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Transcript

THE STATE OF IRAQ

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MODERATING AND SPEAKING:

Lieutenant Colonel Joel Rayburn
Senior Military Fellow
National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies

SPEAKERS:

Ad Melkert
Former U.N. Special Representative of the Secretary-General

Marina Ottaway
Senior Associate
Carnegie Middle East Program

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MARINA OTTAWAY: OK, I think we are sufficiently settled now. Good afternoon and welcome to the Carnegie Endowment. I'm Marina Ottaway with the Middle East program here at the endowment.

We – I just want to welcome you before I introduce Colonel Joel Rayburn and turn over to him the moderating of this – of this meeting. We've asked him to do double duty. He'll both moderate the meeting and also add his remarks.

So let me – without further ado, let me just introduce him briefly, and then we'll – and then we'll go on from there. Colonel Joel Rayburn is a senior military fellow at the National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies. He is a U.S. Army intelligence officer with many, many years of experience. He has served in many different positions, but most relevant to this discussion, he served in Iraq under General Petraeus.

Over to you.

[00:03:34]

LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOEL RAYBURN: Right. So it's an honor and a treat to be here today and to introduce two such distinguished co-panelists here. Let me start with Ambassador Ad Melkert, the former special representative of the secretary general for Iraq.

Ambassador Melkert served as U.N. special representative of the secretary general for Iraq from July 2009 until just last September. He was formerly associate administrator of the U.N. Development Program, and prior to that served as an executive director on the board at the World Bank, where he represented 12 countries.

Ambassador Melkert also previously had a prominent political career in the Dutch Labor Party, which culminated in his 2001 election as party leader. And he's also a candidate for director general of the International Labor Organization in the upcoming May 2012 elections, for which we wish him the best of luck. And I have – I would say that you are our candidate for that post.

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Marina Ottaway – and it's a bit humbling to introduce Marina at her own institution – she is a senior associate here at the Carnegie Endowment, and she works on issues of political transformation in the Middle East and Gulf security. She is a longtime analyst of the formation and transformation of political systems, and she's also written extensively on political reconstruction in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Balkans and African countries.

Her extensive research experience is reflected in her publications, which include nine authored books and six edited ones. And she's also an author of Carnegie's guide to Egypt's transition, which is a website that provides background and analysis on issues that will share Egypt's political future.

So we couldn't have two better-qualified panelists to judge the political turmoil that has unfolded in Iraq after the past few months, and to give us their thoughts on what it means for Iraq, what it means for the rest of us, and where it's likely to lead in the future. So with that preamble out of the way, I'll turn it over to Ambassador Melkert.

AD MELKERT: Well, thank you very much Colonel. It's really a very good opportunity, and I'd like to thank Carnegie also for that possibility to speak about Iraq, if only to ensure that attention will remain focused on the aftermath of many events that kept many of us busy for a long period of time.

But then, with other topics coming up, I've experienced myself, actually, at the time that I was the U.N. special representative, a kind of decline in interest that I think is not serving anybody's interests, because Iraq is really a very crucial country in a very crucial region in a very crucial – at a very crucial point of time.

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The title for this event, "State of Iraq: Solution to the Growing Strife," immediately raises a few points, from my perspective. Strife, yes, certainly there is – everybody who reads and follows knows this, can know this – who the actors are and what is at stake.

Is the strife growing? I don't know for sure and I'll come back on that, because what we may be seeing is a pattern that is more inherent in the situation in Iraq, given a number of factors, given the history, given the interests at play. And can we talk about it? Yes. But can we think about solutions? Well, solution is a big word for what we are seeing unfold, so I'm not going to venture that, in any case.

For me, the main point, actually, also on the basis of my experience and in trying to exchange that today with you, is to be quite humble, actually, about what we think we see in Iraq and what we try to understand. In a way, I believe we are all students of what's going on in Iraq – first of all, students that have to learn to understand how Iraq really looks after three decades of oppression and a number of years of occupation.

So in other words, the normal face of Iraq – what is it? Probably we have to go back a long time in history in order to see a similar situation, where the different actors and representatives of interests could quite openly compete for power. It hasn't happened for a long time. So what we see today is certainly quite new to most of us.

We're all students because also we are learning to grasp the paradigm changes in the region. And we are looking at – every day, almost, at the position of Iran in the region, and to an extent, versus other key actors in the region. The international tensions, but also the domestic prospects of what's going on in Iran are, to a large extent, also defining what the impacts of that would be on Iraq.

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And the domestic prospects in Iran should not be underestimated in their potential impact – with elections for parliament next – coming up next month and elections for the

presidency next year, and the probability that Iran is not isolated – maybe to the contrary – of many events that we've witnessed in the region more generally. Myself, I never like to speak about the Arab Spring. I think it's really a more regional spring, or awakening, or rise that we see. So it will – it will potentially change the region and, as a consequence, have an impact on Iraq.

There's the role of Turkey in the region – a Turkey that has become a very, very important player, certainly, also in Iraq, but also has to grapple with the contradictions or the tensions in trying to play a broker's role – whether it's to Iran, whether it's with Syria and the opposition in Syria, whether it's with different groups in Iraq. All that is potentially changing the paradigm in region, but how exactly is very difficult to predict.

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Iraq is very much part of the ax... – Iran-Iraq-Syria-Lebanon. And this is courtesy of Paul Salem, the head of Carnegie in Lebanon, in Beirut. And I think he is right in trying to position Iraq and what we try to see in Iraq in the context of the interaction between, particularly, those four countries.

What's also going on in the region are the domestic accommodation policies in the Gulf states and in Saudi Arabia, trying to somehow find a response to the events in – particularly in North Africa, with a very clear northern ripple effect in the Gulf region. And how that will play out, and what the impact of that will be on Iraq, again, is very hard to predict.

And then there's, of course, North Africa's next stage. I can't summarize it shorter, but it's just a shorthand for a very big issue that we are all looking at, we are all witnessing – we're trying, maybe, to contribute to or to influence – but certainly, no one is in a position to define what will be that next stage and what will be the implications for the region.

So that's why I think the second part of learning about Iraq is really to grasp the paradigm changes that are going on in the region, but it's not just one moment in time. It's a process that, every day, adds a small part to a much bigger picture.

And the third need for us to learn about Iraq, post-2003, is to decode the reality in the country. And in a way, we have to try to liberate ourselves from the trap of perception – that is so much defined, actually, by the invasion in 2003, its aftermath, the way it's being reported.

And we're still suffering from that perception problem. Let me just quote The New York Times on the 29th of January, where it stated "today, Iraq is more stable than it was at the height of the violence, but with American troops gone, sectarian and bloodshed are on the rise," end of quote. It's not true. And I will come back later to that. But it's – there's still something in our minds that has been defined by 2003 and the years after, and that hinders us, in a way, to really see what's going on in Iraq.

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So when we look at the political infighting, or competition, or whatever, is it really political stasis that we see? What is – what is the nature of the external power play that's going on? It's obvious that there is a lot of actors outside Iraq that are pushing and pulling. What is the real nature of that? So how is security or insecurity evolving? What's going on with the economy? We all have to try to look harder at the facts, and admittedly, it's not always easy to really get the facts on the table in a systematic way. But this is all part of trying to learn how Iraq looks today.

Let me say a few things about the – this decoding of the reality in Iraq, particularly the question of what's going on politically – whether it is a stalemate that we see, or whether it's something different. Trying to look at the bigger picture, I would like to submit that Iraq is just at the start of working on the basis of the – of regained, constitution-based sovereignty. It's, maybe, not longer than two or three years that the Iraqis are really themselves in a position to define their own policies, their own position in the region, and their own interaction with external actors. So in that sense, the post-Saddam period, in terms of Iraq's sovereignty, has only begun very recently.

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And what we see – this daily visibility of internal power play that involves virtually all currents of ethnic, political, sectarian and tribal significance – in fact constitutes a unique moment in Iraq's post-1958 history. That open play and that participation of virtually all currents, or representatives of all currents of significance, has not been seen before.

So what I think we see is the replacement of a relatively uniform dictatorial rule by the imprint of a fragmented reality – a very fragmented reality, but it is a reality. So in other words, talking about political stasis might in fact be just defining – just describing what one sees in terms of how the mosaic, the reality of a society, looks like with different actors trying to have their own position defined and impact gains.

So the key of how this will – unfolds is whether the rules of the game that have been put in place by the constitution will hold. Will the constitution hold? Because by and large, the key actors are still playing on the basis of the rules of the game – not every dot and comma and paragraph of the constitution, but it is something that holds the actors together and, in my view, is therefore a really, very important basis for what's going on now and trying to see whether this is strong enough to keep actors committed in the future.

And there may be two or three reasons to be, still, cautiously optimistic about whether those rules of the game will hold. I said I was cautiously optimistic in my last report to the Security Council last July. I must admit that I am sometimes wondering whether I'll still as optimistic as I was at that time. Certainly, I'm more cautious now. And yet there are some factors that I think could help us not to be too gloomy about what's going on.

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First of all, I believe that an important factor remains the – one could say – survival, political survival, interest and instinct, of the generation that came to power post-2003 – many of them having been abroad, coming back, some part of the resistance against Saddam,

others in one way or the other some distance – or perhaps, sometimes, less distance – related to the Saddam regime.

But all have an interest to keep, basically, the order that came into place after 2003 because they know that the alternative would probably not be kind to any of them. So sticking to the rules of the game is also in the interest of those that share power at this moment. I believe that is also the case for Prime Minister Maliki who of course stands, so to speak, accused by many of building an increasingly dominate position. And certainly he is a dominant position. But one could still argue that, first of all, he's not alone in that position. He's part of a broader coalition that actually provides him with the possibility to govern in the way that he does.

His position may also, in absence – the kind of a default position in absence of an agreement on alternatives between potential competitors. And certainly, his position is also defined by suspicion of considerable competitive powers that exist both within the country and outside the country. So in other words, in my view, also the prime minister and his position and his policies that we see today are still linked to the rules of the game that remain in place.

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Secondly, what we see also is a gradual normalization of administrative and economic patterns of interaction that create institutional and/or business interests and stakeholders that would not benefit from upheaval of any kind. There are more and more investors, domestically and also foreign investors that have really a stake in the future of Iraq.

There is a small group, but an important group, of competent managers in the administration that – with some success at some point, with less success in other areas – are slowly contributing to normalization of administration of delivery by the government. It's going slow. There's certainly a lot of political risks involved. But progress is there and the longer this holds, the more normalization one would see on the ground.

And I would certainly not discount here also the long-standing tradition of administrative competence that is rooted in the history of Mesopotamia. And it's always good to tell each other as Europeans and Americans that that history is really a lot longer than the way that we have governed ourselves in our parts of the world.

And then there is a third reason why it – one could argue that things are not all that bad, and that is linked to the events in the region that, in fact, have reduced, as a kind of implication, the space for potential spoilers of the post-2003 order. What's happening today in Syria with Assad is certainly not anything of an encouragement to those that, in Iraq, have not completely internalized the democratic spirit of the constitution, but nevertheless also know that space for alternatives has been reduced compared to where the region was 10 or 20 or 30 years ago. And I believe in the bigger picture those things matter.

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So what we basically see is the pluralism of ethnic, sectarian, tribal, ideological and interests-driven forces that are competing for power and still adhering, by and large, to the rules of the game.

Now, does that mean that everything is rosy? Certainly not. There are of course many risks and threats. I don't think I have the time to elaborate on each of them, but maybe for the discussion it would be worth to touch upon some issues in – more in particular.

Let me mention a few. What we have seen in the past few months, with the retreat from – the withdrawal by Iraqiya from the government, and even for a short period of time from parliament, was of course risky in terms of maintaining the basis of the so-called Erbil consensus – the basis for the government of national unity as we know it right now.

The reports of the recent 10 days suggests that everybody is taking his or her – mostly his – place again, which means that President Talabani has also – or is also managing to maintain the wide agreement between the major parties, which in itself, I think, is a step forward, because if this Erbil consensus would have unraveled, certainly the risk of internal strife would have tremendously increased.

Also anticipating – that's my second point – the rounds of elections that will arrive quite soon; in September there will be elections for the governorates in the Kurdistan region. Early next year there should be elections for the provincial councils, and early the year after, 2014, is the next round for the council of representatives for the parliament. And it goes without saying that these are moments that will again test actually the solidity of the rules of the game and whether everybody will stick to it, as happened in 2010 with the national elections. But I can testify that it did not just go by itself, and that was in a period where the international community, U.S. and U.N., were still much stronger presence.

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There will be ongoing intra-Shia tensions – I won't elaborate on that – Intra-Sunni competition in terms of who is the representative with really the most weight at that side of the spectrum. There are ongoing challenges basically to the rather centralized order in – with regard to the administration of Iraq, just with the Kurdistan region with its own space as a – as a very autonomous region within the Federal State of Iraq, but other provinces or governorates also knocking on the door for having more autonomy.

I believe that it is not very likely that that will lead to changes anytime soon in the current structure of the federal state. But obviously it is a potential source of tension. The disputed areas in the north between the Kurds and Arabs are still on the agenda, including the future of Kirkuk. Yet I find it fascinating that tensions have not increased, and maybe have to an extent somewhat decreased in terms of knowing how to live with the ambiguity that still exists, and maybe that can exist for a very long period of time.

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Syria, in terms of risks and threats – the outcome of Syria will certainly impact Iraq. How exactly is difficult to predict, but it's clear that the government of Maliki has actually

maintained for a relatively long time expressions of support for Syria. And there's also the border between Syria and Iraq that is – that could play a role in keeping the pressure on Syria.

And then the big elephant in the room I would say is everything that would – that we could imagine – but I'm certainly not going to elaborate on that – with regards to Iran: the impact on the oil markets – Iraq, of course, as the neighbor to Iran, also being able to provide alternatives to sanctions or to help circumvent sanctions is all part of the bigger equation that requires a lot of attention. And the impact of tensions with Iran on Iraq would be huge, in my view.

So let me stop here and just tell myself, in the first place, but I hope it will also convince some of you, that there are still grounds for being cautiously optimistic for some of the reasons that I mentioned. There is – Iraq is part of a development in the region that has opened up many more avenues for Islamist rule in very different – with very different ways and means. When you look at the different countries – Tunisia is not Egypt, Egypt is not Iraq – but there are also some similarities that change also, I think, the equation, looking at it from the U.S. or from the European perspective, as to with whom – with whom we are dealing, actually, in that part of the world.

And there is, of course, the change in the position of the U.S. that finds itself now between being an enforcement power and wanting to be an empowerment force in the region. So the stepping back militarily after trying to find a way to remain in Iraq, but underestimating, frankly, the deep drive in Iraq to be sovereign – and that's not only at the Shia sides; that is really very broadly shared – to be sovereign, but at the same time not closing themselves for cooperation with the U.N., cooperation with the Europeans, cooperation with Asian countries are playing a very important role, particularly where it comes to the oil production.

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So that is has all changed Iraq, with the bottom line we want to be sovereign and then define our relations with our neighbors and with the wider world. So that is what I think I see at this moment in Iraq, but also after the years that's – I had the privilege to be there, because it was really a privilege. I still feel a student, and I think many of us are. Thank you.

LT. COL. RAYBURN: Thank you. Marina? (Applause.)

MS. OTTAWAY: It's somewhat humbling to come after a speaker who has such direct experience in Iraq, which I certainly don't have. I have worked in – on Iraq for many years, but from a distance, certainly have not had that hand-on experience. But listening to Ad Melkert speak, I understood better an email he sent me as we were preparing this conference. I sent him a copy of the paper I was working on.

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And essentially he said, if I can paraphrase your email: I don't really disagree with you, but you are somewhat too pessimistic. And I would argue that the difference is that while he remains cautiously optimistic, I have become cautiously pessimistic. In other words, I am not ready to say it is a hopeless situation, but I certainly see is as a situation that is very, very difficult and it – I think it's going – that a positive outcome that we all hope for, essentially, is increasingly difficult. I see the obstacles very, very serious.

I would try to put my remarks – which I'll keep very short because we have a third speaker and we want to leave time for discussion – I want to try to put them in the – also in the context of the broader transformations that are taking place in the region because, I would argue, that at the center of the problems that Iraq is experiencing at this point is this blossoming of pluralism that we see not only in Iraq but we see in all countries that emerge from a period of authoritarianism.

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But the pluralist – which is not regulated by rules that everybody is adhering to – yes, there are rules. There are rules in the making. There is a constitution. It's a constitution that is still being interpreted as – you know, people are interpreting the constitution as it goes along. You could say, well, the U.S. Constitution is still being interpreted after – you know, after 200 years. And the fact is that there are many more reinterpretation of that constitution that is going on.

And it is really this almost unfettered pluralism which is the main problem that I see in Iraq right now. That, coupled with the regional situation – and here I truly differ with the previous speaker – that I think is going to make the situation much more difficult because I think the regional situation is pushing Iraq into the direction of heightened sectarian conflict. And because unfortunately the politics of the region, as I see it as this point, is really dominated by sectarian considerations.

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So let me talk briefly about the pluralism and what are you considered to be – you know, you cannot have democracy without pluralism, but there are – there is healthy pluralism and there is unhealthy pluralism. And the most unhealthy type of pluralism, I think, is pluralism where people are sort of caught in fixed positions – in other words, when it's not possible to move from one side to another.

And here ethnic and religious identities are the most destructive of all. You are not going to be Sunni one day and Shia another day. You are not going to be Kurd one day and Arab another day. You can be a Democrat one day and a Republican on the other. And essentially, their political identities are in flux. And in fact, we almost forget that what really makes democracy possible is those people who change their mind, because if people were always making the same choices then there would not be an alternating of parties in power, and that would be a real serious problem from the point of view of the survival of democracy.

What we have in Iraq right now is forms of pluralism that, yes, where there is room for change in the reform of pluralism, where there is not. And I would argue that the most serious – the most detrimental, the most dangerous form of pluralism that we have now – and this comes as no surprise of course – is that pluralism which is based on identity, which is based on the religious and the ethnic identities.

You always hear a lot about the fact that, well, it was not always that way. You hear a lot about the fact that there were a lot of mixed marriages before in – before you hear that tribes have both Sunni and Shia members and so on. I think we are – we have entered a situation now, and not just in the last few – in the last few months but for a long time, in which people have to choose between one identity of another. I think polarized situations, like – the situation like the one in Iraq lead to polarization because people have to make a choice one way or another where they want – where they want to belong.

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You cannot be – and this is, unfortunately, not just true of – it's not just true of Iraq. We have seen the same the same – we saw the same situation in Bosnia in the past, in many parts of the previous Yugoslavia. You are seeing the same situation in Bahrain – in Bahrain right now, where people that – you know, that always tried to play down their sectarian identity, their ethnic identities, are being forced to make – to make choices.

There are other forms of pluralism that are much less dangerous, in fact, I would argue are positive. There is a great deal of pluralism of political parties. Political pluralism is a good thing. It may be somewhat excessive in Iraq, as it is in all countries that are undergoing a transition. There would – too many political parties were formed, that there were at one point over 300 political parties. While the political spectrum has to shake down at some point, there is no room in any political system for that many political parties. But that's a minor problem. And it happens, because parties disappear because they don't get anywhere. That's a very positive form of pluralism.

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Unfortunately, this positive form of pluralism – the pluralism of political parties – also links, in the case of Iraq, to the sectarian and ethnic pluralism because some of the dominant parties – not all – but some of the most political parties are essentially still sectarian parties.

And I would argue that despite the fact that they all protest that they are not sectarian parties – in fact in the – in the political campaign before the 2010 elections, all parties were making a point of declaring themselves non-sectarian. All parties made a point of making sure that they had members and leaders from all – from all different groups and so on. But in reality, there were – they had a different – they were perceived by the public as having certain identities.

Perhaps the most obvious case is that of Iraqiya, which is led by a – after all, by a Shia – that – secretary general or whatever his title is, I'm not quite sure – but has been widely perceived by the voters as being a Sunni party. And there is a paradox here. But that

is the reality of that situation. There are a lot of Sunnis in Maliki's State of Law – State of Law alliance. But again, it was not seen as predominant in those terms. So there is – this healthy pluralism of the political parties is linked to the – to the less healthy pluralism of these fixed sectarian identities that tend to become even more fixed as – when the – when strife starts.

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A very interesting type of pluralism which is developing – to which the previous speaker alluded, that I'd like to put a little more emphasis on – is what is developing now in the relationship between the central government – or the federal government, if you want – and the regions. And that is both very good – because Iraq is a large country, and I think a large country like Iraq really should not be governed from the center. It should not be governed by line ministries in Baghdad that make decisions for the – for the region. So I think the dynamic, the struggle for power, if you want, or competition that exist at this point between the central government and the provincial councils is essentially healthy.

The problem is that, because of the weakness of the rules of the game, it's also contested the reign – because it is not clear at this point how the – you know, where – exactly what is the division of power between the central government and the provinces. And we have a position in which the provinces are pushing for more autonomy, are pushing for greater powers. And so we could say, yes, these are growing pains; it's not strange that there is no clarity about the rules of the game. And I totally agree.

The question is whether there is – whether Iraq is going to have the time to grow, essentially – for the rules to develop, or for adherence to the rules to develop, before it really breaks down into conflict between the – between the central government and the provincial – the provincial governments. I don't know; I find it – I am not too sure what we have seen recently is attempt by many provinces to try to push to become regions; that is, to acquire a degree of autonomy, like the autonomy which is enjoined – enjoyed by Kurdistan – because that is the implication of the transformation from a province into a region, that you are – that (look ?) the regional government has much more power than a provincial government.

There is a lot of push and pull on that – on that issue. It's very difficult to know exactly where it is going – where it is going to be; whether some of the – some of the provinces would pull back, probably, but I'm not sure that this is going to – that is going to be the case with all. And I would argue that if more provinces get their autonomy – in other words, if the idea of creating a region with a larger degree of autonomy extends beyond Kurdistan – then we'll see a strong push for it in other directions.

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Finally, if I look at – and just to stop there on the issue of pluralism, but I want to bring in the other side, because so far what I have talked is built-in conditions; that is, pluralism was – existed in Iraq well before the Americans came. I know – and they were quite understood. The accusation against the United States, that somehow the United States had introduced confessional politics into Iraq – all you have to look is at the composition of the Iraq National Congress before to know that it does not make any sense to – for – to

attribute the strong impact of sectarianism on the country on what the United States did or failed to do. It was there to begin with.

But in addition to looking at the conditions, I think it is very important also to look at agency – because it's not just a question of who is – of what the conditions are, what happens. It's also a question of what the most important actors are doing. And I would argue that, if you look at the main actors in the situation now, Iraq carries a really important burden. And one of the burdens that Iraq has – in addition to the specific tendencies of various players – you know, I don't think you can accuse Nouri al-Maliki to be particularly democratic. You cannot accuse Allawi to be particularly democratic. I mean, there are not many people with strong – the strong democratic tendencies in the top leadership.

But I think there is another issue that needs to be taken into consideration; that is, Iraq is burdened with what I would call historic leaders – with a number of people who have played a long – have played a role for a long period of time. They would play their role when Saddam Hussein was still there. And these are leaders who feel that they have a – essentially a right to be in the leadership structure.

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And I think you see that in many countries – again, I'd like to put that in somewhat of comparative perspective. And perhaps the most tragic case that I know of – of a country that has been burdened with its historic leaders – is Algeria, which is still trying to work its way through this long succession of historic leaders who were there in the fight for independence. And the only reason why finally there – it's working its way through the long list is that, one by one, they are dying – because with Algeria having become independent in 1962, obviously the age is taking its tolls, and many of these personalities are beginning to disappear.

But there are a lot of people in Iraq still now who think that they have a right to be in a leadership position. Allawi feels that he has a right to be in a leadership – Chalabi feels that he is – has a right to be in a leadership position. And that is something which is – in other words, these are people who are more than just – at least in their own eyes, more than just leaders of political parties. But they're – they have sort of a built-in right to be in a position. And that, I think, it's a real problem for many countries.

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Finally – and this is the last comment that I want to make in terms of agency – you also have to look at the neighboring countries. And here I – and here I truly disagree with the previous speaker. I think the situation in the region is going to make the – is going to aggravate the internal problem that Iraq is facing – because, like it or not, the regional – the politics of the region is moving in the direction of sectarian – of sectarian conflict. The – talk about the – you know, the Iran, Iraq, Syria – one should say, Hizbollah, more than Lebanon– sort of arc, if you want; the Shia crescent of which King Abdullah of Jordan spoke at one point – which is coming back with a vengeance.

And I would argue that the policies of most countries – of neighboring countries towards Iraq are colored, and are determined essentially, by this – by the sectarian perspective. The Gulf countries have resisted embracing the new government in – essentially embracing Iraq, because they are perceiving Iraq as being a pawn of Iran. Whether or not it is true, they are certainly contributing to pushing – to pushing Iraq in the arms of Iran. But there is no doubt that the policies of the Gulf countries towards Iran – excuse me, towards Iraq – are driven by this perception of what is the relationship between Iran and Iraq.

The perception – and increasingly, even countries that have tried to avoid the sectarian perspective are being pushed in that direction. And here the best example is Turkey; I think Turkey really tried to – not to play the sectarian card or the ethnic card. For a long time there was an incredible turnaround – I mean, a really remarkable turnaround by Turkey, in terms of reconciling itself to a – to the autonomy of Kurdistan, to establishing good relationship with Kurdistan and – both with Kurdistan and with the central government in Iraq.

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And yet Turkey is being – is essentially being pushed in the direction of playing a Sunni card at this point. I think it's still resisting it to some extent, but I don't think this is continuing much longer. And in that sense I would argue that what is happening in Syria in fact is – it is contributing to the sectarian perspective, essentially, with which neighbors are – that colors the way in which neighbors are dealing with Iraq. Let me stop there and turn it over to our next speaker, who is both a moderator and a speaker. But – (chuckles) – so I'll – (inaudible) – over to you.

LT. COL. RAYBURN: Thank you, Marina. If Ambassador Melkert is cautiously optimistic and Marina is cautiously pessimistic, I would say I'm both, depending on the – (laughter) – frame of time that we're talking about. In the long term, I'm with Ambassador Melkert. I think that Iraq has great potential, and I'm cautiously optimistic about the way Iraq will turn out. I think, 10 to 12 years from now, we will be looking at a much different Iraq – one that is a leader in the region in terms of economics and culture and so on, that will probably have found some stable politics by then. And I think we'll be in a much friendlier region.

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Beyond the enormous natural resources that Iraq has to draw upon, which hold incredible economic potential – the Iraqi economy could grow to three, four times its current size perhaps in the regional context. And if not – if not human – if not a very strong human capital, Iraqis have a memory of human capital. And I think they have a strong desire to return to that age of human capital that they once had.

But in the near term, I think it will be a very painful five to seven years or so, that Iraqis will have to go through and that the region will have to pass through, in order to get to that more positive potential outcome – because, alongside the healthy pluralistic model that Ambassador Melkert describes and the unhealthy pluralistic model that Marina

describes, I think there's another game going on in Iraq. And that is the consolidation of control of the state, almost detached from this pluralistic politics.

In Iraq today, I think it's becoming more and more appropriate to speak not of the Iraqi government, or even of a Shia-dominated government, or even a Dawa-dominated government – but rather of a Maliki regime. This is the newly dominant force in Iraqi politics; these are the Malikists. They're an analog to the Saddamists in many way – or the Saddamiyoon, as Iraqis knew them. And so I'd like to coin the term today, the "Malikiyoon." I think this is something that Iraqis will recognize.

And these are the officials and the operators who have enabled Prime Minister Maliki to consolidate control of state power and gradually marginalize the other political blocs as they've done it – while neutralizing, one by one, the checks and balances that the Iraqi constitution was meant to contain on just such a consolidation of power. So I'd like to talk a little bit – to dig down a little bit and talk some about where we can find the "Malikiyoon," who they are, how they behave and what policies they'll follow, and what that will mean for Iraq and the rest of us, my best guess.

[00:53:15]

So, first, in acquiring power in Iraq, the "Malikiyoon" have focused on the security and intelligence apparatus, the coercive arms of the state. And this is where you can most easily find them. You can find them at the top of the ministry of defense, at the top of the ministry of the interior, at the top of the intelligence services. You will find them in control of the Iraqi special operations forces and in the police commandos. And any forces that can – that, really, they have coalesced into a new sort of coup-proofing set of forces – almost a new Special Republican Guard.

Now, next, who are they individually? Well, individually they are not really the Dawa party. This is not really the Dawa party. They are at the center. They're Maliki's family, including his son and son-in-law most significantly. They're his personal advisers, both official and unofficial – so those that are in the prime minister's office and those that are – that are in Maliki's house, you know, in the *diwan* late at night making decisions.

They're also – if they're from the Dawa party, they tend to be Dawa party orphans, in other words. They're – in other words, they're Dawa members who have no independent base of their own in the party, and – or in the larger movement that spawned it. So they're Dawa members that you really didn't hear about before 2003, with some – with just a few exceptions. They're also, some of them, useful former Baathists, some of whom actually worked directly for Saddam or other very senior leaders in the old regime. And this is especially true in the intelligence services. And they're also political generals who are, most of them, originally high-ranking officers in Saddam's army.

Next, they're not really sectarian. For one thing, they're not all Shia. Some of them are Sunni; some of them are Kurds; some – occasionally you see one pop up that's a Christian. And writ large, the "Malikiyoon" will use the Shia sectarian card when it serves their political purposes. But they're just as ready to suppress Shia opposition as any other opposition. It's more about the challenge to their political power.

[00:55:34]

Next, they are not Iranian puppets. They are, however, aligned with the Iranian regime's foreign policy. And this makes their regime behave as a sectarian power in the region, along the lines that Marina was talking about – along that sectarian fault line that runs through the region today from the Gulf to the Mediterranean. And in fact they behave more as a sectarian power in the region than they do inside Iraq. But in this context they still see a need to balance Iran, to balance the Iranian regime, against the United States – and vice versa, to some extent, because they really don't trust the Iranians.

So what do they believe? What is their ideology? Well, they don't really have one. They don't believe much. They don't espouse core religious principles; these are not really devout religious guys, except in a pro forma sense that's required of a nominally Shia Islamist party. And they don't really – they don't really live the Dawa core values that marked the old Dawa party – the idea that laymen should be models of the – of the principles of an Islamic – of an Islamic life.

They are driven instead, overwhelmingly, by the acquisition and holding of power. They don't trust anyone outside the circle of the "Malikiyoon." And occasionally they don't trust some of the – some of them that are in the circle of the "Malikiyoon." So you find significant members of the "Malikiyoon" who are pushed out from time to time.

[00:56:58]

And lastly, and above all, they're deeply committed to keeping Prime Minister Maliki in power – because the fact is – and he has selected members of the "Malikiyoon" for this characteristic – if he were to fall, they have nowhere to go. They would lose everything; their power that they hold inside Iraq derives from his completely. In fact, if they begin to develop an independent base of power, that's who he usually pushes out.

Let me describe what the "Malikiyoon" are doing now. Right now they are focused on eliminating the two major threats to Maliki's rule inside Iraq – Ayad Allawi and Moqtada Sadr – whom they view as the only real alternatives to Maliki in Iraq. They will not reconcile with Allawi and Iraqiya; I will make the prediction here today. They are bent on breaking Iraqiya as a political bloc and refashioning some of it into a rump Iraqiya that they can dominate and deal with, while they – while they force Allawi and other senior Iraqiya members out of public life.

[00:58:02]

And then they will turn on Moqtada Sadr and his movement. And in fact they're already moving against Sadr in a variety of ways. I think they would like to split his movement by introducing a pure competitor to him, which they've begun to do; and also by exerting pressure against him as a leader, so that they can contain him. They're also focused on thwarting federalism, which is a threat to the centralized state that they're building. Their aim is to ultimately consolidate full control over the Iraqi institutions.

Now what will this mean for Iraq, in my view? Well, I think they'll probably succeed – all things being equal, and barring other wild-card events – in pushing Allawi himself and other major Iraqiya politicians out of political life. And they'll probably succeed, in the near term – for the near term, in consolidating nominal control of the state. But as they do it, I think they will actually destabilize Iraq even further. I think the country will actually slip from their grasp – because they can seize control of the state, but they can't actually control, secure and stabilize the country – because the Iraqi state can't secure and stabilize the country. It is not an effective state thus far.

So thus their scheme of consolidation, I believe, if it's followed to their logical conclusion, will probably greatly increase the risk that the country will be thrown back into civil war – especially when you consider that Iraq, as it – as the risks of civil war grow, will be next door to a Syrian civil war, in which the competing political blocs in Iraq will be intervening in the Syrian civil war on opposing sides. And they're likely, also, to be intervening elsewhere in the region on opposing sides: first and foremost Bahrain; who knows where else? Eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia, you know – you – we can predict where this would – eventually Lebanon – we can predict where this would go. So anyway, I think in the near-term then that that – those are the trends – those are the trends that will dominate Iraqi politics.

There's one underlying trend that I think increases the potential though that this state consolidation project could completely unravel. And let me say that this is a worst-case scenario, I think, for the Iraqi political blocs, but let me describe it.

I think there remains, while these – while this elite political competition is going on and while the consolidation of state and institutions is going on, there is an Iraqi society that is growing more and more alienated from the state, which is not capable and does not appear to be willing to – of delivering the minimum that a state is meant to deliver to its citizens in terms of essential services, security and so on. And so as the "Malikiyoon" are congratulating themselves for seizing control of Iraqi state institutions, there's the potential over time that the Iraqi street could just explode against them.

[01:01:13]

Now what will the "Malikiyoon" do in that regard? Well, we've already seen a taste of what they would do, because in 2011 Iraq had an Arab Spring, which not many people noticed and which didn't last too long. And the "Malikiyoon" are the men who made the decision to deploy the Iraqi security forces and fire on crowds. So their answer to the – to the – to the grievances and requirements of Iraqi communities is not to try and make the state more effective or to increase participation or to make the common Iraqis feel heard, it's rather to use the course of arms of the state to suppress dissent. And that's why I think that potentially you have – it's possible you would have a train wreck that could undo the whole – the whole Iraqi state system.

So on that – on that uplifting note – (laughter) – why don't we – why don't we throw it open to some – to questions from some of the – some of the very smart people in the audience? So we have microphones. Why don't we start – why don't we start small? Let's talk the first two questions. And then we'll move on from there and take maybe – take them

maybe in groups of three. And remember to address your questions either to Marina or Ambassador Melkert, and not to me. (Laughter.)

MS. OTTAWAY: And please identify yourself when you –

LT. COL. RAYBURN: Can we – can we – can we start at – let's start with Mr. Ariket and then over here to Moises Naim.

[01:02:35]

Q: Yes. My name is Said Arikat from Al-Quds daily newspaper.

Marina, I don't see how you could really downplay the impact of the U.S. invasion on unleashing the demons of sectarianism, when in fact what they did – they deconstructed the state.

But my question is to Ambassador Ad Melkert. On – you know, you said that the tensions have decreased in the north regarding disputed territories. How does that impact Article 140? What is its status? What is its fate?

And to you, Colonel, will the "Malikiyoon" cut a deal with Barzani, forgoing Kirkuk, for political purposes? Thank you.

LT. COL. RAYBURN: Right. OK. That was three questions. (Chuckles.) So why don't we go ahead and take Mr. Arikat's three questions, and then we'll come back for three more.

Marina, did you want to start?

[01:03:27]

MS. OTTAWAY: That was – just on the – and I – frankly, I couldn't hear what you said. We can talk about – Ad –

MR. MELKERT: Well, on the disputed territories, which at some point seems to be really this kind of powder keg that was waiting to explode, I believe that for the time being the main forces do not have a real interest in trying to maximize polarization and confrontation. One could maybe even say that there has been some remarkable – I wouldn't call it reconciliation, but kind of rapprochement for various reasons between the Sunni sides, particularly in the northern province of Nineveh, and the Kurdistan region. I think the brothers Najafi, the speaker of parliament and the governor of Nineveh, play a role there to try to find kind of balance of interest in how – who could be in charge of which part of the disputed territories in the future.

I also don't think that Maliki – I'm not agreeing with everything that was said on Maliki's position – but definitely he is in the center of power, also in terms of defining the agenda. And I don't think that part of his agenda is to seek confrontation on Article 140 or the future of Kirkuk or whatever.

[01:05:04]

There's just one issue that is a very serious one, and that is the ongoing problem between the federal government in Baghdad and the regional government in Erbil on the oil production and the oil proceeds. And some of the – of the major oil companies are also squeezed now between the two sides in that fight. But I don't think it has the potential to blow up the institutional structure. So to cut – to be very brief in the answer, it is – it is not as prominent in terms of risk as it was. Yet as long as the fundamental issues have not been resolved, it could of course always come up and be used for whatever purpose at some point.

To answer your question about the "Malikiyoon" in Kirkuk: The "Malikiyoon" will dangle Kirkuk in front of Massoud Barzani for as long as they need to keep him neutral, as they – as they consolidate their position against Allawi and against the Sadr movement. And then, at such time as they are able, they will renege on whatever promise they held out to Massoud. And they will slowly, not causing a – not causing a violent confrontation, but they will slowly, creepingly improve their position in Kirkuk. And they will just – and they'll just hold out the threat of force in order to ensure that the Kurds, the KRG, never gets Kirkuk. Maliki will never let the KRG have Kirkuk.

So let's start with Moises Naim and then go over to David.

Q: (Name inaudible.) The three speakers ignored one issue. If you look at the history of Iraq –

LT. COL. RAYBURN: I'm sorry. I called you Moises Naim. I'm – (laughter) –

Q: That's why I said it – from 1910 when Iraq was occupied by the Turks. The Iraqi officers in the Turkish corps were organizing secretly to fight for independence. From 1920 on, Iraqi politics was revolving around Iraqi nationalism. It continued in the '60s after the overthrow of the monarchy. It continued until, I would say, the invasion of Kuwait. And I think Iraqis are proud nationalists. The Iraqi nationalism will resurface.

So I think we need to pay more attention. We need to read the Iraqi history and the role of Iraqi nationalism. In the '20s and the '30s and the '40s and the '50s and the '60s, the theme was Iraqi nationalists. You didn't hear people saying, "I'm a Shiite." You didn't hear people say, "I'm a Sunni." This thing, yes, under Saddam; he used overwhelming force against, you know, people in the south of Iraq, in the war with Iran. But I believe if you look ahead, the Iraqis will go back to their nationalist tendencies, and they will create a democratic, secular state. It may take 10 years, 20 years, but –

[01:08:21]

MS. OTTAWAY: Can – you are taking more questions?

LT. COL. RAYBURN: Yeah. Why don't we – why don't we – thank you for that comment. Why don't we go ahead and take two more questions. Over here.

Q: David Mack from the Middle East Institute.

LT. COL. RAYBURN: I'm going to refrain from calling – from guessing at anyone's name from this point. (Laughter.)

[01:08:36]

Q: Yeah. David Mack from the Middle East Institute.

LT. COL. RAYBURN: I'll get it wrong, except for – (inaudible) –

Q: Thank you very much Ambassador Melkert for trying to point us to some optimistic potential, and we can all hope you're right. But I'm going to ask the more negative-minded strategists, Marina Ottaway and Colonel Rayburn, to focus on some worst-case scenarios in Iraq. And tell me what you think are the worst – the worst of them and which ones – and what the implications are for U.S. policy.

The first would be a failed state with some vast ungoverned spaces. The second would be a government dominated by Shia religious parties but not by one man, and subject to overwhelming Iranian influence as they shift and form different coalitions. The third would be an authoritarian government ruthlessly guarding its internal power and trying to remain independent of external influences.

[01:09:52]

LT. COL. RAYBURN: OK. And right next to David here. Microphone is over here.

Q: (Name inaudible) – with the Jerusalem Report and Dutch radio. So Melkert mentioned the perception of the status of the state of Iraq and also briefly the oil interest. So I would like to ask more generally, what is the perception of the business community and specifically the oil companies about the future and stability of Iraq? Are they ready to invest in – long-term in Iraqi oil? Or are they still withholding because of the uncertainty?

LT. COL. RAYBURN: OK. And maybe one more. Who else? Here in the front.

Q: Art Donart, City1.com and the Catholic Messenger. Since many of the problems are sectarian, would it be a helpful approach to reconvene the world parliament of religion? And given the fact that sectarianism tore much of the Christian world apart for 500 years, but with the advances in communication, it's been within the last 50 years that many of these sectarian issues have been resolved. So would there be hope in that direction?

LT. COL. RAYBURN: OK. Marina, do you want to start with –

MS. OTTAWAY: Yeah. OK. First off –

LT. COL. RAYBURN: -- David's worst-case scenarios –

[01:11:19]

MS. OTTAWAY: Yeah. The – I would just wanted to make a quick comment first with Otis (ph) said. Yeah, nationalism is more – you know – first of all, once sectarian identities are out of the bag, it's very difficult to put them back in. I mean –we see that around the world – I'm not saying that it's impossible, but usually takes a long time before this division heal.

The other part of the answer is that usually sectarian – the sort of nationalism revives at a period of – at a time of external threat. And at this point, the – whatever external threat might exist, it's going to – is going in the direction of dividing the country. You argue Iran is an external threat to the Sunni population; it's not to the Shia population. So I don't see at this point a revival of nationalism.

Now concerning the – David Mack's question about the worst-case scenario, that's a tough one. I would – I would argue that from the point of view of the United States – and here I'm going to be cynical – probably the – of the three alternatives that you gave us – in other words, you did not give us the rosy alternative of a nice democratic country – but of the three alternatives, probably the one that's least threatening to the United States is an authoritarian government and – that is in control. Very – you know, it's sad to say so. But in a sense, it's the one that we can live with more easily. Between the failed state and the government dominated by Shia close to Iran, probably the government dominated by Shia close to Iran is the worst. But it's a close call between those two, I would say.

LT. COL. RAYBURN: Ambassador, do you want to cover the international oil companies?

MR. MELKERT: Yeah. The business community and particularly the oil communities, I think they're very strongly present now and are anticipating also a new round and probably more rounds of auction of a number of still considerable fields for production in the south of Iraq.

There's increasing exploration going on at – in Anbar and the western parts of the country, and definitely also lots of investment in the Kurdistan region. But certainly also in the south, there is a concern by quite a few companies about, say, the direct security of the infrastructure. And this is a – this is a mix of threats of a, say, more political nature but also criminality that is on the rise in some parts of the country.

[01:14:13]

But overall, the business community is not discouraged, on the contrary, I would say. And it's not only oil. It's also hugely in construction and also some other industries where foreign investors in particular are, in my view, quite close to take important decisions.

Let me make one remark on the role of nationalism. I very much appreciated the question in reference to stages in Iraq's history that are very important for us to grasp in order to understanding the things – the situation today and tomorrow. And I believe the role of nationalism is very important.

I'm not sure whether their nationalism could then be make – made equal to a democratic way of dealing with that nationalism. But certainly it's helpful also to understand the position of Iraq vis-à-vis Iran, because the nationalist side including, say, the nonideological driven nature of the state consolidation project is a very important notion. And in that sense, Iraq is very much a country in itself, a nation in itself, and as far as it concerns the Arab side, distinguishing itself even in – in terms of the religion from the state theocracy in Iran. And I think it's also relevant to note that the scars of the Iran-Iraq war are still felt very much, and mostly in the south.

[01:15:55]

MR. : Mmm hmm.

MR. MELKERT: So we should not underestimate that element in the kind of easy perception like, yeah, you have Iran, you have the south of Iraq, and where is the border? There is – there is really a border in many dimensions.

Optimism – I hope I don't qualify by being slightly optimistic. It's partly genetically, but part – because otherwise you can't survive in the position that I had in Baghdad – (laughter) – but it's in fact also related to this question, will they adhere to the rules of the game? And once that wouldn't be the case then also for me the scenarios would come a lot closer to the kind of the options that you were describing. But for the time being, I don't see the forces, including the Maliki forces, having an interest in turning around actually the – or putting upside down the current situation.

And finally on the sectarian side, I mean, the most important is of course what is happening in the Islamist world. There is the OIC, the conference of Islamic countries that is playing a role but not very – not with – not great impact as far as I can – I can tell.

Q: Thank you.

[01:17:20]

LT. COL. RAYBURN: So let's take some more questions. The gentleman in the yellow tie right there, which is – which is very fetching by the way. (Laughter.) And then we'll move – please.

Q: Good afternoon. My name is Alex Wright (sp). I'm from the Department of State. But in a previous life I served as a civil affairs officer in Iraq with the Marine Corps. And my question really goes to the ground level.

Marina, you talked about pluralism as a reaction to authoritarian rule – I'm going to try to talk today – but too much of that can lead to little traction, can lead to many political parties, many – everybody wants their say. We certainly saw a lot of that. The question I have is what it's going to take to coalesce a group of people, modern Iraqis, many of which who have lived under heavy-handed rule, don't know much of a life without that heavy-handed rule, that authoritarian system? Many of them acquiesced to the point of simply just trying to stay alive. What's it going to take to get Iraqis to not allow for a return under the

modern day system, the modern politicians they have to return to that central authoritarian rule, that heavy-handed society? What's it going to take on the ground for the people to not allow for that rule, especially when many of them don't know what that society looks like? Thank you very much.

[01:18:39]

LT. COL. RAYBURN: OK. We had a couple in the back – let's – way back in the back. The young lady with the glasses, yeah. Go ahead.

Q: Yes. I have a question. Taking into account that there is no kind of conventional deterrence against terrorism in the region, if you had the possibility – just to Marina, this question – if you have the possibility to lay out a kind of strategy against this kind of closed society moved by deep religious feeling, to which area of the society will you address that kind of layout in order to neutralize terrorism and recruitment in the region?

LT. COL. RAYBURN: OK. And let's take – let's take one more. We had someone – the gentleman in the last – in the last row who just put your hand up and then right down. Yes.

Q: Thank you. I'm –

LT. COL. RAYBURN: OK

Q: -- (name inaudible) – from the University of Wisconsin. Our speakers spoke about pluralism and the rise of sectarian politics and also about multiple party politics. And I think an essential element for this kind of society is respect for minorities. And in that type of context, I'd like to ask what they see as the trends particularly for the Christian minority in Iraq. We haven't heard much about that.

LT. COL. RAYBURN: OK. Ambassador, do you want to start with the – what will it take for Iraqis not to return to the central, heavy central rule? Do you want to –

MR. MELKERT: Yeah, it's – that's a very good question. Because what might seem for us kind of obvious as to how you want to see the ground principles of authority defined in your country is not at all that obvious for different generations of Iraqis. I would say that, first and foremost, it's important that there will be a functioning state. And this has also a political connotation, going back to what the colonel said on the state consolidation project. I think that some serious investments are going on. For instance, I had different meetings with Deputy Prime Minister Shahristani, who is overseeing the rehabilitation of the electricity sector – which has been a huge problem and which was one of the reasons why people took to the streets last year – everybody complaining about it, everywhere.

[1:21:18]

And, of course, I don't know what exactly today happens, but I would not be surprised – let me put it that way – that as was indicated, in the course of next year and the year after – because it really takes two or three years to have such huge infrastructure

rehabilitation in place – that Iraqis would notice that their daily circumstances would improve. The same goes for investments, domestically, internationally and employment creation. And this is, of course, not only in Iraq a big issue. It is the issue of the region – that there will be employment for the young people. And also, in Iraq the demography is showing a tremendous group of young people, ever-better qualified, that are looking for a job.

So those – and the third thing that's going on right now, as we speak, is a number of very important housing projects, including in Baghdad, that will, I think, improve the living circumstances, the living conditions, for quite many people – not for all, unfortunately, because it's a bit selective. But it will have an impact.

[1:22:38]

So to the extent – sorry, to the extent that these things would be put in place, it would relax, in a way, and also would make Iraqis understand that elections serve a purpose. This is going to be the huge challenge in the preparation for the 2014 parliamentary elections, because definitely people will come back to their representatives and ask them, what did you do for me? So that is, I think, a basic notion.

LT. COL. RAYBURN: Yeah, let me jump in there for just a moment. And to complement what the ambassador has just covered, I think also Iraqis need a restoration of Iraqi civil society. Civil society utterly atomized under Saddam, with the exceptions of those layers of civil society that he could use in order to strengthen his rule.

Also, the growth of a vibrant Iraqi private sector would also – so we're talking about insulation between that mode of a centralized state and the population. And there's no insulation right now, or very little. The Iraqi private sector is absolutely anemic. The public sector is huge; the private sector is essentially – because of crony capitalism, and just – and just the investment frameworks and legal frameworks that are in their infancy, the Iraqi private sector just is dwarfed by the public sector right now.

[1:24:22]

And then lastly, let me – let me emphasize the point that the ambassador made about housing. Right now, the housing shortage in Iraq is a driver of conflict. The Iraqi government – according to Iraqi government statistics themselves, there is a shortfall of 3 million housing units in Iraq. And the Iraqi state, right now, has near-sole responsibility for meeting that housing shortfall, and that state is not capable.

The Iraqi ministries and their – and the line ministry offices at the provincial level – are not capable of filling that 3 million shortfall, in a country of 27 million.

Marina, do you want to talk about the strategy –

MS. OTTAWAY: Yeah, but I also want to talk about this for a moment. Because it seems to me that they – you know, certainly, these are good things and they should be very

important to happen, and they'll make life for Iraqis better. They will not necessarily prevent the consolidation of an authoritarian state.

LT. COL. RAYBURN: Right.

MS. OTTAWAY: You can have – I mean, look at Saudi Arabia. It's doing all sorts of things for its citizens, and it's certainly not becoming, you know, any more democratic than it was. I mean, the temptation – what is tempting to answer is, look at the example of the so-called Arab Spring, essentially, the uprisings in many countries and what has led – you know, it's people getting fed up with the situation.

And we still don't understand what triggers it, because we can speculate as much as possible, but, you know, none of us can give a coherent explanation of why it happened in 2011 rather than happening at some other time. Let's face it. But so, as you're saying, what really prevented the consolidation of a new authoritarianism is people really taking things into their own hands.

It does not necessarily work. I mean, the colonel talked about the repression when the first street protests started. They were put down pretty quickly, essentially. And we are seeing more and more in the Arab world, too, that governments – that, sort of, the uprisings – like the ones we saw in Tunisia and Egypt – they don't necessarily work once governments are aware that this can happen.

[1:26:46]

Because if you think about it, the two governments were – that allowed themselves to be overthrown, if you want – were Tunisia and Egypt – that were caught by surprise. Assad was not – did not allow himself to be caught by surprise, so there is no guarantee that even that would work.

Very briefly, on the issue of terrorism. What we have seen – again, you know, I wish I had an answer. What we have seen in Iraq in the past – one thing that did happen to de-escalate the tensions to – was the negotiations that took place, the attempt to turn supporters of the – the creations of the – the Awakening, the militias that sort of turn – local militias that turned against these groups and essentially sided with the government.

Whether that can be repeated in the future I don't know. But that is the only time, I think, where we saw – and I thought that that worked fairly successful for a – successfully for a period of time. At least, I don't know what –

LT. COL. RAYBURN: Right. And Ambassador, can you cover the Christian minorities question?

[1:28:07]

MR. MELKERT: Yes, I think that's a very important question, given what happened, particularly in the period – if I recall, well between October 2010 and last summer, when a lot of very – a number of very vicious attacks took place that targeted

Christians for, I think, very different reasons and different agendas that were played out there.

I don't think one should associate it with a kind of organized drive to reduce the presence of the small minority that Christians represent in Iraq. But the impact was clear, because many left in addition to the many that had left already in recent decades, basically. So the community is now quite small. Although the situation has slightly improved, particularly in Nineveh – measures have been taken to increase protection, including through their own representatives.

The Kurdistan government, at some point, also opened some possibilities for Christians to stay there if they wanted. I'm not exactly aware about the numbers that accepted that offer. So recently, I don't think that we – that we have seen much particular news on that. But the overall situation, or the overall impact of what has happened, is that the Christian community right now is very small indeed.

[1:29:44]

LT. COL. RAYBURN: Right. A few more questions? In the very back row, the gentleman there – OK, and then we'll come up to you next.

Q: Hugh Grindstaff, THIS for Diplomats. The expatriate, Iraqi expatriate community, got us into the last war with Chalabi. But we've had – you had two sets of – (inaudible, audio interference) – 2003 expatriates, and then the war sent a lot of people out of country. What influence on current Iraqi society do you think that the expatriates are having or not having? And why – is there a large returning percentage or not, and why not?

LT. COL. RAYBURN: OK. And the young lady here, in the fourth row.

Q: Jane Newton-Small with Time magazine. My question is about the State Department's recent decision to have its staff in Baghdad. Do you think it's still possible to carry out the stated U.S. mission there, and what involvement do you see the U.S. having in Iraq over the next few years? I guess it's hard to predict, but whatever you can predict.

LT. COL. RAYBURN: OK, and let's take one more. OK, the gentleman just behind her – yeah?

Q: Thank you. What role do you see for the U.N. moving forward with the decreasing U.S. presence, particularly in elections and observing elections in the coming years? Thank you.

LT. COL. RAYBURN: Very good, OK. The question on the Iraqi expat community – either of my co-panelists want to take that one on?

MS. OTTAWAY: Well, let me – let me try. We don't – OK, that is the first – the pre-2003 generation, and I think they had, you know, many of – they are still – they are very much in the political game at this point, and had a big impact. I don't think we have seen a

lot of important people who have left in exile, at the worst time of the violence, and are coming back and playing a very important role. If that exists, I don't know.

What I would be very worried about now – but that's more of a question, almost like a humanitarian issue – what's going to happen to all the Iraqis that left and sought refuge in Syria, with what is going on now. It's not so much what impact that they are going to have on Iraq, but where are they going to go? What's going to happen there?

[1:32:29]

LT. COL. RAYBURN: And why don't we move to the role of the U.N. moving forward? Ambassador, do you want to cover that one?

MR. MELKERT: Yeah. Well, of course I don't have any official authority right now in saying what should happen, but I've got some ideas.

I think, I mean, it's quite right in the question to emphasize the role in elections, although it will be a different one than before, as 2010 was already different compared to the previous elections in the sense that the leadership, also in 2010, was really in the hands of the independent high electoral commission, which is a broadly – politically broadly based Iraqi commission.

And right now, the U.N., UNAMI – the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq – is involved in assisting the council of representatives in selecting the members for the new independent high electoral commission. And this is an extraordinarily important task in order to ensure that there will be sufficient political balance in that commission that will basically define the rules of the game, within the rules of the game of the constitution, with regard to the election.

[1:33:47]

And there is certainly some, or some see – let me put it very neutrally – but some see some risk that an effort would be undertaken to have the composition of this independent commission influenced in such a way that it would become a political actor in itself. And that would really be a big risk to the constitutional process.

Apart from this, the U.N. role remains, I think, very crucial to continue to monitor the observation of human rights in different parts of the country – and really, also, in the broad sense of human rights – to report regularly, to work here very closely with the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights in Geneva.

And a third – and a third task is to assist the government in the framework of the so-called United Nations development assistance – assistance framework, which is a 2 billion (dollar) program with assisting the government with technical advice in different areas of policy, trying to help to build the capacity of ministries, et cetera.

[1:34:57]

There used to be a fourth area, but I'm not sure whether there's a lot of prospect, right now, to make progress – that is, trying to assist in resolving the border issues between Kuwait and Iraq, going back to the Gulf War of 1991. I've been myself many times in Kuwait for that purpose, but unfortunately, I cannot report an end result on that. And that will – but it's still on the agenda of my successor.

LT. COL. RAYBURN: Let me take a stab at the question about the U.S. embassy and its staffing, but let me do so as an individual – not speaking for the Department of Defense or anyone else, just as an academic and offering my personal view.

The U.S. diplomatic mission in Iraq, which was envisioned as being something on the order of 17,000 diplomats, staff, security contractors, and so on – and military personnel under chief-of-mission authority – that was a mission that was planned for a different relationship than the one that exists between the United States and the Iraqi government now. And so conditions have dramatically changed from those that obtained when those plans were drawn up and when that relationship was outlined back in 2008, '09 and '10.

[1:36:24]

The most significant thing is that there's no residual U.S. military force. And this has changed the nature of the relationship between the U.S. government and the Iraqi political groups, so that the U.S. military is no longer there to act as – insofar as it could – as an honest broker in Iraqi politics, and as a deterrent from some of the actions that have been taken against U.S. personnel and agencies that are on the ground there.

I would say that the relationship between the Iraqi government and its officials, and the U.S. diplomatic mission, is quite a bit more hostile than the one that was envisioned – which was one of very close partnership that would include a lot of capacity-building activities on the U.S. side, a lot of ministerial assistance.

And what we have found is that the nature – and I think it's also a byproduct of the state consolidation project that I described earlier, is that this assistance – this capacity-building is viewed, in the context of the state consolidation project, as interference, and as an impediment to the consolidation of control of the state. And so it's not wanted. And so the Iraqi officials who respond to the "Malikiyoon" and others then have been pushing U.S. presence, U.S. influence aside, or bringing pressure on U.S. influence.

So that – and at the same time, the threat environment for U.S. officials, U.S. security contractors, and to some extent, U.S. citizens who are there for business purposes – the threat environment has grown more intense since a year ago, and certainly, by the end of the year. So that in particular, you have the threat from the Shia Islamist militias that are sponsored by the Iranian regime – it's an explicit threat against U.S. personnel.

And this has greatly reduced the mobility of U.S. officials inside Iraq, so they can no longer get out of the embassy compound. They can no longer do the kind of engagement with Iraqi officials and Iraqi citizens that they need in order to do their job. And so after a while, you wind up just having several thousand people on an Indian reservation who don't really serve their strategic purpose anymore. And that caused conditions to change.

[1:38:55]

At the same time, as the U.S. – I think my personal view here – let me stress – the idea that you would withdraw the U.S. military, to some extent because it was seen as an irritant in Iraq, and then replace the face of the U.S. military with security contractors working for the U.S. government in Iraq, I think, was always problematic. Because over time, I saw the U.S. military come to be accepted at the local level in many places as an honest broker, as a guarantor against local conflicts, and so on – while U.S. security contractors were universally vilified, especially after their behavior early on, and then incidents like the 2007 Blackwater killing of 17 Iraqis in West Baghdad. That poisoned Iraqis against U.S. security contractors, and so that was – that was always going to be a difficult thing, to keep going with a large U.S. diplomatic mission in that environment.

OK. Our contract with you is to end at 2:00. So I think we have time for perhaps one more question, if we have – if we have anyone who wants to ask a question. Let's have the lady over here to my left.

[01:40:16]

Q: Good afternoon. Susan Arnold (sp), United States Army; I'm a student at ICAF. And I'd like the panel members' views on – as Colonel Rayburn just indicated – our, basically, failure to come to an agreement with the Iraqis for any follow-on U.S. forces there in Iraq and the subsequent withdrawal. Do the panel members see that as ultimately a positive development, an inevitable development, or as a liability for U.S. strategic interests going forward? Thank you.

LT. COL. RAYBURN: Ambassador, you want to take that one on first? You were there for some of that negotiation.

MR. MELKERT: Yes, I witnessed it from quite close. And I didn't have, say, an opinion, other than that it would – it should be a bilateral agreement, as was the status of forces agreement that was in place until the end of last year. However, I had quite strong feelings from the very beginning that there was a kind of inevitability; that it would be very difficult to agree on the configuration. So maybe even not on the principle – and certainly that principle wouldn't be addressed by all actors as such.

There were of course some forces that didn't want to have the U.S. forces in the first place, and others not for the future. But there were also quite many that didn't express themselves in those terms, but provided objections to actually any option that one could think of, of keeping some U.S. forces remaining in Iraq. And as you know, very many options were being discussed at some point in time.

And the inevitability, in my view, goes back to the – to the histories, to the – that's why the question on the national – the nationalist sides of history is important, of the sovereignty idea that is very strongly represented I think across the boards. So also those that feel actually quite close, in terms of their own interests, in working with the U.S. still had a difficulty to envisage that they would make themselves or make their country dependent

upon the presence of U.S. forces – also in the context of the wider region, that we shouldn't underestimate as well, because everybody has a lot of interaction with brothers in the region.

[01:42:55]

So this sovereignty idea – I think it's very important to understand it. It's not the rejection, necessarily, of having U.S. forces in this case on the ground. But to be in charge – even as U.N., we have really noticed a change in attitudes. And I don't say that in any critical way, because it's the full right of a sovereign state to define its own interaction with, in the end, a representation of a foreign institution. And we have seen over time really a shift in terms of how the interaction was guided, and of where sovereignty came up in, so to speak, every second sentence.

LT. COL. RAYBURN: Marina, do you have anything to add?

MS. OTTAWAY: Essentially there's just one point that I would like to add. I think it was – anybody who was following the situation closely essentially saw it coming, what it did not come as a surprise. What it's very difficult for me to understand is why the U.S. government, until the last minute, presented this very positive – the optimistic idea that the Iraqis wanted us to be there; that it would be a matter of time before some sort of arrangement; that the strategic framework agreement would be – remain very, very important; and so on.

And frankly, my question – and I don't have an answer – remains whether – you know, was the U.S. government just trying to spin the story because it was – it was not a good idea to tell the public: We are getting out, but this is going to be a much more – a really drastic getting out. Or did they end up by spinning themselves as well as spinning the public? I mean, I participated in some briefings for, you know, think tank people shortly before the withdrawal took place, where the message was, you know, there is no problem here. We are going to stay; these agreements are in the process of being worked out; and so on. So I am left with a lot of questions.

[01:45:08]

LT. COL. RAYBURN: Let me – let me – let me just add, again, a personal view – not speaking for any part of the U.S. government. I think that the – in retrospect, a mistake that we made was: Well ahead of 2011, we did not – we did not adequately send the message to Iraqis that a residual U.S. military force would be nested within a broader U.S.-Iraq relationship; and that it would just be one aspect of that relationship; and that in – because of that relationship and a partnership – that Iraqis would be getting quite a bit from the U.S. government. They would be – the benefits of a partnership with the U.S. government would outweigh the negatives that would come from the perceived infringement on Iraqi sovereignty that the ambassador is talking about.

So we never, I think, did the work that we could have done to create top cover for Iraqi politicians, who behind closed doors always – up to the last minute – indicated that they thought it was in Iraq's interest for us to have a residual force there. We never – we never did the work to give them selling points for that relationship with the United States.

And we never, I think, adequately countered the message that was coming out of the Iranian-sponsored militant movements, including the Sadr movements, about violations of Iraqi sovereignty. We didn't push back enough on that messaging to make it clear to Iraqis how they would benefit from it. So I hope we learned that for future such negotiations, such as the one that will eventually be going on somewhat to the east of Iraq in Afghanistan.

[01:47:06]

Well, maybe on that note, I think we're out – we're out of time. But if you'd please join me in thanking our two primary panelists here for a great reception. (Applause.) And thank you for your kind attention.

(END)