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“The Syria Withdrawal and Next Steps”

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Andrew Schwartz: Good evening, everybody, and welcome to the Schieffer Series. Thanks for coming out on a rainy night in D.C. on a very slow – another slow news day in D.C. We welcome you here to CSIS, the no spin zone.

We're very pleased to be able to do the Schieffer Series, and it's made possible by TCU, the Horned Frogs, and it's also – and the Schieffer College of Journalism – I'm sorry, the Schieffer College of Communication. And it's also made possible by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, which has been our sponsor for this series for many years now. And without them, we would not be able to do this.

And without further ado, we've got a excellent panel today. We're going to focus on Syria. But before we do that, you're going to hear an update on the British elections and Brexit with Heather Conley and, without further ado, the greatest name in news, Bob Schieffer.

Bob Schieffer: Well, we really do appreciate you coming out on a night like this. It's – we're having a lot of nights like this, so it's good to see you.

So we're going to talk about Syria. But you know, in this – what has become routine in this era of calamitous events, they happen so quickly that before we could actually get it sorted out in our mind about what happens another of these events comes along and washes it away, and then we start over, and then it happens. I mean, we're going to talk today about the U.S. withdrawal from the Turkey-Syrian border, what had been the implications of that. But just stop and think how many things have happened since that happened. It now seems like it was two or three years ago. It actually was October 6th that it happened.

But before we do that, since the British election is coming up day after tomorrow, right?

Heather Conley: Thursday.

Bob Schieffer: Heather Conley, who of course as many of you know is our go-to person on all things in Europe, and she is going to give us a little report just to start out here about what's coming up in this Brexit election, what it means, and what it means for this country and also the folks in Britain. So, Heather, if you would just start, we're pleased to have you.

Heather Conley: Well, Bob, thank you so much. Bob is such a rock star. I'm the warmup act and then you're going to have the main event. But this is CSIS breaking news. We need that chyron across the bottom of the screen.

So Thursday is going to be a very historic election for two reasons. The outcome will likely change the economic trajectory of the United Kingdom because one candidate, the leader of the Conservative Party, Boris Johnson, wants to transform the U.K. economy to pull and diverge from the EU and to create potentially a Singapore on the Thames, he tells us. And if Labour Party Jeremy Corbyn somehow pulls off – becomes the leader of a minority government, potentially, he wants to nationalize key U.K. industries, taking the U.K. back to an economic relationship similar to the '70s. You couldn't choose two more different economic visions. That's at stake.

But perhaps the most important thing that's at stake is the actual integrity of the United Kingdom. Brexit has not only divided the U.K. politically between those who wish to leave the EU and those who wish to remain; it's divided within the country. Particularly, Northern Ireland and Scotland both voted to remain in the EU in the 2016 referendum.

So we think right now, the polls being what they are, the Conservatives are leading by 10 points, and that's been steady for many, many weeks. So probably the wind is in the Conservative sails. But we don't know how much the Conservatives could win by. They could win by a massive majority – 60, 80, even 100 seats. They could win by a very small majority, maybe just 20 seats. We could see an absolute surprise. Right before registration closed, 3.5 million people registered to vote. A lot of them were young people. And so the question is, will there be turnout? Will these young people turn out? Will they vote? And then how will they vote? There's something called tactical voting, which means that you're not voting for the party that you want; you're actually voting for the party that will make sure the party you don't want doesn't win. It's very complicated. There's lots of websites that tell you how to do this, and we're not sure how that would work.

So there's a possibility that we could see a hung Parliament, which would mean potentially a Labour minority government supported with other parties, which could mean – and this is what we don't know about Brexit. So if Mr. Johnson wins a majority, the U.K. will be leaving the EU by January 31st of next year and will likely not be able to negotiate a new trade agreement with the EU by the end of next year, which will probably be the new no-deal Brexit deadline. But if Labour wins, they will probably ask for another extension from the EU. They will renegotiate another deal, a third deal, and we will see if there's closer alignment.

So stay tuned. This is a preview of coming American attractions. We are seeing social media. We're seeing Russian interference. We are seeing tactics that I would suspect we will be seeing in our own presidential election. So this is one to watch, Bob.

So that, my friends, is your breaking-news report. And now back to your regularly scheduled Syria discussion which I don't want to be part of. Thank you so much.

Bob Schieffer:

So back to this situation on the Syrian border. Seth – and let me introduce everybody; that'd be a good thing to do here. Dr. Seth Jones, who holds the CSIS Harold Brown Chair, is director of our International Security Program and Cooperative Defense Project. Prior to coming to CSIS, of course, he was with the RAND Corporation and served in several Defense Department posts.

Melissa Dalton, who is to my immediate left, is a member of the congressionally mandated Syria Study Group. She's a deputy director of the CSIS International Security Program. And prior to joining CSIS, she too held various positions at the Defense Department.

Brian Katz, down at the very end, is a CSIS fellow in International Security after a decade of service in the CIA and the Defense Department.

And finally, our friend Nancy Youssef, national-security correspondent for The Wall Street Journal. Previously she was a war correspondent in Iraq and was the Cairo bureau chief for the McClatchy Newspaper.

So we have some people on this stage tonight who know a little about what's going on in that part of the world.

Seth, why don't you just start? Give us kind of a picture of what the situation is there today. It was October 6 when the president announced we were pulling back. What's happened since then?

Seth G. Jones: Well, Bob, what the U.S. has done is not entirely withdrawn all of its forces. It's withdrawn forces from some areas. Interestingly, when the U.S. withdrew from its base in Manbij, for example, Russian forces moved in pretty quickly, had television images, including of RT, inside the base with the Russian flag. So we saw a quick replacement of U.S. flags now to Russian flags in areas.

The U.S. also announced that it was going to start to guard some of the oil fields in Syria to protect oil for Kurds. And then we have the U.S. decision also to continue to keep a military presence at bases like the one in Al-Tanf along the Iraqi-Syrian border just inside Syria.

So for the moment U.S. has decreased its force presence, but it has not eliminated it. So it's operating in some areas of the north, northeast, and then the south.

Bob Schieffer: Melissa, I was very interested in one of the papers you wrote in the wake of this happening. You said both the Obama administration and subsequent administrations have made enormous miscalculations and mistakes. So tell us a little about that and how that led to this, if, in fact, it did.

Melissa Dalton: Thanks so much, Bob. It's great to join you this evening, as well as this distinguished panel.

And I think what we've seen over the course of both the Obama and the Trump administrations is a failure to see and recognize the scope of the Syria challenge and the strategic interest that the United States has in play in Syria.

Both administrations have chosen to focus almost exclusively on the counterterrorism objective, which is, of course, very important for U.S. interests, whether you're considering ISIS and its affiliates and its growth in the region or al-Qaida affiliates that continue to operate in Syria.

But really this is part of a larger story of intersecting conflicts in the region, but also those that are anchored to Syria itself. And when considering U.S. interests that remain, despite this very narrowly scoped strategy, whether it's strategic competition with Russia and the gains that they've made over the last few years following their intervention in 2015 and the inroads that they've now made into northeastern Syria with the U.S. withdrawal from that area, whether it's strategic competition with Iran and how it's continuing to build out its militia presence, its missiles in places like Syria and how that connects to its broader regional strategy, and then the impact on our neighbors, Syria's neighbors, which are U.S. key regional partners, whether that's Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, of course our NATO ally,

Turkey, to the north, whose interests in Syria we severely underestimated in their opposition to the Kurdish element of the Syrian Democratic Forces that the U.S. chose to partner with in its counterterrorism operations. So, really, across the board there's been a misalignment of these strategic objectives and the – both the Obama administration and Trump administration's approach in Syria.

Bob Schieffer: Nancy Youssef, you've been covering this story for a while, all the way back to Iraq. You were the bureau chief for McClatchy and in Egypt. Are we there or have we withdrawn? I mean, we had the story about we were withdrawing. We saw all the pictures on television of the Russians coming in and the Americans, and then the next thing you know we're sending more people back to the region. Where exactly are we on that?

Nancy Youssef: So that's a great question. You'll remember in October the U.S. announced that it was withdrawing all its forces and that all those forces would be moving into Iraq, and then as soon as the U.S. said it the Iraqis said they're not staying here and the U.S. said it was going to transit them in some way, and then we heard this announcement about somewhere between 5 (hundred) and 600 troops that would be there to guard oil fields and, subsequently, we've heard about a return of missions that are countering ISIS or targeting ISIS leaders.

I think the way to think about it is the U.S. withdrew in the sense that it's no longer the buffer that protected the Kurds along the border and allowed its Kurdish partners to sort of focus on the counter-ISIS fight. They were there to buffer Turkish incursion and then, of course, as soon as they left we saw the Turks enter.

But the U.S. counter-ISIS campaign has continued, I think, less as a ground mission or as a training mission alongside Kurdish partners but more through air strikes and targeted missions through special operations and other specialized forces.

Bob Schieffer: And, Brian, down at the end, what do you – who has gained and who has lost here, and does that really matter right now?

Brian Katz: Yeah. Well, I think, ultimately, who will gain is ISIS and other extremist groups in Syria. But we can come back to that. I think in the immediate term, you know, who gains? Look to Russia, as colleagues here mentioned. With the U.S. withdrawal from a couple of key posts in northeast Syria, places like Manbij, places like Kobani – some of the key flashpoints where the U.S. actually got involved in Syria in the first place for the fight against ISIS – you've seen Russia be able to move in. We now see Russia with Turkey conducting joint patrols in northern Syria where it used to be the U.S. and Turkey conducting those as part of these confidence-building mechanisms because of our relationship with the SDF.

You see Russia enjoying the benefits of the sort of solidification of the Assad regime's control in western Syria, which, despite the continuing fighting in places like Idlib province against the opposition, there's really no direct threat to the regime anymore. So Russia has more or less secured its interests, and then with the U.S. withdrawal creates an opening for continued influence in Syria and to exploit some of our eroding partnerships in the region, particularly with Turkey, a NATO ally. Not a coincidence that that is among the key partners that Russia is trying to pick off first from this.

But going back to, you know, who ultimately benefits, you know, we can look at the Assad regime, Russia, Iran and Hezbollah and their efforts. Those have sort of continued on more or less the last few years without a direct impact from the U.S. presence. But I think our big concern, going forward, is what this means for ISIS, right. Syria is not one war. It's multiple wars that are all overlapping.

But for none of those combatants is ISIS their primary enemy. It was really the United States and SDF where that was true. Assad's focused on the opposition. Iran and Hezbollah, while supporting Assad, are focused on a potential conflict with Israel, and Russia is kind of supporting all of those objectives.

Who is going to be left to fight ISIS? We have this enduring presence now of about 5(00) to 600 U.S. troops. It's going to get more and more difficult as that presence is being squeezed by Russian and Iranian regime encroachment while ISIS is dispersing and now out in these very difficult-to-reach urban area – rural areas.

This is what the U.S. mission was intended to be, to train the SDF to continue this difficult phase of the campaign against ISIS out of places like Raqqa and into the desert and mountains, and now we see no indications of the regime, of Russia, or Iran being willing to do that difficult fighting, which is going to give space for ISIS to regroup.

Bob Schieffer: Well, I guess when we're talking about winners and losers we can say there was one definite loser and that was Baghdadi. He's not there anymore. But, Melissa, is ISIS dead?

Melissa Dalton: No. Far from it. I think what we're seeing growing evidence of is the ability of ISIS cells to regenerate through an insurgent network. The intelligence linkages to local communities, the financial networks are still active across the Syrian-Iraqi border. And given the lack of an international strategy to provide the Syrian people – who are the real losers in this equation, unfortunately and quite tragically, given everything that they've been through – the lack of a comprehensive approach to providing an alternative governance model in Syria is really the biggest win for ISIS because it's in that vacuum, that lack of alternatives, that groups like ISIS can thrive. And essentially, Assad is able to prevail in this environment, backed by Russia and Iran, and that only feeds the narrative of the extremist groups like ISIS and helps with their recruitment.

Bob Schieffer: Seth.

Seth G. Jones: Yeah, I was just going to add to Melissa's comments. And I think it's important to get your hands-on rough estimates. A range of Western governments assess significant numbers of both Islamic State and al-Qaida-linked fighters in Iraq and Syria.

If you look at Syria to start with, if you include those currently in detention including in places like Al Hol, about 15,000 or so Islamic State fighters in Iraq (sic; Syria). Add a number – add another 8,000 or so in Iraq – so 15,000 or so in Syria, another 8,000 in Iraq. When you add in the al-Qaida-linked groups, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Tanzim Rafidayn in the Idlib area, those are, you know, probably another 8,000 or so. So we're talking about over 30,000 either Islamic State or al-Qaida-linked fighters still in Iraq and Syria.

And as Melissa said, even with the Islamic State we see smaller cell structures in As-Suwayda down in the south, in the volcanic areas, in the Badia Desert, switched from controlling territory to conducting guerilla attacks, small-scale guerilla attacks. So they're not – what we don't see is large-scale control of territory, but we see significant numbers. They don't fly the Islamic State flags anymore. Some of them have been dressed in Bedouin dress. So more difficult to identify, including the satellite imagery. So they've played a little bit more of a careful role in how visible they are, but they're there.

And I think, you know, the more that time goes by and the more we attempt to fool ourselves that we've won, I think the more likely we'll see a resurgence. Because just to pick up on one last point that Brian mentioned earlier, you know, Russian forces in the south, they're not conducting sustained operations against Islamic State in any of the areas I just talked about, nor is the Syrian regime, which means for the moment the gas pedal has come off them.

Nancy Youssef: You know, it's funny. In 2010 and '11 I remember writing stories about al-Qaida in Iraq, which was the precipitating group in ISIS, being just a few hundred and sort of down and out. And within two years, in 2013 we started to see the resurrection of this group called the Islamic State and the attempt at building a caliphate, which was sort of an inconceivable idea for al-Qaida in Iraq. So when Seth is talking about thousands, you know, a few years ago we were talking about a group that was just a few hundred, to give you a sense of how quickly the situation can change. And I think it's why you're sort of hearing a nervousness between – among people about the potential for the Islamic State to return, given what happened leading up to it.

In addition, you have an Islamic State operation in Afghanistan that's quite enduring. You've seen it expand through India, Pakistan, the Stans into Asia, and to Egypt, and to Africa. And so when we think about the Islamic State and its ability to sort of return, even though I can't – I don't have the imagination to tell you how it returned, there are lots of ways and lots of parts of the Earth that it can try to sort of rebuild itself.

Bob Schieffer: Brian, what is our strategy now?

Brian Katz: OK.

Bob Schieffer: What is it – what is it we're trying to do?

Seth G. Jones: Yeah, Brian, what is our strategy?

Brian Katz: So, to the best one can discern, as Melissa said, it has been consistent now for two administrations that the primary objective of the United States in Syria is to degrade the threat from international terrorism. While there were efforts to involve ourselves in the Syrian civil war to facilitate President Bashar al-Assad's transition from power, we still have high-level diplomatic engagement to facilitate some type of political settlement to the conflict. All previous efforts have failed and they're really not going anywhere.

There's been discussion of trying to counter Iran and Hezbollah's presence in the country because of the threat that it poses to Israel. More or less, the U.S. hasn't

done anything pertaining to that. Israel has more or less taken action into its own hands to deal with the threat emanating from Syria.

So really, the last U.S. concern and the one that we're willing to direct American force towards is the threat from ISIS and to a lesser extent al-Qaida. So while strategy is, you know, traditionally something driven by overarching political objectives for a country, we don't really have any. Our objective is still a military one, which is the defeat of a terrorist group. So going forward I would expect to see the focus of U.S. effort remain how do we keep a presence in Syria and how do we keep a presence in the region, working with our regional partners, to maintain that type of persistent pressure on an ISIS and al-Qaida that are learning, adaptive organizations?

What we learned, as Nancy mentioned, from the experience with AQI is that these organizations will adapt. And if you don't adapt to them, they're going to gain the upper hand. But that's an incredibly intensive load. It requires persistent intelligence capabilities to understand how these groups are operating, and then it takes military forces to be able to take action against those groups when they're – when they're gathering steam again.

So I think what we'll see is if the U.S. maintains this 5(00) to 600 force presence with a few key bases in northeast Syria and in southern Syria along the Jordanian border, we'll see efforts from the United States to try to continue to work by, with, and through local partners, the SDF still being the main one, to counter ISIS, and then the U.S. and global coalition partners to conduct strikes against ISIS when there's intelligence. But the challenge we'll have is the SDF. They now, because of our withdrawal, feel compelled to have to collaborate or cooperate directly with the Russians and the regime against Turkey. So we will be now dealing with a partner who has been our by, with, and through force, who is also working and maybe having worked by, with, and through by our geopolitical rivals in the country.

Bob Schieffer: Did this do anything, Seth, to our credibility throughout the region, this sort of surprise withdrawal that we announced?

Seth G. Jones: Yeah, I think the biggest challenge to American credibility is how this was done, or at least one of the major ones. And you know, Brian and I were in the region talking to a number of folks, and one of the things that struck me from government officials in the region was how – was not just the withdrawal, but how it was done. They found out on social media, not through government channels. And so the challenge is, you know, how is our strategy decided? How is it then communicated across government agencies in the United States? And then how is it communicated to our partners in the region, both governments and then with the Syrian Democratic Forces, nonstate actors? I think we've had challenges in making decisions and communicating them effectively.

And why that's a problem is because I think what it forces other governments in the region to do is you've – I mean, you need – you need some consistency. It looks like, for the foreseeable future, the Russians are going to be in the region. They have power-projection capabilities at Tartus, at Latakia. And so if you're going to err with one major great power in the region, you're going to go with the Russians.

And two interesting points along these lines. One is the Israelis have developed a relatively effective relationship with the Russians. They deconflict on the Israeli strikes in Syria. And then the Jordanians have done the same thing, reasonable relations, in addition to the Lebanese and the Turks, who are buying Russian missiles now. So you know, the Russians have in many ways replaced us as a major country in the region because they are now viewed as more reliable, more permanent and long term. And that is a stunning development from a few years ago, when our National Defense Strategy says that they are strategic competitors.

Bob Schieffer: So, Melissa, one thing we haven't talked about is the humanitarian side of this. Where is the region on that? I mean, I would assume that we'd have to say that Assad is probably more in charge than he was, but what he's in charge of is a huge disaster.

Melissa Dalton: Yeah. I mean, I think the humanitarian toll in Syria is deeply profound; millions displaced, millions of refugees flowing into Europe and the surrounding region, over half a million, probably more, killed over the course of the conflict.

You layer on top of that the system of intelligence and security apparatus that detains, imprisons and tortures Syrians, and particularly as territory is reoccupied, how predatory that model can be. And there's been plenty of expedition in the media as to the atrocities of this system.

So I think it's incumbent upon the international community, given the serious missteps and misalignment that we've talked about, to think about how we can invest in justice and accountability for what has been committed in Syria. This week, working through Congress, is the Caesar bill, as part of the National Defense Authorization Act, that is going to put in place on Syria unprecedented sanctions, layered on top of the sanctions that already exist, that's going to circumvent international investment in Syria.

However, with this – and I should note that the spirit and intent behind Caesar is for accountability. Caesar was somebody who – it's his code name or his pseudonym – with somebody who was actually tortured in the Assad regime but smuggled out documentation of the atrocities that had been committed. And so there's been a campaign over a number of years to seek some recognition of these atrocities and next steps and sanctions from the international community.

So the fact that this is moving forward, I think, is positive if you value that justice-and-accountability objective. The downside is that, you know, where does this leave the Syrian people in the reconstruction and humanitarian toll in Syria? When there are such diminishing options for the United States and its allies in terms of how we've extricated ourselves from Syria and diminished our leverage, where does that leave the Syrian people if we're going to crowd out the possibilities for reconstruction?

And so it's a significant dilemma for the United States and its allies to think about how to balance that humanitarian objective with these justice-and-accountability mechanisms that are absolutely necessary, you know, to right not only the atrocities in Syria, but also and the acceptability of other, you know, atrocities being able to be replicated in other conflicts going forward.

Bob Schieffer: Seth, what are the steps we ought to be taking right now? What are we doing that's good? What are the things we should not be doing on this?

Seth G. Jones: Well, I think the broader question is to make it clear, both within the government and externally, what are our political objectives, long-term political objectives, in the region? And what are the primary instruments of power – military, information, diplomatic, development – to help achieve those objectives with our partners in the region?

And so I think, you know, there are a combination of counterterrorism objectives. We've already outlined that there needs to be a continuing presence and pressure on Islamic State and al-Qaida groups in the region. So I think what that suggests is the U.S. needs not just a military posture, probably talking more about Special Operations forces and intelligence units to keep pressure, work with partners in the region to provide training assistance and advice to them, but also working other aspects of this; I mean, diplomatic component.

When Nancy brings up the broader issues of Islamic State activity and al-Qaida activity in other regions, you know, there's a strong need for diplomatic engagement in Libya, because we've got not one government but several; same thing in Yemen, diplomatic engagement to try to end some of these wars that are breeding grounds for militant groups.

I think, in addition, we do have to think also about objectives in containing Iranian expansion, and also, to some degree, containing Russian expansion. So I do think this requires some U.S. presence and activity across all those instruments with key partners in the region. But it has to hinge on what are our long-term objectives in the region. To me, they're not really clearly identified at this point.

Bob Schieffer: Nancy, what if we just truly pull out? What if the United States were no longer a player –

Nancy Youssef: In Syria – just Syria.

Nancy Youssef: Yeah.

Nancy Youssef: OK. I mean – well, let me just start by saying, you know, the U.S. objectives that it's wanted in Syria, as we talked about, they've sort of relinquished, right. The U.S. has started out by saying Bashar al-Assad cannot stay. And the reality is it appears he's going to stay. It said that Russia couldn't sort of become an influential competitor in the region. And that's happened.

And I should point out, I think there's an argument to be made that it's not that Moscow seeks to end these wars, but on the contrary, to keep them going, to maintain its level of influence and have as many people dependent on them as possible. The U.S. said it didn't want an expanded Iranian presence in Syria, and we've seen that as well.

So I think the short answer is if you see the U.S. completely withdraw from Syria, at the minimum you're going to see – and we've started to see this – real atrocities committed against the Kurds and tens of thousands of suspected ISIS fighters and

their families not guarded, because the minute the Kurds can't protect themselves, they cannot protect those that they're guarding in those facilities.

And I think, broadly speaking, you lose years of intelligence and partnerships and understanding of the region to sort of spot these problems going forward. I think, you know, some people would point to the U.S. withdrawal of Iraq as sort of a warning of what happens when you just leave. I think the challenge is you're doing this in a much more complex environment.

That all said, I understand why there is such an exhaustion with sort of open-ended conflicts where there doesn't seem to be a clear withdrawal. So it's an understandable frustration that you hear from the public when we're talking about open-ended conflicts for, in some cases, decades. And so I think the calculation is, is there a long-term cost for a potential short-term gain or seeming benefit of ending wars? And if you do withdraw, can you do it in such a way where you have partners on the ground that can maintain some sort of pressure on the Islamic State?

Bob Schieffer: All right. Well, let's go to the audience and see if you all have some questions on this very complicated subject here.

Way in the back. And hold the microphone up close, because the acoustics – it's very difficult to hear anything back there.

Questioner: It just seems to me – I mean, how many years have we been in all these countries? And every one we've been into has been destabilized. We've got ISIS sprouting up. We've got – I didn't even realize that they were in Afghanistan. But they're in Iraq. They're in Libya, and now trying to destroy Syria.

What is the end game here? And who's benefiting from this? Someone's making money off of this.

Bob Schieffer: I'll ask the panel. I was unable to hear any of that.

Seth G. Jones: It was if the Islamic State –

Bob Schieffer: It's just an age thing.

Melissa Dalton: Yeah. I mean, I'll take a stab at it. It's basically the question – it seems like wherever we've intervened, things have gotten worse. And, you know, ISIS has proliferated to multiple countries, to include Afghanistan. I'll start and answer. And please feel free to jump in, fellow panelists.

You know, I think it's a question of the balance of the tools that we bring to these equations. I think there has been a heavy reliance over the last 20 years on the military instrument, which is highly effective but limited in terms of achieving some of the types of objectives that we've set out for ourselves in the region. So it gets back again to this misalignment of what are our strategic aims as stated, whether it's for a region or for a country? And then what sort of tools are we not only bringing to bear, but resourcing?

I think, when you take a step back and look at this region and the problems that are resident in them, and what ISIS is an expression of is poor governance. And so what are the tools that you need to enable local partners to redefine their political dynamics in a way that answers the expressions of, let's say, the Lebanese, who are protesting across confessional lines in Lebanon, or in Iraq protesting against the Iranian consulate in Karbala, which, you know, would have been unheard of several years ago.

These are governance questions. And so what tools can the U.S. bring to bear in a credible way to give people in the region the tools that they need to redefine their environment? And that will then circumvent the ability of extremist groups like ISIS, like al-Qaida, to take hold.

Bob Schieffer: OK. Over here.

Nancy Youssef: I just wanted to add real quickly –

Bob Schieffer: Oh, go ahead, Nancy.

Nancy Youssef: – because I think you raised such a great point in terms of is the U.S. presence sort of causing problems that are facilitating. I think the one area in my reporting where you see that the most is civilian casualties. The way that ISIS was moved out of Mosul and Raqqa was through the – frankly, the destruction of these cities. And I think while the U.S. makes great efforts to avoid civilian casualties, I think when they happen it exponentially raises the possibility of creating another future insurgent. I mean, so I think that – when Melissa talks about the limitations of the military component, I think one of those is that dependency on it to sort of take on a problem once it becomes a crisis is the wholesale destruction of communities and potentially creating new members of these groups going forward.

Bob Schieffer: Seth did you want to –

Seth G. Jones: Yeah, I'm just going to push back a little bit to the argument that, you know, U.S. actions are at the core of much of what we're seeing. I think, you know, the interesting development is you see the numbers of both jihadist groups and of fighters – Salafi jihadist fighters – increase dramatically. So we have mapped the numbers, put a database together. The biggest jumps are 2011, '12, '13, '14. This is when the slope of the curve starts to increase dramatically. And when you look at where these are going on, they're actually structural conditions, events like the Arab Spring, which is weakening governments. And you know, you had large protest movements in Egypt and we had additional protest movements in Yemen. We had the protest movements that started Syria and triggering wars. Al-Qaida in Iraq takes advantage of the Syrian uprisings and pushes fighters in, including Mohammed Jolani. So there's a lot happening in addition to external powers getting involved in these cases. There are also lots of structural conditions.

Which brings me to this final point, Bob, that we've got protest movements in Lebanon right now, in Iraq still – we've seen the end of leaders there. We've got large protest movements in Iran. We have – I mean, I'm not sure this protest movement which has created such dramatic developments over the past seven or eight years, these may not be done. In which case, if we have greater instability, we go right back to the problem that Melissa just identified: weakening governments,

including the security services, that may provide opportunities. This is in addition to whatever the U.S. does.

Bob Schieffer: All right. Over here. This gentleman right here.

Questioner: Yeah, hi. Thank you for –

Bob Schieffer: Here comes the microphone.

Seth G. Jones: Right behind you.

Questioner: Thank you for a great panel. I'm curious what you see as the regime's main domestic and international goals as the country starts to transition into a post-conflict environment, particularly how it plans to interact with the two sort of remaining countries, Iran and Russia. Thank you.

Bob Schieffer: Who'd like to answer?

Brian Katz: I can go ahead.

Bob Schieffer: Go ahead.

Brian Katz: Yeah. So I think the Assad regime's priority, you know, first geographically, is western Syria. Which is, one, stabilizing and sort of putting in place firmer regime control in areas that have been recaptured the last few years. So think about places like Aleppo, think about eastern Damascus, think about places like Homs and Hama. And then within that process, essentially trying to co-opt what remains of were opposition groups there to sort of bring them in through these reconciliation agreements, but for those where there is still suspected ties to armed opposition groups or just from past behavior to use all of the means that the Assad regime's security and intelligence services have at their disposal. So, as Melissa mentioned, sort of large mass imprisonments, the use of torture, the use of just sort of intense measures to assert your control over the population, to try to ensure that there's not going to be any other type of internal revolt ever again. So I think that's a – it's a brutal and intensive means by which they are trying to assert control.

In terms of internationally, I think the Assad regime is moving towards what ultimately is in Assad's head, is to try to reassert his nation's sovereignty over the rest of the map of Syria. So I think that's why you see this outreach to groups like the SDF, so that they can avoid having to have a battle with the SDF to regain eastern Syria. They can, by helping advance a U.S. withdrawal by engaging with the SDF, start to be able to have a nominal regime presence back in these places like Deir ez-Zor, Qamishli, Hasaka, so slowly but surely they can – they can reassert control.

And I think working with Russia to try to check further Turkish expansion into the country in the north. Turkish forces are more or less holding their gains right now. In part, that is because of Russian efforts working with both the SDF and the Turks.

Bob Schieffer: Melissa.

Melissa Dalton: If I can also just quickly weigh in on this, because I know there's other questions. I mean, I think one of the interesting spaces to watch as we move into this next phase of the conflict in Syria is, you know, how the alliance between Russia and Iran and Assad shifts, you know, particularly as this becomes more of a political question and a competition over the spoils of war. Because I think, you know, Russia is vested in the Assad kind of model and that top-down state structures that, you know, they have supported their military for years, they've got those connections, you know, to the political and military apparatus.

Iran is taking a different approach. I mean, they have had longstanding operational intelligence linkages in Syria to support their enterprise in Lebanon with Lebanese Hezbollah, but you know, are building not only the network of proxies and missile facilities that Seth and his team have been exposing, but also engaged in a soft-power campaign to change kind of the bottom-up dynamics in Syria, whether that's through Husainiyah's, you know, schools and mosques, and bringing in some of that Iranian theology – that I'm not convinced is necessarily going to sit well with Russia because it's changing the flavor and the composition of Syria. So does this – I think the strategic question is, does this present the U.S. and its allies with some sort of advantage, you know, if that's a true cleavage? And are there opportunities that reside there for the U.S. and its allies?

Bob Schieffer: All right. Anyone else? Right here. This gentleman right here.

Questioner: Thank you. I'd like to get the panel's reaction to what seems to be really sort of a sea change in opinion here. I mean, for example, you've got The Washington Post with the so-called Afghanistan Papers, supposed to be like the Pentagon Papers, and this whole – this whole memory of Vietnam seems to be coming back. I mean, it seems like some people knew we're not going to be able to win this war long before we gave up trying to do that.

But just to hitch onto somebody specific, Professor Bacevich, who you must be familiar with now, he's written books on this. And I mean, basically, that's his argument. I mean, we just – it's not going to work, and it was never going to work; and we can try as hard as we want for as long as want and suffer as much as we want and other people suffer as much as they want, but simply speaking, the facts are it will never work. How do you – and obviously, I didn't give the argument for that – but how do you answer somebody like Professor Bacevich, who obviously is a highly intelligent military person and, of course, professor at Boston University?

Melissa Dalton: Yeah. I mean, I think Professor Bacevich represents an important voice in the policy conversation that is increasingly taking hold in terms of exercising restraint and being a bit humble and having some humility about how we can particularly use our military to achieve our strategic aims. And this gets back to the earlier conversation, too, about, you know, being very clear about what we're trying to achieve in these different areas of the world, and then the tools and resourcing that we're willing to bring to bear and sustain over time requires a political commitment. And I think where the breakdown has occurred is that policymakers haven't had a transparent conversation with the American public, with the American Congress about what we're actually trying to achieve, how difficult it's going to be, and that it is going to require a long-term commitment, but also having the ability to accept failures on a pathway to hopeful success, but also reevaluate

where it is that we are going as we go. And it's that breakdown in the system that I think we've, unfortunately, seen play out over time.

I, frankly, was not surprised by what we saw in the Post. For anybody that's been paying attention to Afghanistan over the last 20 years, there's been plenty of public expedition – exposition of the failures and the missteps there. But you know, I think in some areas some have marginal success. But we haven't connected those broad strategic aims to the resourcing piece effectively.

Bob Schieffer: Seth?

Seth G. Jones: Yeah, just briefly. I mean, you know, I've been interested in the Post stories. I mean, Brian is in the same position I am, although a different organization. I was in Afghanistan in United States Special Operations. I think the – here's the challenge is I think if you go back to 9/11, and I think this is the same challenge we faced with the Islamic State's rise in 2014 and '15, is the choice between not going or going.

I think, based on having a Taliban that was not willing to give up Osama bin Laden and that was willing to harbor groups that were plotting attacks overseas, when we had the Islamic State in 2014 that was – if we go up to 2015, plotting attacks in Paris – for example, the Bataclan attacks – there was a lot of external operations coming out of the Iraq-Syria border, was the choice either not to go in at all or to go in – or to go in? And it's not a zero to one choice.

I mean, part of the question is what do you do. If you're going to go into some of these countries and use instruments of power – military intelligence, development, diplomatic – what are you going to do on the ground? And I think where we've gone, and I think this is probably the right direction, is we've shifted a lot from thinking that we can solve the problem by flooding these countries with American military forces – a hundred thousand plus both in Iraq and Afghanistan, in each of them. We went over a hundred thousand in both. That, clearly, was not, in my view, the answer.

I could have said that – I did say that at the time when I was there. But I think, you know, that still doesn't get around the question, should we have been there, and I think the answer there is yes. The question is for how long and what should we have done, and that answer is a little bit more difficult.

The Russians are in this position in Syria, which is they're winning the war. They're not putting any resources – any meaningful resources into development and reconstruction. Will they pay a price for not doing any of that if Syria falls apart again and it's on them? It's the Pottery Barn rule. Now the Russians have to learn it instead of just the Americans.

Brian Katz: I'll just say two quick things. One, there's a rich history of the U.S. intelligence community assessing progress or lack thereof in a conflict and U.S. policymakers and military commanders saying something opposite. So the Afghanistan Papers shouldn't be a surprise to anyone who's studied the histories of Vietnam or even in real time. So you can look at the differences between what was the public testimony of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence every year during this Afghan war versus the statements coming from U.S. policy and military officials. It looks like they're talking about two wars.

So this really – people who are saying now they’re shocked by this I think are being disingenuous if they’re still in government. But we are actually at a time where you have a consistent view for the last several years across the U.S. intelligence community and among the military and policymakers about the threat from ISIS, now, with its most likely resurgence in the coming years exploiting this world safe haven, but even going back, and, as Seth said, this decision for U.S. intervention in the Middle East and North Africa.

I think most Americans and global partners agree that if you have a terrorist group that is transnationally operating and trying to conduct attacks against the U.S., our Western allies, and our interests in these regions, you take action. But there’s a process between a group when they get to that point versus when before they first started to emerge.

Most likely than not, maybe they were a rural insurgency. Then they slowly started gathering steam and started putting pressure on, you know, nations’ capitals and then in that process they’re developing networks and cells across the region and maybe that expands into Europe. Where in that process do you, as the U.S. and your global partners, start to intervene? There’s no good answer to that. But I think that’s the type of discussion –

Seth G. Jones: And what do you do when you intervene.

Brian Katz: And what do you do and who do you do it with. Those are the types of questions I think are helpful for framing this and that need to be a conversation with the American people. We can point to 10 places right now, from the Philippines to Mali to other – broadly that part of the Sahel in West Africa, where you have groups that fulfill some of that criteria.

They’ve pledged allegiance to ISIS or al-Qaida. They’re conducting regular attacks against the armies in those regions. There’s Western forces – the French, mainly – in those areas. Where is the trigger point for when it’s determined to be a threat to U.S. interests? There’s no clean trigger point but that, I think, is how you need to think about and have – how policymakers need to engage the public on it.

Nancy Youssef: Just to be provocative, I think critics like Andrew Bacevich – I have talked to him, but not about Syria specifically – here’s what the critics would say in terms of where the lessons of Afghanistan weren’t learned in Syria. When the U.S. partnered with Kurdish forces, it knew from the minute it entered that it was going to reach a point where there was going to be a conflict with its NATO ally in Turkey, and never addressed it. And we were – we were always, you know, driving towards this conflict point, one.

Two, you have a president who repeatedly signaled that he wanted out of Syria, and you’ve had a national security apparatus that has not been willing to put forth a plan that meets the political means as he sees it.

And so, again, I think those two conflicts sort of put us on a collision course towards a withdrawal. And so for those who say that the president was reckless or in how he did it, there’s a counterargument to be made that his national security team did not learn the lessons from Afghanistan in the sense of sort of anticipating

political decisions and anticipating conflicts that come with its intervention; that is, it hadn't fully thought out the end state, the offramp from these interventions.

Bob Schieffer:

All right. I think on that, the one thing I know how to do, as I've said before, I know how to get off the air. Our time - . Thank you all very much on behalf of TCU and CSIS.

(END)