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THE WAR'S LEGACY FOR IRAQ, THE MIDDLE EAST, US POLICY, AND BEYOND

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PANEL DISCUSSION:

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MELANIE SISSON: Hello and thank you all for joining us here today. My name is Melanie Sisson, and on behalf of the Center for Middle East Policy and the Strobe Talbott Center for Security Strategy and Technology. It's a pleasure to welcome you to the Brookings Institution for today's conversation, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the war in Iraq.

The decision to go to war is always enormously consequential. It is momentous because of what we know will happen when we make the choice to go to war. And it's consequential because of what we don't know will happen when we make the choice to go to war. The events and outcomes and effects that we don't anticipate and we can't control. When the United States initiated war in Iraq in 2003, we of course did so with a rationale. We had objectives and we had expectations. We got some of what we intended and we got a lot of what we didn't intend over the subsequent 20 years. And all of those events together, the expected and the unexpected have consequences that are ongoing. They are complicated and they are very human. So it would be some combination of foolish and arrogant to claim that we're here today to talk about what it all means. And so we certainly won't be doing that. What we will be doing is having a conversation that is honest and introspective and reflective, and that is very much focused on what it is that we should be understanding from those 20 years of experience what we can understand from those 20 years of experience and certainly what we can learn from them.

To do that, we've assembled a really outstanding group of observers, analysts, scholars and strategists. Marsin Alshamery joins us from Baghdad today to share her perspective. She is a long time very sensitive observer of and has written extensively about civil society in Iraq. Suzanne Maloney in addition to being the vice president of foreign policy here at the Brookings Institution, is a world recognized expert in Iran and on Middle Eastern politics more broadly. Mike O'Hanlon holds the esteemed Philip H. Knight chair in defense and strategy. And he holds that chair because he's had a truly exceptional and I think, unparalleled career in both defense and strategy. And Molly Reynolds is a national expert on the United States Congress, and she does us all the great service of studying what it is the Congress does, how it does it, and why it does it, so that we can work hard to understand how the domestic political process here in the United States affects not just our lives, but the lives of people beyond our borders. So, Marsin, thank you so much for joining us here today. It's really wonderful to have you. If you would, please ground our conversation first by sharing a bit about what life is like in Iraq today.

MARSIN ALSHAMARY: Thank you so much. And the and thank you to everyone. Thanks for setting this up and making it possible to speak with you from all about today. It means a lot to me to be able to be here, to give my account of what life is like and what it has become like in the last 20 years and the transformations. I wanted to start by briefly reflecting on the many events that are taking place and will take place in the next few weeks about this anniversary and to gently put a reminder that this is first and foremost about the Iraqi people and what they've been through in the last 20 years. And it's, you know, there's always an opportunity to learn from policy, but this isn't really an opportunity to seek vindication or absolution or even excuses for policy failures that were done individually or collectively. And it's important for me as an Iraqi-American to say that and to begin by saying that.

So taking the agency and the and the the frame to Iraqi is right now. I'll start by saying that, you know, 20 years since the war in Iraq looks like a completely different place. And that's mainly because we've had such a generational change in the country that very few people actually remember the era of Saddam Hussein or even the 2003 war or subsequent occupation. And you'll find a generation that remembers a civil war, of course, but the entire era of the 2003 war and what preceded it in international politics is not something that younger all kids remember today. And the country is predominantly young. Most Iraqis were born after 2003. And, you know, this actually makes Iraq feel a lot different than you would think. And I find that the focus on the anniversary differs vastly in Washington or in the United States versus in Iraq, where it's largely been forgotten. To give you an example, I think to really transport you to Baghdad, yesterday I went to visit the Martyr Monument with some of my friends from the U.S. and the martyr Monument was erected by

Saddam Hussein as as a way to remember those who were killed fighting in the Iran-Iraq war. So this is a very contested memory, of course. But beneath it, there is this museum with the names of people who had died etched in the wall. And after 2003, they began to create exhibitions that included those who are victims of Baathist era Iraq, victims of Saddam Hussein, and even later victims of ISIL's. And so when we went to the monument yesterday, we were astounded to see so many young Iraqis there in their graduation clothes, taking photos and taking photos next to this very large portrait of Saddam Hussein being hung maybe the size of three or five people just on the wall. As soon as you enter the museum and not really paying attention even to its existence, you know, just walking right by it to take their photos for graduation or for whatever event that they were there for, You know, not even pausing to think about the fact that we were so close to the anniversary of when this regime was toppled. And so I hope that gives you an idea of where Iraqis are today in terms of how they view or don't view the war.

But, of course, even though they don't recognize it or in the center, it, it still impacts their life in ways that they themselves don't know about. And its legacy continues in so many ways in Iraq today. It continues of the corruption that we see has really crippled the country. It continues in the political system that was set up and it continues. And the regional dynamics that prevent Iraq from finding stability and, you know, coming to peace internally and with its neighbors. Two. Good place for us. Two to begin thinking about the longer-term implications. You mentioned the generational divide and the age of the majority of Iraqis today and how that changes the perception of the war itself. You mentioned the political system and there are challenges in corruption and so forth. When we think about one of the goals of the U.S. invasion, the word democracy has to be in the conversation. How does this generation that doesn't necessarily remember the war, how do they think about democracy in Iraq today? They are a very unique generation in the sense that they don't really compare democracy to anything that came before. And you actually see this is a common, a common theme across the world. When you have a youth generation that has no memory of authoritarianism, they tend to have very high expectations of what democracy should look like. And I think Iraqi youth are no exception.

So when you look at the opinion polling from Iraq about how they view democracy, there is various views and contradictions that are represented. On one hand, Iraqis strongly associate democracy with poor economic performance. They associate it with instability and they associate it with poor governance. And I think that's largely a reflection of the fact that they consider these to be the attributes of their country that they don't like. At the same time, if you ask an Iraqi on the street if Iraq is a democracy, they'll likely say that it's a sham democracy or it's a fake democracy. However, if you also look at the opinion polling bill and ask Iraqis if they think that democracy is the most suitable form of governance, most of them, over 60% of them, will agree that it is. So there is an appetite for democracy in Iraq, but there is a strong association, that I think is shared elsewhere in the Middle East, about democracy being incompatible with economic prosperity. And I think this is a case for Iraq. But I think there is also an issue in Iraq that is a bit unique in that the instability, the poor governance, the poor services after 2003 has generated what can only be described as authoritarian nostalgia among Iraqi youth, who, having never lived under Saddam, have a very specific idea of what life was like there under that particular regime. So they tend to focus on the fact that the Iraqi army was strong, but the borders were secure, that the country was respected, even if not liked, but at least respected. These are all things that they lack. They think about, you know, the opportunities for employment that they hear maybe parents or grandparents talk about. I'm not saying they have an accurate view of what Iraq was like under Saddam Hussein, but they do express authoritarian nostalgia. And that does complicate their view on whether or not they actually want democracy.

And how do Iraqis understand or think about Iraq's role in the broader region in the Middle East? And how do you think about Iraq's role in the Middle East today? Iraqis are still very much caught between many powerful actors in the region. They're very aware of intervention in their country. If you remember the protests in 2019, there was a strong sentiment of anti-Iranian intervention and those were mainly youth led protests. At the same time, last year, there was a Turkish airstrike in the whole governorate in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, and a lot of Iraqis died, I think about 20. And it created this extreme anti-Turkish wave in Iraq in which people wanted to

boycott the products and not travel. And, you know, the other thing that really comes into into play in Iraq is the fact that there is a visible drying out of the rivers and it's strongly associated with with the with Turkey and with Iran. And, you know, in terms of powers in the region being more powerful than Iraq, of being able to withhold resources from Iraq. So there's the sense that the country is weaker than it should be, weaker than it was prevails. And, of course, there has been a improvement in relations with the Gulf in the last years specifically. But having, you know, having been an accumulation of work over the last five or six years, And I think Iraq is getting to a place that it's happy with in terms of relations to its neighbors. But Iraqis are very sensitive to foreign intervention in any way. I mean, rightfully so.

MELANIE SISSON: Marsin, I have one more question for you for the moment, and this comes from an audience member who noted, as you have just described, that there are a lot of challenges for Iraq today and into the future. And this audience member had asked, are there any reasons to be optimistic for Iraq?

MARSIN ALSHAMARY: I'm a very optimistic person when it comes to Iraq, and mainly because I can't afford to be anything but optimistic since it does concern my own country. But I will say, you know, we spent a lot of time talking about youth, and I think youth are a source of great optimism in Iraq because, first of all, they display an anti-sectarian that is virtually absent in other generations. That's quite important for the political development of the country. And that is something that you see on the street that you see in protests, that you see just in the media and the production, the cultural production that emanates from Iraq today. We're in a much healthier place when it comes to citizen to citizen relations. And I think that's a very positive development. I have the optimism that these very same youth and the civil society forces that exist in Iraq today will develop even and slowly enough to be able to seek reform in what in the existing institutions that we have today, and to protect Iraq from sliding into authoritarianism or siting further into authoritarianism, depending on your view. You know, everyone talks about oil being a curse. It is a curse for long term development, but it has Iraq some time to sort things out when other countries have suffered a lot from the economic, from the economic damage and from various crises. Of course, a reliance on it is going to be an, you know, a very ill advised. But, you know, having to work with what we have, I don't think Iraq is necessarily doomed. I think it has institutions. I think it has citizens who are committed and interested. And I think there are things that have happened in Iraq that tend to be overlooked, that actually demonstrate the incredible resilience of the country, including the fact that in the last 20 years, Iraq has had two internal wars or civil wars, and both have ended very quickly in comparison to civil wars that have occurred in other countries. So an ability to move past violence very quickly is something that should be highlighted. You know, I don't have crazy aspirations for how quickly democratic consolidation can happen in Iraq, and I certainly think that we could have been in a much better place today, but we could also have been in a much worse place than where we are.

MELANIE SISSON: Well, Marsin, thank you very much for that really clear-eyed and nuanced set of comments about what the world is like in Iraq right now for the people who live there and what you see around you. I hope that the connection that we have, we'll hold on in case audience members here want to follow up with any questions. But just in case, I really want to thank you for your thoughts today. Suzanne, I'm sure you're prepared to talk a bit about Iran. And I thought we could start with giving us a little bit of a refresher about what Iran's role was in the region 20 years ago and some comparison with what its role in the region is today.

SUZANNE MALONEY: Thanks so much, Melanie. And I also want to thank Marsin for just setting us off in this conversation in exactly the most appropriate place, thinking about the impact on Iraq and Iraqis. And and I think that, you know, over the course of this conversation, I hope that we do come back at times to both the human and the fiscal toll. I know both countries have experienced it. And it's a it's a toll that has been experienced across the region. I'm going to get to your question in just a moment. But I did want to make this remark that, you know, when I go back to visit my parents grave in my small hometown, buried next to them is the brother of a high school classmate who was a diplomatic security officer with the State Department who died in Iraq. Stephen Sullivan. And I think that, you know, this is something that we all live with from a political

sense. The human toll here in the United States, the human toll of perhaps a half million Iraqis and others who have died as a result of the conflict. And I think that it's just very important to have that kind of human perspective. So I'm very grateful that we started off with Marsin.

I do want to get to your question and actually speak to the to the impact on Iran and how Iran's role in the region has been transformed by this war. I will say that one of my last visits to Iran came on the eve of the conflict when it was quite clear that the United States was moving in a direction where conflict was, if not inevitable, highly likely. And when I visited with a senior representative from the foreign ministry there in late 2002 and we discussed the possibility of a war in Iraq, he said, we've been there. We know what this will look like. It will be very, very bad for you. And so this is one of the themes I hope we can also speak to the extent to which, you know, some of the outcomes, particularly the early outcome. Of the war were eminently foreseeable and in fact not built into the planning in the way that they should have been from the perspective of the US government. Iran at that time, of course, still had a rocky relationship with Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The war, the eight year war between the two countries is one that forged the world view of the current leadership in Iran and left the Iranian government and frankly, the Iranian people more generally scarred and feeling isolated and very much encircled. And so the kind of role of Iraq in Iranian security thinking, I think, has always been quite significant, perhaps more significant than we fully appreciate. The Baathist regime was a was inimical to even the Pahlavi, the monarchy that preceded the Islamic revolution and Saddam Hussein's invasion left, as I said, very significant scars and a very significant impact on the, on Iranians. They had never, in fact, settled the war. And there was still, I think, quite a regular sense that, in fact, frictions could escalate once again between the two countries. And so at the time of the US invasion, the Iranians, you know, saw this, I think, very clearly as something that was going to have long lasting impact on the balance of power in the region. They also were incredibly well positioned to benefit from it because they had nurtured a Shia opposition group as well as relationships with the Kurds and others in Iraq, which enabled them to have significant influence in Iraq over the course of the immediate aftermath of the war.

And of course, in the 20 years that have followed, Iran's strategic position, I think has benefited significantly from the aftermath of the war, both in terms of what its how they think about the region as a whole. It's hard to imagine that Iran could have played the role that it did, for example, in salvaging Bashar Assad's regime, mobilizing Shia partisans from across the region, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Lebanon and Iraq to help secure Bashar Assad when his own country erupted into civil war. That wouldn't have been possible if there had been still this sort of adversarial relationship in Iraq. But I think more generally, what it's given Iran is a sense of strategic depth that a country that, as I said, had felt isolated and encircled as a result of the war suddenly had a natural ally, a natural ally, because the United States emphasis on trying to create a fledgling democracy in Iraq meant that by definition there would be a dominant role for the majority of the population whom were Shia, who had in fact not held that kind of a position under the Baathist regime. And so the Iranians have not just benefited from their prior and longstanding ties with some of the Shia groups in Iraq, but they, in fact, built relationships across the board every every slot on the roulette wheel, effectively funneling money and weapons and arms to groups all across Iraq and playing a very significant role there.

So, you know, it is transformational. I think it's also been transformational in the sense of Iran's use of militias and its reliance on non-state actors to influence outcomes, not just in Iraq, not just in the Levant, but also, of course, in Yemen and elsewhere across the region. There's a relationship that they had pioneered with Hezbollah in Lebanon, then later applied and perfected in some respects in Iraq with various groups, enabled them, I think, to have this wider reach through other groups enabled people like Kassam Suleimani, the now slain head of the Quds Force in Iraq, who became legendary for his ability to respond and to exert influence and insert Iran in conflicts around the region. It was the sort of testing ground of Iraq which enabled figures like that to rise, which enabled the Revolutionary Guard to essentially develop a kind of new life in terms of their influence within the Iranian security establishment at a time when, in fact, Iran might have gone in a different direction. So I'll pause there, but I just really appreciate this conversation and look forward to continuing to engage with our colleagues.

MELANIE SISSON: Yeah. Thank you very much. That's a really good overview of where Iran started and some of the progression in between. I want to ask a little bit about the today part and the connection between that those events over time to areas of great interest today are the nuclear deal the. Mean to say the letters incorrectly? JCPOA Thank you. But then also, of course, this this new announcement of the change in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. And to what extent you see these as an outcropping of the events of the Iraq war and the change the all of the behaviors that Iran was able to undertake there in. And also, if you reflect a little bit about what it says about the U.S. role in the region.

SUZANNE MALONEY: I'll speak first to the nuclear politics and there to I do want to kind of look back to 20 years ago. Of course, it was just 20 year, just over 20 years ago that, in fact, that some of Iran's clandestine nuclear facilities were made public. We did not have an event to celebrate it, but we have now marked a 20-year nuclear crisis with Iran. And I think, you know, the Iraq war had two direct impacts on that. One was that the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the subsequent comments about going all the way to Tehran by some former then U.S. senior officials appears to have had an impact on Iran's nuclear trajectory in the sense that it was later assessed that the Iranians shelved long standing work on weaponization in 2003. And to this date, the U.S. intelligence community continues to say they do not have evidence that that work has resumed. So it did have a an intimidating effect on Iran's nuclear plans and development. It also the war also had a significant impact on the extent to which the United States could respond effectively diplomatically at the at the moment that the nuclear crisis began with the revelation of the of the heavy water facility and of the uranium enrichment plant at Natanz in 2002. The Europeans, in fact, tried to mobilize negotiations with Iran. This was at a point where Iran's nuclear program was significantly less developed than it was in 2013 when an interim nuclear deal was in fact achieved, or certainly significantly less developed than it was today. There was, at least in 2000, two, in those early years, an opportunity I think many saw, and in fact briefly was achieved by the Europeans to pause Iran's nuclear development, to, in fact, cease uranium enrichment entirely in Iran. And in an agreement that was that was devised by the Europeans, the Bush administration refused to engage with that diplomacy on the presumption that any diplomacy was, in fact, both legitimizing the Iranian regime and legitimizing the Iranian nuclear program. And I think that a huge opportunity was lost during that period to to really avoid Iran becoming what it is today, which is a latent nuclear state. So I am very pessimistic that we're going to get to a resuscitation of the nuclear deal, the JCPOA, as the Biden administration had hoped, and can go into that in greater detail.

As we go on in the conversation, I'll just say a word or two about the other question you asked, which is the the recent deal announced that brokered apparently by the Chinese, announced in Beijing, announced not in English, between the Saudis and the Iranians. You know, I think that this was a very deliberate signal primarily from the Saudis, that the United States is not the only game in town. We can get into more detail on this, but the the U.S.-Saudi relationship, I think, was transformed by the invasion of Iraq and the subsequent events. I don't expect that there will be a significantly different or higher level of of enmity between Tehran and Riyadh as a result of this agreement. In fact, the embassies were open in both countries. There was a whole diplomatic relationship between 91 and 2016. And you can reflect on that time and think about how rocky the relationship was throughout that period. But I think that it was intended as a as a direct signal to the United States that, you know, there are other options for all the players in the region and that the United States dominance since the 1970s in the Middle East may now be contested by other players.

MELANIE SISSON: Mike, let's pick up right there and if you could give us your thoughts about and for us grand strategy, if if you're willing to go back and think about what it is that we were looking to achieve with the war in Iraq from a grand strategy perspective and go as far as you want, bringing us into the present about where we are in terms of our grand strategy as a result of or in combination with the events that have followed since that invasion.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: Thanks, Melanie, and hi everyone. Happy St Patrick's Day. But even more to the point, for those who have served, who's whose families have served. Thank you.

And we've asked a lot of of you in uniform, but also across the State Department, in other parts of the government, it's been a very tough. He called 20 years, especially for Iraqis, but certainly for many Americans. And I know we all want to extend that word. And I want to just echo what others have already said. Second, I'm still hopeful that while this war was extremely costly, generally badly done, perhaps quite probably unnecessary and overall very discouraging that still eventually, with the long sweep of history, some net good may come of it. I'm not claiming that today at this 20-year mark. I think the costs have been far too high to justify where we are in terms of Iraq's potential future. But notwithstanding all the regional challenges that Suzanne just mentioned and notwithstanding the suffering of the Iraqi people that Marsin talked about, I want to reinforce her last point, Marsin's last point that maybe because there's no other sentiment to really have except hopefulness, but also because the Iraqi people are a young people who seem to be moving beyond some of the challenges and burdens of the 20th century, of dictatorship, of sectarianism, and of so much strife. I still want to hope that we can wind up thinking someday that we can at least have a debate about whether the benefits have started to approach the costs.

But that's that's a word of hope. That's not a word of analysis, because I think where we are today is is still one where the net costs have been enormous. And just to mention those very briefly, this the only war the United States ever fought that was more expensive than the Iraq war was World War two. And we spent about $1,000,000,000,000 in direct costs. However, as the Watson Center at Brown University has rightly argued, the broader cost is much higher. I don't agree with every piece of the Watson Center's analysis, but at a bare minimum, the Veterans Administration costs that we can attribute to the Iraq conflict and that we will be paying for the next 30 to 50 years, and that, more importantly, our veterans will be suffering and bearing the burden in their own lives for those who are still alive or the families thereof. Those costs, in financial terms alone will be measured in the many hundreds of billions of additional dollars, and we already know those costs are going to be incurred. We can do the actuarial analysis. And so that's a big burden. So it's at least a $2 trillion war, and it's 4500 dead Americans and tens of thousands wounded and also tens of thousands, the victims of suicide, which I don't want to say is all about the Iraq war. And I benefited from conversations with military fellows here whose service we salute as well and who teach us so much and for many other friends who have served. I know there's a lot that goes into these statistics, but suicide among veterans and active-duty troops today is higher statistically than it would be normally for that age, those age groups. And it wasn't always the case. Certainly the burden of what we've asked them to do this 21st century, not just in Iraq but elsewhere, has been enormous. But I think we also to try to be a little more positive. We also know that a lot of them have found meaning and they should they served their country well. But not only that and this is, this echoes a little bit what our colleague Bob Kagan has said, and I agree with him, even though this war didn't turn out as well as we would have liked, and it didn't go anywhere close to as smoothly as some had hoped, if I were looking around from some other country at the United States, I wouldn't want to fight the American armed forces. We are tough. We may not always win. Our broader political system may give missions to the armed forces that are difficult to achieve, and our outcomes may wind up mediocre. But we are a tough people, and the military has learned a lot in the course of these 20 years. Some people thought it became too mired in the Middle East and distracted from rising challenges in East Asia and Russia. That may to some extent had been true. But I think we've been compensating for that in the last 5 to 10 years. And on balance, I think that the toughness, that the excellence, that the focus on training, the focus on preparation and the focus on protecting civilians, which the modern American military has done much better than, let's say, the military of the Vietnam War -- and I mean no disrespect to Vietnam vets, but the political and military ethos of that day did not emphasize protection of indigenous populations nearly as much. And yes, far too many Iraqis have died in a war that we had a lot of responsibility for not properly managing. But American forces, I think, generally speaking, developed an ethos and a discipline of protection of civilian lives, which is extraordinary. So I've already gone on a fair amount, Melanie, but when I when I add up all the different pieces, a lot of cost to our people, and mostly blood costs and human costs, family costs, emotional costs, but also financial a lot of costs to our taxpayers and a hit to our reputation globally, but also a reaffirmation of the grit, tenacity and excellence of the American armed forces and of this country's willingness to stay engaged in global and regional security affairs, even when the going gets tough, to put it mildly. Amy McGrath and I wrote about this in regard to Afghanistan, where we were both very saddened when the United

States pulled out in 2021. But we also made the observation that the Taliban probably aren't going to think too quickly about pissing us off again any time soon, at least not in the sense of active collaboration with major terrorist organizations. And I was not happy. I thought the counterterrorism argument meant that we should have stayed in Afghanistan to maintain intelligence. However, the deterrence that we create when we apply ourselves so diligently to these conflicts is in grand strategic terms, I think, important. Now, Molly's about to speak, and I this is a big piece that I've left out, and I look forward to her thoughts. And I would acknowledge to be another big cost is what this has done to our politics and our cohesion at home. And that will have a ripple effect on our foreign policy potentially, and it already has. So, again, there are I'm not in any way celebrating the burdens that we've been through, but they have sent a message to the world that the United States is a very engaged and resolute superpower, and I think that does have grand strategic benefits. So I'll stop there.

MELANIE SISSON: Mike, that sentiment that you just expressed actually resonates with a question that we got from the audience that submitted ahead of time. And so I'm going to go ahead and read it, looking at the flip side of the coin that you just described. And the question is this will the Iraq war legacy cause future presidents to be more likely to de-escalate conflicts mid-course instead of escalating? Examples of de-escalating are in Lebanon in 1984, Somalia in 1993, and of escalation in Iraq in 2007 and in Afghanistan, 2009.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: It's an excellent question. I hope the answer is yes. But I just did this book on military history where I observe the pattern that we tend to decide never to fight a war again after we come out of one, only to wind up forgetting many of the lessons later. And it's not just us. People have a tendency to think the next war is going to be different because we have new technology, we have brilliant war planners, we have the martial spirit of our people. We have, you know, new concepts of operations. And you really see this pattern through history where the tendency of wars to be longer, harder, bloodier and more difficult than expected at the outset is typically forgotten. A generation later, when people think about the next conflict, it doesn't have to be that way. John F Kennedy remembered the outbreak of World War One during the Cuban Missile Crisis. To his great credit, and there have been other examples of cases where policymakers have remembered history. But it's all too easy to forget. I would argue that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the late Donald Rumsfeld, forgot this truth with the expectation of a rapid victory in 2003. And I respect the late Secretary Rumsfeld for his intellect and for his boldness of thinking. But on this one, I think he was wrong. And certainly Vladimir Putin got it wrong last year. You weren't asking about Russia, you were asking about American decisionmakers. But I'm trying to identify a broader human tendency. And even our own CIA thought Russia would win fast last year. And that's sort of a remarkable mistake for an agency that did so well. Otherwise in anticipating and warning the world about what Putin was planning. So I have to say that I hope the questioner is right, that we'll remember this, that especially if thinking about war against China or Russia, that war tends to be more difficult, longer, less predictable, less controllable than people believe at the outset. But history argues it's going to be a tough lesson to remember.

MELANIE SISSON: Molly, Mike just alluded to the fact that wars, of course, have more than just foreign policy antecedents and. Implications. They have domestic policy antecedents and implications too. And could you share with us some of what those were and that dynamic in the United States around the initiation of the Iraq war, in a sense?

MOLLY REYNOLDS: Sure. So I think it's really I really appreciate how we started this conversation, kind of centering the human cost both in Iraq and in the United States. I'm probably going to sort of touch on the American piece of that as well. But I think it's really important to remember the way in which the decision to invade Iraq and the conduct of American involvement in Iraq were huge structural forces in American politics domestically that we're still living with today. And so it's a little hard to kind of tease cause and effect here. But there are a couple of places where American involvement in Iraq really illustrates the big forces that we're still that we're still living with in American politics.

And I'll start by noting that even prior to the invasion and then persisting through that period of American involvement, American public opinion on the US involvement in Iraq was more polarized than any American military by party than any American military action. Going back to sort of the advent of modern polling in the 1930s. This was true basically as soon as the issue emerged on the national agenda of sort of in the run up to the to the invasion, there were still relatively high levels of support among Democrats, but there was a gap between Democrats and Republicans. And then sort of soon after, after the invasion itself, and then persisting through the duration of American involvement, we saw this huge gap between approval of the American conduct in Iraq, between Democrats and Republicans in just the period between 2004 and when President Obama took office in 2009, that gap averaged 58 percentage points. That's a huge difference and it's a difference that we now see across all kinds of issues, both foreign policy issues and domestic policy issues in the United States. So when we think about things like polarization of public opinion today around us, support for the war in Ukraine, we continue to see the sort of persistent and persistent polarization by party. And so it's impossible to say if we should attribute all of that trend, beginning with the US invasion of Iraq, but it certainly, certainly continued. We certainly continue to live with it today.

It's also true that the war in Iraq is deeply related to what we now see in terms of really persistent polarization across the parties, in terms of public approval of the president. So for reasons not entirely related to the war in Iraq, but deeply connected to the George W Bush administration, marked this period of really stark polarization of public opinion towards towards the president by party. So by 2006, President Bush was receiving the lowest ratings from Democrats who responded to public opinion polls of an opposite party president ever recorded up until that point. And that averaged in the last three years of his presidency, he was getting about 8% approval among Democrats. And that that persistent divide between the two parties in terms of approval of the president persists. It grew during the Obama years and it persisted through the Trump years and today into into the Biden administration. So, again, these are kind of places where we see really, really strong connections between the the decision to invade Iraq and kind of our structural understanding of American politics.

MELANIE SISSON: And in terms of the views of war and the willingness to engage in conflict, one of the propositions to explain how and why the United States would refrain from doing so again is something called casualty aversion. The idea that the domestic public rightfully wishes to avoid the death of U.S. citizens fighting overseas, and that that filters up through the political process to engender restraint in our decision makers. First with you, Molly, do you see evidence of that? How do you think about that in the context or do you think about it in the context of the Iraq war? And then, Mike, I actually want to turn to you for your views on that same question about casualty aversion and the effects it has on decision makers?

MOLLY REYNOLDS: I do think so. And I actually think that when we began to take us a little bit back in history and thinking about sort of about the 2006 and the 2008 elections, we have quite good evidence that we that in the communities in the United States that had experience casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, that those communities, you can sort of see that reflected in how they voted in those elections. And I think at a at a macro level, we should really attribute much of what happened in the 26 and 28 elections, which then by virtue of sending President Obama to the post, sending Obama to victory in the Democratic primaries, sending him to victory in the 2000 election, have also had very far-reaching effects of all kinds in in the United States. But I think we really did see kind of the the visceral experience of American casualties really shaping shaping those both of those elections which have had really, again, far reaching consequences.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: And I certainly agree with Molly, but I would also add another point based on my own lifetime historical perspective. So if we think about the creation of the all volunteer military after Vietnam and then, you know, I'm 61, so I was in college in the late seventies, and this is the period I was starting to really understand and pay attention to world affairs and what we saw in that period of time with the early years of the all volunteer force and the aftermath of Vietnam, was how the attempted hostage rescue in Iran in 1980 really put the final seal in many ways on Jimmy Carter's presidency. And God bless Jimmy Carter. We all have

benefited as Americans from him, even if at the time he wasn't popular as president among all rank and file. And we lost eight people in that failed rescue attempt. And that was seen as way too many for the political system to bear in 1983. And history that Suzanne knows better than I. We lost 241 Marines in the bombing in Beirut, Lebanon, that I think that might have been where the late Pat Schroeder, who'd just coined the phrase that Ronald Reagan was the Teflon president, because even things like that somehow didn't seem to tarnish his reputation. But what it did do was lead us to leave Lebanon. And then we had the magnificent successes in the overthrow of Noriega and then the Operation Desert Storm under the first Bush presidency. And we lost some people in those operations, a couple of dozen in Panama and a couple hundred in Operation Desert Storm. But they were such resounding quick wins that they seemed to be sort of exceptions to the overall. You know, they did not seem to invalidate the casualty aversion hypothesis. Bill Clinton, of course, experienced this with a Black Hawk down in Mogadishu in October of 1983. One bad day, 18 dead Americans. We end an entire mission. And there are a lot of reasons for that. It wasn't a core national security prerogative. The mission had evolved from -- one second, excuse me -- from when President Bush, the first President Bush, had begun it as a humanitarian operation. So it surprised Americans that we lose 18 people in one day. But still, it revealed a casualty aversion that was pretty acute. And then that same casualty averse aversion haunted us through the nonresponse to the Rwandan genocide and the ways in which we handled the Bosnia and Kosovo civil wars. And so I thought after two decades of watching a highly casualty averse democracy at work, that we were disinclined to risk American lives.

And of course, the last example and sorry for the long answer, but all of this is useful, I think, for framing where we were before 9/11 when we when Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda attacked our embassies in Africa in 1998, our only response was to use cruise missiles. And we hoped that that would find bin Laden still at his training facilities in Afghanistan. But our unwillingness to consider putting forces on the ground allowed him to escape. And there may not have been any great options. I talked about this with a number of American planners, and that would have been a tough one to pull off to send special forces into the heart of Afghanistan with no infrastructure. But of course, we did that a couple of years later when we had responded to the 9/11 attacks. So our ability to stay with Iraq and Afghanistan lose a total of 7000 people killed, tens of thousands wounded. This was a much higher degree of casualty resilience than we had experienced or demonstrated in the previous two decades. So attacking our homeland really did change the way Americans were willing to risk American lives. Molly's right that once we got to the point where we didn't know if the mission was headed for success and we were unsure what we were doing any longer. That started to waver. But and certainly we're in a different place today. And the fight against ISIS is exhibit A that, you know, in the modern era, we've again gone back to this sort of standoff warfare as our primary approach. But on balance, I would say 9/11 changed us and we showed a lot more casualty resilience than I expected or that I had observed in the previous two decades.

MELANIE SISSON: A quick note for all audience members. When we think about absorbing and learning lessons from war, I really commend to Mike's new book, which he mentioned briefly, but it's military history for the Modern Strategist, and there is an awful if you think you're getting a lot out of this discussion, you should certainly read the book because if you can believe it, there's even much, much more of Mike's wisdom and not just information, but again, really useful lessons to be extracted from these histories as we think forward into the future. Before we turn to some audience questions, Suzanne, let's look one more time at the present and the nature of the relationship between the United States and Iraq today and the nature you mentioned earlier, the US-Saudi relationship has changed in a fundamental way. And if you'd be willing to elaborate on that, I think we'd all be interested.

SUZANNE MALONEY: Well, I mean, I think the primary legacy for U.S. policy in the Middle East from the Iraq war has been this transformation in the balance of power there. And I think it's a is a permanent transformation that has left Iran in a in a position of greater strength and reach across the region. And that has had its impact on U.S. Saudi relationships. And, you know, sort of the way that we think about the region. But it's also, you know, there's also been a significant set of developments within the region itself that are, I think, largely divorced from the broader strategic

picture, and that is that we have a more assertive Saudi leadership, younger generation coming to the fore, both at the leadership level and in terms of popular opinion. That is changing the way that Saudi Arabia is governed and the way that the Saudi leaders want to extend their own reach across the region. And so I think it is a in some respects, a maturation of of a longstanding partnership, but one that has come with quite a number of frictions as we try to adapt to the current set of circumstances. And so this also has some interesting, I think, domestic political dynamics to it, because as the Demo -- and here I'm stuck outside my expertise -- but as the Democratic Party I think is moving leftward, there is a greater emphasis on issues of human rights and responsible use of American force in the region that is particularly focused around the U.S. role in supporting the Saudi intervention in Yemen.

That is, and I'll turn them over or I'll hopefully throw it to Molly in just a moment too to discuss this. But, you know, I think that this is the world in which we live today is a world in which the U.S. can't dictate outcomes in the Middle East and in a world in which the United States doesn't want to dictate outcomes in the Middle East, primarily because we're focused on the the urgent challenge and the pacing thread, I probably got the adjective reversed there of Russia and China. And, you know, this began during the Obama administration with the much vaunted but actually mostly unseen pivot to Asia. It was taken, I think, in a more significant direction by the Trump administration, which, as Mike suggested, was determined to leave behind the legacies of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. President Trump, of course, Trump campaigned against by highlighting the $7 trillion the United States had spent on these conflicts. And I think, you know, now the Biden administration in many respects is continuing that same shift away from the region and to focus on Russia and China. And that has created opportunities for other powers. And particularly we're seeing this new role for the Chinese, how real it is, how meaningful, whether the Chinese are prepared to, in fact, play the the role that American officials once hoped of a kind of responsible stakeholder able to mediate conflicts, effectively able to enforce agreements such as the one between Iran and Saudi Arabia earlier this year or last week, I think is very questionable. But it is a transformed balance of power internally. It is a transformed global balance of power. And that makes all of our all of our aims and all of our activities in the Middle East more challenging than they have been in years past. But I think the domestic political implications of all of this are really interesting. So.

MOLLY REYNOLDS: Yeah, I think I think Suzanne is is right. And I think one of the things that has been really interesting for me as an observer of the U.S. Congress to watch in this space is the way that particularly around the U.S. support for the Saudi led war in Yemen has created some interesting bipartisan coalitions in the U.S. Congress. And so it's fitting that we're having this conversation today. Yesterday, the Senate advanced legislation to repeal the 2002 Authorization for the Use of Military Force in Iraq. That's expected to pass next week. And we have that did so on a bipartisan basis. And we have seen in the Senate in particular over the past several years sort of partnerships between the likes of Rand Paul and Bernie Sanders on efforts to use their kind of procedural rights as senators to push back against various forms of US involvement in militarily in the in the region. And so I think it's it's, you know, as we think about and I talked before about the really high levels of polarization in American politics, some of which are perhaps attributable, perhaps a reflection or reflected in opinion on the US, US involvement in Iraq. I think as we've come closer into that, into the present, we see sort of more just sort of more interesting politics on this. And the other thing I'll note about the AMF and AMF repeal is that I think, again, for folks who pay quite a lot of attention to that, the U.S. Congress thinking about the role of the AMF in allowing the executive branch to really have a very expansive view of what the President was able to do in the region over the past 20 years. That's a that's concerning from a perspective of kind of congressional power and a healthy Congress that weighs in appropriately on foreign policy decision making. So I think Suzanne is absolutely right. As we sort of move forward, what will we see in terms of, you know, folks on the left and concerns about appropriate consideration for human rights, folks on the right where we see an increasingly vigorous nationalistic streak in foreign policy opinion? And kind of what will that mean? I don't know. But certainly going forward, the domestic political implications will continue.

MELANIE SISSON: We now have time for some audience questions in keeping with the tone that our panelists have done a really wonderful job of setting, of being contemplative as we ask and answer some questions, I'm going to ask you all to adhere to what I think is a very generous one-minute rule of up to one minute to formulate and ask your question. And at the one-minute mark, I will I will stop you. So please do your best to monitor the time. We've got some hands. Yes, we've got you in the back, please.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, everyone. Reva Dhingra, a post-doctoral fellow with Brookings Foreign Policy. My question is for Marsin. You talked about and you're an expert on civil society in Iraq. And one of the big challenges during the invasion and after the war was an empowerment of elites and Iraqi elites at the expense of civil society and civil society organizations and groups. So I wondered if you could talk a little bit about, you know, the growth of Iraqi civil society in terms of organizing, in terms of, you know, bottom up organization and whether there's been any evolution and inclusion of Iraqi civil society compared to political elites over the past 20 years.

MARSIN ALSHAMARY: Thank you, Reva. That's an excellent question. And I think in an ideal world, Iraqi civil society would have been mature enough to participate in the first elections in 2005 and be representative of the Iraqi people. But the reality is that for years, because of the Baathist regime, there really was no Iraqi civil society. What had been Iraqi civil society was decimated, forced underground, or in some cases after 1991, had gone to the Kurdistan region. But in 2000, three, Iraqi civil society and many organizations were very young, were almost all organizations, barring a few important big ones, were formed after 2003. And because of the way there was a large influx of money into civil society promotion in Iraq from the idea that civil society produces democracy, there was a lot of ghost organizations that were mainly formed just to take money and run essentially. So in a way, there was a lot of corruption in civil society work in Iraq. This, you know, decreasing amounts of money with more serious work over the years were out of place.

Now, where we have a good number of serious and active organizations in Iraq, and in the last two elections, in the last three elections, you can slowly see veterans of civil society organizations, members who had been there for, you know, quite a few years, hope develop skills through being an activist, decided to run for office, particularly in either parliament or at the time that we had provincial elections at the provincial level. So civil societies are national, is a natural, excuse me, way to create an organic grassroots political class that stands in opposition to the one that's that arose in 2003, which had mainly been in opposition, though not entirely. And, you know, today civil society looks better poised to be able to participate in elections and in politics generally. And the last election we had in 2021, which followed the protest movement of 2019 and was an early election, we had a lot of activity from first time candidates, from those associated with civil society organizations or with protest. It's a positive development. It's not a big enough of a development to see significant change in Iraq right now. There's a lot of politicization. There is a lot of activists and candidates who get co-opted, I think, in the sense that Iraq is no different than many other places. Where the money is, is where politics is strongest, and no one is immune or no country is immune to the corruption of excessive funds in elections. Iraq is certainly not immune from that, and I think that's a challenge.

All that being said, many organizations are younger than 20 years old and have had to deal with fluctuations in money. They've had to deal with the interest of the interest of the international community, appointing them to specific tasks and specific objectives that they deem important in Iraq, but might not actually translate to the reality on the ground. And oh, quite a few of them are still thriving, still working energetically, to be quite honest. Some of them, when I meet them, quite amazed their energy and amazed they're not verbal. The manifestations of optimism and hope that the actual actions that they're taking that show that they are committed to to a cause. So they really are one of the sources of optimism they have in Iraq, and they're really a space to look to in the future.

MELANIE SISSON: Next round. We have a gentleman here in the front row, please, for the middle.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: One of the participants in this. The nobody's mentioned is Turkey, right from the invasion in 2003 till now. The Turks, I think, have played a bigger and bigger role in the area. And I was wondering if you have any comments on this.

SUZANNE MALONEY: I would actually encourage Marsin to speak to that. What I will just note, we have a colleague, Asli Aydintasbas, who works on Turkey here at Brookings and is not with us up on the panel, but I know would have some some interesting views to share. But Marsin did allude to Turkey once or twice in her remarks, and she may have more to add.

MARSIN ALSHAMARY: Oh, I'm sorry. The sound cut off a bit on my end. Were you asking me to comment on Turkey.

SUZANNE MALONEY: If you will?

MARSIN ALSHAMARY: I'll just.

MELANIE SISSON: Sorry, Marsin, can you hear me?

MARSIN ALSHAMARY: Oh, yes. Now, would you? I was asking if you would like me to comment on Turkey.

MELANIE SISSON: Yes, please. That was the. That was the question. Thank you.

MARSIN ALSHAMARY: Thank you. Sorry, I'm having a bit of an audio issue here. And well done. It's quite a long connection. On the Turkey issue, it's a very important question. I'm glad you raised that. I alluded to it briefly when I was speaking initially since, you know, as we're speaking right now, Turkey has over 36 bases in Iraq. It has military incursions into Iraq. There is airstrikes, drones, particularly in northern Iraq and in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. So it's not been a friendly neighbor. But this is largely because, according to Turkey, it's going after the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers Party, an opposition group that thinks that the Iraqi government and the Kurdish politicians in Iraq are unable to address or unwilling to address the issue. Iraq's weak borders are allowing this to happen. This isn't the only infringement on Iraqi sovereignty that we've seen. I think this is both an internal and external problem. Internally, there is a lot of discord and lack of coordination between the central government, between the federal government in Baghdad and between the regional government of Iraqi Kurdistan. There is no coordination on Iraq's borders with Iran or with or with Turkey alongside Iraq on the Iraqi Kurdistan front. And I think that really speaks to a larger problem that actually ties to the way the U.S. treats are all going, the way that Western powers deal with Iraq, and that they still really haven't reached a consensus or a uniformity in whether Iraq is truly to be approached as a unified state in which there is an expectation of coordination and centralization, particularly along borders, or if it's still viewed as two regions that are nominally a state but in reality operate separately and along the security front. This is a very important issue to be addressed and can't be neglected because where there are security vacuums, there are always threats of terrorism and we've only just recently recovered from ISIS. So, you know, Turkey, tremendously powerful actor. I didn't even get started on the water issues, but I don't want to take time from the audience members that may have other questions.

MELANIE SISSON: Thanks. We'll go to another question now. Let's do the gentleman here on the end.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'll thank you. My name is Coisas, young reporter for Japanese television, NHK. I have a question to Suzanne. Mike, I want to ask you about the political vacuum in the Middle East. Some of you mentioned that after the US disengagement, there are players like China and Russia and Iran filling the vacuum in the Middle East. And given that this administration has been focusing on the Indo-Pacific, I think this trend will continue. And what would be the longer term just geopolitical implications when these actors are expanding its sphere of influence in the

Middle East and also not only the geopolitically, but also the energy aspect, that the China having more influence on major oil producing countries in the world. Thank you.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: Thanks for the question. You're certainly right to identify those trends. I think they complicate American foreign policy. I'm not sure we have to view them as fundamentally adversarial or or at odds with our own long term interests. In the short to medium term, I do think that our superiority and military position in the Middle East is an advantage for the United States in dealing with China, because China knows one of the deterrents to war is that China knows it's exposed with its global economic interdependence and requirements for raw materials and so forth. And we can make their lives very complicated outside of the Western Pacific. And as an American strategist, I find that advantageous. We have to fight against China somehow. I would prefer that the fight begin with economic warfare, where we use military forces to reinforce the economic effects of shutting down global sea lines of communication and other such key areas of common interest, rather than having to fight China right next to Chinese shores. And I also think that there's less potential for rapid escalation to nuclear war if you're further away geographically. Obviously, I don't want any of this, but the point is for China to know that we've got ways to make their lives complicated that don't require fighting right next to Taiwan or China itself. And that's good for us. So I don't want to lose that quickly. But I on the other hand, this will be a hand off to Suzanne, and I'll be a little provocative just for the sake of argument. I don't really care who gets the privilege of being at the front end of the peace negotiation table over conflicts that never seem to get resolved anyway. And and so if China has I have no concerns, particularly about China helping broker this slight rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, because I don't think it's going to go that far. And frankly, I'd rather have peace than war, even if the Chinese get a little bit of the credit. So so. So that's I know that's oversimplistic. And she can now clean up my mess with more sophisticated analysis. But but there are some aspects to the Chinese intervention or greater influence in the broader Middle East that I don't really regret.

SUZANNE MALONEY: I'll never hope to be more sophisticated than any of my colleagues, especially not the ones on this panel and here with us virtually. But I'll just maybe attack the question from a slightly different perspective, which is to say that there is a narrative of U.S. disengagement from the Middle East, which I think is unhelpful and fundamentally inaccurate. Obviously, we do not have the same level of of American forces positioned in the Middle East that we did for a period of time, especially after 2001. But in fact, is the sort of primary economic and strategic power in the region. And I think, in fact, we still are the dominant power. It is contested clearly and has been contested in some ways. But I think, you know, when you talk and listen to folks from the Biden administration explain how they see the region. They've described it as a kind of back to basics strategy. And I think that that's both accurate and and timely and appropriate. The level of troop presence that we had in the region between 2001 and, you know, sort of the 15 years that followed, I think wasn't didn't secure our interests in the way that we hoped that it would. It proved unsustainable from a fiscal perspective and from a human perspective. And I don't think it was more effective than some of our other tools of influence in the region. And so when you think about, you know, sort of the halcyon moment of of US supremacy in the Middle East as a global power from 1970 onward, in fact, for most of that time, we didn't have a significant military presence, and our engagement was through diplomacy and through economic relationships and through cultural and political relationships. And I think reverting to that kind of an approach in the way that we think about and deal with the Middle East is is entirely right. And so, you know, there may be a perspective that we have disengaged. I don't think it's entirely accurate.

I do think that, you know, it's unclear to me that Russia and China have taken on additional roles in the region. It's unclear to me that that either one of them is a force for good. And it's certainly not clear to me that either one of them is prepared to are interested in replacing the United States as a guarantor of security, at least implicitly, for some of the key actors in the region. And I think about this when I think about the, you know, sort of recent agreement in the role of the Chinese. The Chinese, in fact, are highly dependent on oil exports from through the Persian Gulf and from the region as a whole. It's not clear to me that they had the attacks on Saudi oil facilities that took place in 2019. Attributed to Iran. That, I think has left some of the legacy of of Saudi frustration with Washington because there was no response from the Trump administration, at

least not in real time. I don't see the Saudis. I don't see the Chinese as being prepared to ensure that Saudi sovereignty would be respected in the future. I don't think that that's the role that they see for themselves. And so I think there still is a kind of implicit understanding that the United States is, in fact, the key security actor in the Middle East, and that that hasn't changed simply because we have a smaller force presence in the region or because there are other actors moving in the region.

MELANIE SISSON: Let's do one more question, young lady here in the middle please.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi. My name's Abigail Haig from the Elizabeth Dole Foundation. We support military and veteran caregivers, so definitely want to thank anybody in the room who served in uniform or is a family member or a caregiver survivor. So especially following the departure from Afghanistan, we saw a lot of our community really come to grips with what was going on and questioning their service. And a lot of emotions come back from Vietnam as well. And your comments on the human and family cost, as well as casualty resistance, really struck me. So my question is for both Mike and Molly, how can we be sure we don't rack up these costs and burdens in the future? And what is the political red line around these engagements.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: Okay, it's also a very thoughtfully put thank you for your kind words as we start to wrap up about all those who have served and their families, which again, we've all been echoing today, but nice to hear again, I think that, as Melanie asked earlier, we always have to worry about the next possible war. And there is no one simple answer of how to stay out. And sometimes you have to be ready to fight it to stay out. But I guess one point I'll make and Melanie may want to comment on this, too, because she's writing a book about U.S.-China relations, which is very thoughtful, is that I think as Americans, we have to avoid the temptation to believe that it's a realistic standard for our military to be able to guarantee victory against China in any plausible scenario in the western Pacific. I think that's too high of a bar for some of the scenarios. And if we but we still talk this way like, you know, victory is the only acceptable outcome. And I want to bring back a little Bernhard Brody from the nuclear age who's told us that with atomic weapons, the purpose of militaries now must be to prevent war, not to win war. And again, it's not a complete dichotomy. Sometimes you have to be able to make a war tough and deny your adversary their objective in order to deter it. But I think we're going to have to make sure we can't be beaten quickly by China. That's a worthy goal. And trying to be able to win is a worthy goal. But in crisis management, the number one imperative is to stay out of the war, if at all possible, because this kind of a conflict would be so difficult to contain and would be so fraught with the potential for escalation. So it doesn't mean you want to be a paper tiger or give the impression of being lied to. Let somebody else think they can walk all over you. So it's a delicate balance, but those would be some of my thoughts.

MOLLY REYNOLDS: So I'll say two things. One is a little bit just building off your comments about the work that you all do on working with with veterans and their caregivers, and just to say that another kind of long arm of this conflict in the United States is that how to adequately meet the needs of veterans of this period is a continuing live political and policy question for Congress. And so Mike talked a little bit about the overall costs of the war. I'm thinking about going forward fiscally. This is going to be something we'll be living with for a while. I don't have a great sense of sort of what the what the red lines are. But the thing that I would add is that they're to my mind, they're also kind of conditional on everything else going on in the world at a given point. So, you know, Mike talked before about the ways in which he thinks -- and I have no reason to disagree -- that's kind of 9/11 changed the calculus here in the United States. I think it's also important to remember other things that were true of American politics and American through the American economy in the early 2000. We were in a so, you know, at this moment, we're in a very different economic situation. There are folks folks are very differently concerned about their own pocketbooks. And they necessarily were in sort of the better economic times of the of the 2000. And so I think as we, you know, evaluate whether it's China, whether it's somewhere else, kind of what the red line for for intervention would be, it's not just about these questions of sort of can we win. It's about the broader kind of mood of the American public at any given moment towards towards taking on responsibility for involvement in other parts of the world?

MELANIE SISSON: Well, I want to thank the entire audience, those online, those who submitted questions prior, those who are here and asked really thoughtful questions today. And I'm sure that you also will join me when I thank and express my appreciation to the panel. Policy is simply people making choices that affect people's lives. And so it's really always very heartening to have experts who bring to bear not just their scholarship but also their humanity. So thank you all. And. Please come join us again for another Brookings event soon. Take care.