind of at the forefront of this. I wouldn't say that MBS himself was particularly focused on Iraq.

And I think that -- you know, I would be interested in hearing Ken's point of view because he's been to Saudi Arabia more recently than I have. But I think at this point it is sort of -- there's an institutional dynamic that again the Saudi-Iraq coordination council is, you know, has some institutional momentum. Not to overstate things because, you know, if Iraq deals with a whole lot of bureaucracy and red tape. You know, so do the Saudis. But I think that there is now sort of institutional momentum.

MR. RIEDEL: Thank you. Ken, I'm going to throw America into the loop here. And particularly American Iranian relations.

We now had a year of the Biden administration trying to put the joint confidence of a plan of action back together again. I keep thinking of those pictures of Donald Trump ripping up things and seeing Joe Biden now desperately with his tape trying to put it together.

I think it's fair to say it's not going very well. And we increasingly hear from the administration that time is running out. Let's project forward to the Spring. And let's assume that time has run out and that the administration says, they're wanting to get there but it's too late.

This seems to me to put the Iraq government in a particularly delicate situation. Literally being Iran and America. How might that affect the future of Iraq? How would that affect the future of Iraqi American relations? How would it affect the future of Iraq-Saudi relations? And understand one last point, we are already beginning to hear and you and I have heard this many times before. The heavy breathing that goes with Iran must do something or else. Something really, really bad is going to happen.

And the implication, of course, is some kind of military action. But that's a quick turn in the fork here, but could you take a look at that?

MR. POLLACK: Yeah, Bruce. And I'm going to try to be brief because I know

you've got questions from the audience as well and this is a huge topic.

And I'll start by just saying that, you know, your point about tearing things up and putting them back together. As you know well, the Iranians are actually expert at putting things that have been shredded back together. And so, if there's anybody who can help out it's them.

All right. To your actual question. You know, you are of course absolutely right. The last thing that the Iraqis want and all through the Trump administration, they were saying this as loud as they could. They did not want to be the battlefield between Iran and America, right? You know, there's that old expression. Some people say it's from India, some people from Africa. But when elephants fight only the grass gets trampled. And Iraq would be the grass in that equation.

It creates, you know, a particular dilemma for the Biden administration in particular because as you point out if there is no new nuclear agreement with Iran. If there is a return to a more confrontational approach to Iran. Iraq looms large in a variety of different ways. And, you know, in their own way -- and Katie was talking about Rex Tillerson and what he tried to do.

It was something that at least some members of the Trump administration understood, which is if the United States is going to take a confrontational relationship with Iran then it's critically important to back Iraq. To strengthen Iraq to give it the ability to -- and I think Raj's point about the reality of Iran being woven into the fabric of Iraqi politics. I think that's absolutely true, but there's still a range within that of Iran being dominating to Iran simply being an influential element, right?

And the key is if you're going to take a confrontational approach to Iran, you've got to give the Iraqis some ability to stand up. Some ability to push back on the Iranians and to limit their ability in particular to employ their influence over Iraqi politics to take over the Iraq economy.

If you're going to try to use economic pressure to try to coerce Iran or to limit its

ability to do things as I once described it a number of years ago. The problem is that the Iraqi economy is the snorkel through which the Iranians breath when they're under water from sanctions, right?

They use it as their windpipe as their lifeline. And we saw that all through the Trump administration and its maximum pressure sanctions. In part, it did not work. It didn't work for a lot of reasons, but in part it did not work because the Iranians were able to use the Iraqi economy.

And so, there would be a premium on strengthening the Iraqis. Strengthening U.S.-Iraq relationship and in particular just strengthening Iraq, which first of all is going to cause the Iranians to push back and could trigger a confrontation with Iran over Iraq. And secondarily, you know, as you know better than any of us, isn't necessarily what Joe Biden wants to be doing in the rest of his first term in office.

Iraq is not a place. I think, you know, Biden and his team have been very good about saying, look, you know, we recognize that we need to pay more attention to Iraq. I think they've been terrific with Prime Minister Kadhimi as far as things go in recognizing kind of what a constructive force he has been and can be.

But it's not a place where they're looking to invest a lot. They don't have a lot to invest. I think it's the last place they want to invest. And so, I think that would create -- it would be one of the many different problems that they're going to face if they can't get this nuclear agreement, which is one of the reason why they're going to try hard to get that nuclear agreement. And even if they can't they're never going to say it's dead, right?

They're always going to leave it out there as a possibility because the moment they describe it as dead, they've got all these other problems. Iraq being one of them that they're going to have to tend to.

MR. RIEDEL: Thanks, Ken. Raj, I'm going to ask you a question with two parts.

One is the Abraham Accords. There is some pressure on the Biden administration to get the next score. And getting the next score won't be satisfied by getting the

Khomeinis to make their relationship more public than it is today. The big score would be to get the Iraq or Saudi Arabia to recognize Israel.

I'm personally of the view that Saudi Arabia is highly but unlikely. But I would like to get your thoughts on is Iraq a serious possibility given the fact that we know that the Israelis have an ongoing relationship with the Kurds that amounts to more or less an alliance, if you will.

But closely related to that is the so-called Bagdad dialogue of the Iraqi facilitated conversations between the Iranians and the Saudis, between the UAE and the Iranians. Should we be doing more to facilitate that? And perhaps should we trade off and leave the Abraham Accords on the back burner and put our focus on trying to get a regional reconciliation between Iran and its Gulf neighbors?

MR. ALAALDIN: Thanks for that, Bruce. But let me take it in reverse order because I think the first question is a pretty easy question to answer in fact with certain nuances and objective perhaps.

So I think the summit in Bagdad. The Bagdad Summit was a great example of what can be achieved when you've got political will, momentum and when you've got the right personalities enough who can enable such an initiative. And I would say with positive impact so far in the region. I think there will continue to be a debate on whether that initiative has yielded the results that we would have liked.

But it was certainly a lot better that not having it there. And I think it's not so much a question of the initiative per se, but who's in office. So Maliki entered office as a compromised candidate who was a political lightweight at the time at least one can say, but still significant. He left it as an outsized political force, but still today he plays an outsized role within the political system itself. So he left it as a heavyweight.

Haider al-Abadi entered it as a political lightweight. In some respects, I think he also exited as a political lightweight as well. This was exemplified by the elections. Although, he is still considered to be one of the more moderate actors within Iraq.

And with Prime Minister Khomeini, I think it's still a bit unfair to judge him just yet given that he was regarded and still is in some ways a transitioning prime minister.

So it's really about the individual. The personal touch they add to these initiatives that totally makes sense for these initiatives but will determine whether we can actually alleviate a crisis. But it always helps to have those back-channel lines open and I think it has played a role in at least trying to ensure the various parties to the conflict are not falling victim to misinformation to nefarious malign campaigns and so forth. So it can have a very positive impact in terms of de-escalation.

Now, that all could be appended. In fact, in the coming months depending on who comes into office. Personally, I think it would be quite interesting to see how that initiative moves forward if you've got a Sadr aligned prime minister.

And that's where things start to get extremely tricky because it doesn't matter whether you're Prime Minister Khomeini or a Sadr aligned prime minister or a hard lined prime minister, in fact. You've always got to balance what is still considered to be very sensitive topic that is aligning with and engaging with developing closer ties with the Arab Gulf states, with the imperative, I would say, of keeping Iran in your good books.

Or ensuring Iraq is still in Iran's good books because the latter in particular can have a very devastating, damaging impact given the coercive capabilities of Iran and its allies in the country.

I think it would also be quite interesting to see who assumes the office of the presidency. But (inaudible) is a well-liked, highly regarded figure in the region, particularly in the Arab world. Strong personality, charismatic. But of course, at the same time the life of the Saudis, the UAE and others also know that he lacks a political base. The same applies to Prime Minister Khomeini, but of course -- but I think the office of the prime minister is a bit different to the office of the presidency. That's why I think you can do a lot more as prime minister than president. So keep an eye on how the appointment of the president unfolds over the coming months.

Coming to your first question, which is a very easy question to answer. I would say absolutely not. Any idea of Iraq normalizing ties with Israel at this point in time is probably for the next -- for the coming decades is unrealistic. And it will be laughed off by, I would say, by most in Iraq.

But it's true, of course, Israel does have longstanding ties to some of Iraq's political actors. With (inaudible), it played an integral role to ensuring the survival of the Kurdish revolutionary movement back when Saddam Hussein with the support in some of the region, with the support of Arab actors, other Turks, some of the worst humanitarian atrocities in history including the Halogen genocide. So you know, those legacies still come into play.

Now, could all that change in Iraq if, in fact, the U.S. -- if, in fact, you do have a normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Again, I think it will almost certainly open up a discussion in Iraq. And who knows where that discussion could lead to? But as it stands, I think it would be suicidal for any political actor in Iraq to come out in support of normalization.

And, in fact, some politicians have paid with blood. That includes the likes of (inaudible) son or sons were assassinated when he advocated closer ties between Iraq and Israel. Maybe I think this was 10 years ago, perhaps. So it's a costly proposition at this point.

MS. HARVEY: And just to interject, I would say that I think that what the Iraqis primarily don't want -- I mean I think all the Iraqis are really excited about the possibility of engaging with the Arab world. But they don't want Iraq to be turned back into the old work that Saddam Hussein's Iraq had been.

And I think the thought of, you know, normalization with Israel would be for them, for the Iraqis, you know, kind of that idea of turning Iraq back into a bulwark. And that's just a losing proposition for Iraq.

MR. RIEDEL: I agree with you both. I don't see either Iraq or the Saudis following the UAE course. I think it's very ironic that the country that is I think the most adamantly opposed to it is Kuwait.

Because after all Kuwait is the country that we rescued it and arguably owes us

the most, but it is not going to do anything on this front.

We're close to the witching hour here. So I've asked for final comments from all three of you. I'm going to go in reverse order starting with Raj. What I would particularly like you to say. What do you think we should be looking for next in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iraq? Or how far can this go?

There have been some provocative articles in the Arab press in the last few months about expanding the GCC. Usually it's in terms of including Jordan and Morocco. It's hard for me to see how Morocco can be considered a Gulf country. The logical country would include or would be of course Iraq, but I understand the difficulties of that.

Without focusing too much on that. What should we look for in the next one to two years in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iraq? And we now have 10 minutes left. Please to you, Raj.

MR. ALAALDIN: Thanks, Bruce. So I would say, you know, like I said in my remarks. This is a momentous period. The first thing to look out for is whether Saudi Arabia and the Arab world take the bait because with the rocket attacks, the corona attacks.

You know, these serve multiple purposes. And one of the things that Iran and its allies in Iraq have their eyes set on is whether this relationship truly represents a tectonic shift because that will be very problematic for them. Economic relations, the deepening of economic ties automatically translates into political influence.

It's a large part of the reason why Iran has been so successful in developing, cultivating the relationship that it has the influence that it has in the country. So it's important, I think with as much American support, European support of the Saudis, that the Arab world do not fall for the bait that Iran and its allies will set for them specific to Iran.

Secondly, I would say keep a look out for how the Arab Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, the UAE cultivate relationships with the different political actors. So, you know, if Iran's foreign policy isn't institutionalized, it's got a foreign ministry that does a great job in many respects. But when it comes to developing, building on establishing strategic relationships,

partnerships, that really rests on the shoulders of the individuals that are considered institutions in and of themselves.

And it's quite obvious who they are. In Kurdistan it's quite obvious who they are. In the Arab Sunni heartlands especially with Mohammad Abbasi emergence. And it's quite obvious who they are in Bagdad. So I would, in fact, encourage the further deepening of these. Personalized? Certainly. Relationships? But relationships that in effect are tantamount to the relationship that two institutions would have.

So in other words, don't go for the grand, large scale approach of trying to, you know, reposition Iraq in the region. Trying to establish a state-to-state bilateral relationship between Iraq and the Arab world. But rather try and build on the foundation, the fundamentals that are already there.

And I think there's a lot that can be done particularly in respect of how Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Arab states develop their relations with Kurdistan, with the Arab Sunni heartlands. Which in fact will strengthen and empower the likes of Khomeini in Bagdad.

MR. RIEDEL: Thank you. Ken?

MR. POLLACK: So let me pick up on Raj's point because I completely agree with it. But pull back maybe a little bit to say that I think on the Saudi side, the wheel is there. The strategic decision has been made and I suspect the Saudis will actually be quite patient about this barring some dramatic change in Iraq.

I mean that they recognize that if they can bring Iraq more into the Arab world that it's useful for them to do so. And they'll remain willing to do so. And will explore as Raj is suggesting, all kinds of little pathways forward.

The problem though is the other half of what Raj is talking about which is Iraqi politics are stuck, right? And they're stuck because of the political system that we and the Iraqis put in place between 2003 and 2008, right? And it is tragic but that is the reality. And, you know, the kind of details that Raj and I have followed in Iraq politics on a daily basis are just reinforcing that in every single day.

And we've seen recent decisions in Iraq just in the last week regarding the presidency, regarding the formation of majorities in the government. They make it less likely that we're going to get an Iraqi government that is going to be willing and able to pursue bold new policies, right? And increasingly it looks like we're going to be stuck with the status quo in some way, shape or form.

All of which is going to make it hard for the Saudis to really reach out to the Iraqis the way that they would like to do so. It's going to leave the Iraqis trapped in this netherworld between the Iranians, the Saudis, the United States and a variety of other countries with different weak factions all playing against each other and trying to use these foreign powers exactly as Raj is trying to describe it.

So while theoretically, there is great potential for this relationship. Unfortunately, I think the reality is going to be the status quo until something happens. And of course, it is the Middle East so something will inevitably happen. We just don't know what or when.

MR. RIEDEL: And I think it is safe to say that because it is the Middle East something that will happen will not be good news. But Katie, the last word is with you. How far do you think the Saudis want this relationship to go? And what do you expect to see in this relationship as it develops and we get further and further away from the era of King Abdullah?

MS. HARVEY: Yeah. I think that to build on Ken and Raj. You know, I think that the Saudis would like to develop this relationship. But again, I think that they also like as kind of Raj has sort of pointed to.

You know, Iraq to be less dysfunctional or Iraq to be less corrupt for, you know, whoever becomes prime minister, the powers that be in Iraq to be able to disarm the PMF or at least to be able to significantly curtail the PMF's power. You know, and so, yes, I think that the Saudis would like to develop the relationship but as Ken has just pointed out. You know, what's more likely is just for the status quo to carry on.

You know, I am still -- you know, I think that the status quo is still -- again, I'm an

optimist just based on, you know, the research that I've done as I done in the book. Is that even if the status quo is still really murky and kind of has two steps forward and one step back. The status quo 10 years ago was just so overwhelmingly awful between Saudi Arabia and Iraq that, you know, just by virtue of the fact that the Saudis have made this strategic decision that yes, they can engage with Iraq. And yes, it is a beneficial thing for them to do.

You know, just that is an enormous step forward that was hindered for years. So even though, I very much agree that we're kind of this era kind of two steps forward, one step back. I think that the relationship will continue to develop slowly. You know, I don't think anybody should expect, you know, kind of stuff to happen quickly or all of a sudden for the Saudis to write a huge check to the Iraqis.

But, you know, I'm hopeful that for instance, you know, this agreement has just been signed to hook up Iraq to the Saudi electric grid. You know, hopefully we will see that actually happen. You know, sometime in the next couple of years. Hopefully, we'll see, you know, some of these things that are being talked about and agreed to actually happen.

You know, I think that there's a potential for that to happen, but not for some kind of -- probably not for some sort of major breakthrough, kind of an overnight major breakthrough to happen in the foreseeable future.

MR. RIEDEL: All right. Thank you all. I'm just going to make a completely unrelated point before we go.

There was a big no show at the Olympics last week. The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud promised to be one of those who would be at the opening ceremonies and he didn't show up. Instead the ambassador to the United States, Reema bint Bandar bin Sultan represented the kingdom. I don't have an explanation as to why this happened, but I have a feeling it tells us something is going on Riyadh that we don't know about.

But on that note, I will point out that we will post later today or tomorrow the video of this panel. I want to thank the panelist. I certainly learned a lot from it. And I want to

thank our audience at home for joining us today to talk about these two very important countries and to talk about this great new book, *A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy*, which I hope you all now take a chance to go out and read.

Thank you once again and I'm bringing it to an end.

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