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PRESS BRIEFING ON IRAQ, AFGHANISTAN, AND GULF REGION

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ANDREW SCHWARTZ: Good morning and welcome to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Thank you for coming out for Tony Cordesman's briefing. He's just returned from Iraq and Afghanistan and I'll let him tell you all about that. After all, what would Valentine's Day be without a briefing from Tony Cordesman on Iraq and Afghanistan. But we are very fortunate to have Tony's insights. He has been on the ground in some very interesting places over the last couple weeks. And I think you'll benefit largely from hearing his observations. And with that, my esteemed colleague, Tony Cordesman.

ANTHONY CORDESMAN: Thank you very much, Andrew. I'd like to make just a few introductory remarks because if there is any lesson I drew from both battlefields – and I had the opportunity to be in the 82nd Airborne's area of operations in Afghanistan and to tour most of the areas inside Iraq where there is still fighting going on – it is first that sometimes we forget that victory or defeat at this point is more likely to be dictated by the political issues within Iraq and Afghanistan than by the way in which we fight. And it is clear that in both countries we face serious problems with weak central governments, with a lack of local and provincial governments, a lack of services, and a lack of development.

A lot of what I am going to say about the military situation is positive. But I think we need to recognize more clearly that each country's political weaknesses, its internal problems, and its neighbors, may really be what determines the outcome. I also may use the term victory occasionally during this briefing, and I want to be clear about what that is. It is essentially that we end up with a reasonable degree of security, stability, and a reasonably friendly state.

The idea that we're going to transform either Afghanistan or Iraq into something approaching a Western democracy or a modern power within the foreseeable future is simply not realistic. As one aid worker put it in Iraq, you are never going to get our version of democracy. The best you can ever hope for is Iraq-racy. And I think that that is a realistic perspective.

There are two other points that became clear. Throughout the theater, regardless of where I went or the colleagues who traveled with me, we saw presentations and plans that divided counterinsurgency into three dimensions. These were security; they were governance; and they were development. Particularly in Iraq but also in Afghanistan, it was not the security dimension, the kinetics, the war-fighting that were the critical problems. The critical problems lay in governance and in development. Both in terms of the inability of the host country to move forward quickly, effectively, and without corruption, and the limits in terms of a lack of aid workers, particularly skilled aid workers, and the lack of resources that could deal with the immediate problems.

The second message is one of timelines. When you go into the forward area or you talk to people who are in headquarters, no one talks in real terms about decisive years or irreversible momentum; 2008 is going to have to give way to 2009. The plans you see almost invariably have timeframes like 2012, 2015, and 2020. These are going to be long wars, which require consistent U.S. efforts.

That doesn't mean the current troop levels or war-fighting levels; it does mean advisory efforts, aid efforts, consistent long-term plans. And that also means that there is no one who is planning today to have either war won before the end of the next presidency. The quality of the transition, the quality in which the next president deals with these issues, is going to determine the outcome. And when we talk about political campaigns in terms of this year, the fact is this is completely unrealistic. It also means it will be absolutely critical to have a smooth transfer of plans, resources, command, and action from the current presidency to the next presidency. If that falters or is inadequate, it could have – in both cases – devastating consequences.

Now, let me talk briefly about what I saw in terms of the security situation there. And I will try to summarize it quickly by each country and then get to your interests and your questions. And Adam, if I could have the first map.

These are complex situations, and the reality is, I can't talk about what is happening without talking about some of the issues which arise in ethnic and sectarian terms. The first map I am showing you is Afghanistan. I've given you in a handout some of the data that is available on the growth and expansion of Taliban influence. What I think is critical to note, however, is that when you go to Afghanistan, something is clear that should have been clear from the start: This is an Afghan-Pakistani conflict. It is still centered around the Pashtuns in both countries. It is something which is in many ways determined at the local level.

The outcome in war-fighting has become actually steadily less important in the course of this year. The Taliban has been able to expand its support areas, its areas of economic and political influence in spite of what has been an almost continuous process of tactical defeat. It has done so because it has attempted much more to avoid the kind of major combat or clash that existed last year, to insert and infiltrate forces into Afghanistan, and do so broadly.

One of the striking things about U.S. intelligence estimates is the growth of support areas for the Taliban in broad areas west of Kabul, moving into the north, moving further into the West, essentially taking over territory in terms of political and economic influence by taking advantage of the fact that NATO has far too few forces to adopt a win-and-hold strategy. The Afghan army is developing very slowly and the Afghan police is probably more part of the problem than part of the solution.

But what is also striking is that the expansion of Taliban and other Islamist elements and of al Qaeda in Pakistan has been much more rapid this year than it has been in Afghanistan. And U.S. estimates are dividing the threat into two basic groups: a

traditional Taliban effort under Omar in the south – and you can see the southern border in Baluchistan, largely national, largely driven by the same concerns that created the Taliban originally – and a much more sophisticated evolving network of Taliban, al Qaeda, HIG, and other efforts in the east, which are more adaptive, much harder to attack, concentrating really both on moving and infiltrating into Afghanistan, but also moving out of the FATA or tribal areas in Pakistan, expanding their influence, reaching out to the Kashmiri Islamist extremists.

The estimate, quite frankly, is that they are doing so with at least some support of elements by the ISI, the intelligence groups inside Pakistan, and that there are problems within the Pakistani army. Whether these will continue after the Bhutto assassination in the same way is not clear. But at least when you look at the maps of areas of influence and support, in spite of the fact we have won virtually every clash this year, we are losing in terms of political and economic structures. There is very little actual aid presence in terms of developing governance and aid assistance in most areas. We do not have the people or resources to cover the border, or most of the areas where conflict or tension is taking place.

Our victories in Afghanistan are not yet matched by the Pakistanis. They are losing most clashes. Their claims to tactical victories are often uncertain or unreal. And this is presenting serious problems. It will take a major reorganization of the way the Pakistanis organize and deploy if we are to secure the border.

I think it is also true that the shortages in aid workers and aid resources, the failure of the Afghan government to move forward, not simply at the political level but in providing services, in simply being present in most parts of Afghanistan, are being matched by the fact that NATO is disorganized, ineffective, and cannot really fight until the stand-aside countries and the caveat countries participate. The numbers are too small. They will remain too small with the U.S. buildup.

When you talk to people in the field, they are much more cautious, much more determined to provide warnings about NATO's lack of troop strength and lack of coherence. But let me be very clear: This is not a test of NATO. NATO's command structure, its rules of engagement are very solid. It is a test of individual countries within NATO and their willingness to back up the countries that actually fight. And unfortunately, sometimes, the tensions that occur between the United States, Britain, Canada, the countries actually fighting, disguise the fact that the countries that aren't fighting are going to encounter a serious growth in Taliban influence and Taliban threat for which they are probably not prepared.

If I can turn to the next map, which is Iraq, I think the outlines are more familiar. We had the opportunity to go to Mosul, to go to Fallujah, to go down to Basra, to visit the provinces in the south, Anbar, to go up to Diyalah, to go into Baghdad, and into southern Baghdad, the Baghdad ring. In virtually every case, it was clear that we have scored very significant tactical gains.

It's important to understand, however, what is happening. Part of this is the troop buildup. But what is far more important is a change in tactics, to go from basically staying in rear bases, winning, and leaving, to a forward deployment and to win and hold. We would not have succeeded without the tribal uprising, which began in Anbar and has now moved far more widely. The question whether the tribal uprising could move into areas which were Shi'ite or mixed as well as Sunni has been resolved: It's quite clear it can. You can see the posts mapped in detail wherever you go except in the south. And I'll come to the reasons in a moment.

The tensions between Kurds, minorities, and Arabs remain. They are serious. But the friction points have been far less violent than many people feared. And the U.N. is making significant progress, as is, I think, the United States and other countries in trying to find a way to resolve these differences in ways which will not split the country or lead to violence. You do see, as one of the critical dimensions, however, that what was once called the tribal uprising, and then the Concerned Local Citizens, and now the Sons of Iraq, will only be secure and stable if the Iraqi government does a far better job of reaching out to them, supplementing, and paying for them, taking them into the Iraqi security services, and showing the Sunnis that this is not a Shi'ite government that is incapable of actually sharing money and resources.

Unfortunately, much is – oddly enough – true of the Shi'ite councils as well. One of the striking realities of what is happening there and that could affect stability in the future is, as security improves, people are less and less tolerant of the inability of the central government to spend money honestly and effectively, to transfer resources to the provinces, to provide elementary services, to go beyond security to being a government that serves the people. If anything, what is being exposed particularly in the south in the Shi'ite areas is that ISCI dominates the governors and dominates the police without providing services, resources, or development, even to Shi'ites. There is a peculiar equality here. It is failing both Sunni and Shi'ites with equal effectiveness.

It is also clear that our victories have not been matched by what has happened in the south. The British effectively lost Basra over a year ago. Basra is dominated by rival Shi'ite gangs. The level of Iranian influence in Basra is far more striking when you go there than when you read about it. And it is a very serious and rising problem. What we do not have is a clear basis for political consensus and support in the south.

And that raises another reason we've been able to win: It is very dependant on the Sadr militia continuing to have a cease-fire and allowing us to concentrate on the worst elements of the Sadr militia, the rogue elements that we have been able to attack. We could not have succeeded at anything like the present level, if at all, had the Sadr militia not stood aside and had a cease-fire.

We have also succeeded for a whole variety of reasons because of improved intelligence, improved tactics, improved technology. But the surge has failed almost completely at least as yet in dealing with the problems of governance and development.

Creating effective PRTs is still very much a work in progress. It has effectively lapsed in many areas or lagged by nearly a year. And it is still unclear what can or cannot be done.

The inability of the Iraqi government is matched by the fact we have far too few aid workers present. We are forcing the U.S. military to take on far too much of the aid task. And a combination of the Congress and the failure to fund long-term programs in terms of the president's budget request has created a morass of conflicting constraints on the ability to use aid money effectively, which threaten our ability to sustain the local militias, much less move toward any kind of actual development.

This something I've found striking. I expected to find military problems to be the most critical. Instead, it was really a matter of governance and development at the provincial and local levels, which were the most serious threat to stability and to sustaining the kind of victory we've had. And with that, let me simply leave things up to your questions, and I will try to address what I've found in both battlefields.

MR. SCHWARTZ: John.

Q: (Off mike, inaudible.)

MR. SCHWARTZ: Hey John, could you talk into the microphone, please? Thank you.

Q: Okay, you talked of Afghanistan, of the timeframes that the people on the ground are talking about. Tell us a little bit about the timeframes that the people on the ground in Iraq are talking about.

MR. CORDESMAN: It's almost exactly the same. It doesn't matter whether it is the Iraqi minister of defense or it is the U.S. advisory teams. By the time we get through all of the support activity, the military enablers, the other things we need to create an Iraqi army, which can really sustain counterinsurgency on its own, we are going to be at least at 2012. What it will take to establish a rule of law and an effective Iraqi police force – if it's possible at all, because it may well end up very divided, sectarian and ethnic in character – is a timeframe we can't yet establish. To create an Iraqi force that can defend itself against its neighbors is going to require U.S. help and assistance at least through 2015, and possibly through 2020.

When we talk about moving into effective economic development, it will almost certainly be well into 2009 and probably 2010 before the Iraqi central government can really manage simply spending money on development in services effectively. Right now, we have a major problem because if we're to ensure stability, the U.S. aid effort is going to have to take into account the realities of just how inadequate the Iraqi central government is, which means that the U.S. aid effort is going to have to be larger and more prolonged than has ever been requested. And if you have looked carefully at this year's budget request, there is not request as yet for 2009 that describes any programs or any activities. And in fact, everything is deferred to a supplemental.

We face the fact that in virtually every area where the CPA tried to make a major shift in the Iraqi economy, it is a matter of record through the SIGR and other sources: It failed. But more than that, we don't have funds at this point to deal with the areas where individual projects succeeded. The money isn't there to transfer and sustain these efforts until the Iraqis are ready to fully absorb and fund them.

And talking about Iraqi oil wealth is irrelevant for two reasons. First, until you can spend it, it doesn't matter how much they have in the bank. And second, when you look at the scale of what needs to be done, you have to remember this country ran out of money in 1982. It had to cut back and choose between guns and butter in 1984. Its population has almost doubled since that time. We're not talking about reconstruction; we're talking about construction. And if you divide the number of Iraqis into Iraq's supposed oil wealth, Iraq is in the lowest fifth of developing countries in terms of oil revenue. And it is going to take years to raise those numbers to the type of level where you can sustain high levels of development.

Now, all of these are reasonably obvious facts. But as I hardly need point out, the political debate is over how to get it done in a hurry. And the political debate is simply decoupled from reality.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Ann.

Q: (Off mike.)

MR. CORDESMAN: Well, there's no question, I think, to that strategic level because it's in their literature. When you look at the web pages and their statements, when you look at the pattern of action, it hasn't yet moved clearly from east beyond Kabul to the west. It has certainly been a factor in the south. So far, it has been largely bombings, individuals attacks. It hasn't been a concerted campaign. And it's not clear what it will be. It's not clear how they're going to use these support areas next year.

We tend to forget that the doctrine in guerilla war is to avoid direct clashes with combat troops – 2007 was almost a model of how you should not fight a guerilla war or long war. And the doctrine involved goes back to Sun Tzu. Certainly anyone who read Mao would not have taken the chances that the Taliban took in 2007. The difficulty is that to counter the tactic of simply establishing influence through intimidation, through domination of the narcotics industry, which has moved south into Taliban-occupied areas, through the use of simply being there while there is no police, military, or government presence. These are the tactics, which they're obviously exploiting just looking at the intelligence maps of the expansion of influence, into areas they weren't in last year. But how they're going to play it out next year or over time is very hard to determine.

And I should note that while the movements in the east have become more sophisticated, more restrained, perhaps paid more attention to local sensitivities, one

problem the Taliban faces is – particularly the Omar movements in the south – still are very, very extreme. And a lot of what the Taliban does, particularly as it moves toward the areas, which are not Pashtun – is going to present really serious problems because the people there simply don't share the Taliban's religious agenda, don't tolerate the kinds of actions it will have. So it's not clear how far they can go with what they're doing today, and how they'll succeed once they move from moving into the area to actually taking action.

MR. SCHWARTZ: David.

Q: Tony, there's been a lot of – as you know – a lot of speculation and attention paid to the question of how quickly U.S. forces can be drawn down in Iraq. But it seems that perhaps there's been less focus on the question of how quickly the mission can be transitioned from a combat mission to a lower profile mission of support and intelligence and counterterrorism. I was wondering, from your standpoint, do these things seem to be traveling along the same track or are they different tracks? And if so, how would you assess the progress that's being made on the transition of the mission itself?

MR. CORDESMAN: Well, first I think that when we run down from really 20 to 15 brigades, we're not simply cutting troops. You're moving people into transition teams. You're taking troops and dispersing them into areas, which we've not attempted to hold before. You're working in a different kind of partnership with Iraqi forces. And these forces are taking time to develop, but they are increasingly capable of performing missions, particularly if they have partner units or they have embedded training teams to start. We're shifting people out of the military training teams and we're providing teams for police and this is critical to try to limit the police becoming essentially the captives of local political movements.

But I think that we have to be very, very careful here. We've used this term surge. By historical standards, we have a tiny fraction of the troops necessary to occupy the area against a counterinsurgency movement. If we rush out too quickly, we are going to create gaps before the Iraqi forces are ready to fill them. And I think that when we talk about strategic over-watch, that's a fine phrase. But through 2008 and 2009, what you really need is something very different. It's a very cautious, conditions-based test of can you make these reductions, can you get the Iraqi forces to really take over? Can you find ways to move money and services in for governance and development?

And the map of success should dictate the rate at which we withdraw, not some sort of strange categorization we use in theory on some PowerPoint slide to distinguish between combat forces and strategic over-watch. We are already thin. The compensation is the rising level of Iraqi capability. But if we end up taking considerable tactical success and creating the climate where development and governance can take place and simply allowing not simply al Qaeda to reassert itself but the JAM, part of the Sadr militia, or local tribal and other disputes because we have rushed out, we are going to sacrifice the gains we've made. And you can talk all you want about coming back to

reassert our capabilities, but I don't think once those problems arise you're going to be able to come back and solve them.

In short, I think that we have to be very cautious and conditions-based. And frankly, this is the best way to reduce American casualties. It may be more expensive in terms of American dollars. But there is probably going to be a choice between dollars and blood. And frankly, I'd prefer to spend the dollars.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah.

Q: How do you see the role, the strategy of Iran at the moment in Iraq?

MR. CORDESMAN: It was made repeatedly clear, not simply by our intelligence experts but by those of allied countries, that Iranian influence is still continuing to build up the militias, to provide training, to provide weapons. There have been statements about Iran pausing or reducing its capabilities. I think that these have been episodic and cyclical. The level of Iranian activity in the south is very high. The level in Basra is seen as a major threat. And one of the striking things was to be told again and again by people in the Iraqi government and in the Iraqi military that Iran supports ISCI in the idea of a nine-province federation, that it sees the creation of a kind of Shi'ite enclave as something that it is directly backing, and where it is trying to win influence.

Now, I don't mean in saying this that we're going to see a sudden flood of new EFPs or that you're going to see dramatic new shifts in the way Iran arms people there. But it's quite clear that Iran is supporting all of the factions in Basra province and more broadly is supporting both the Sadr militias and the Badr organization on a target of opportunity basis.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Dr. Slanner (ph).

Q: Question about the awakening councils, your assessment of their effectiveness, and how they could be included in the potential reconciliation in Iraq? Why this reconciliation is being delayed? What is the major factor that affecting not reaching that reconciliation that the surge was supposed to achieve? One other just –

MR. CORDESMAN: Let me take them one at a time. First, people, I think, correctly use the word accommodation. People aren't going to be reconciled. There have been too much violence; there have been too many tensions. The question is, can they work out a new set of arrangements within Iraq? When you talk about this, we also have to remember that for most of the people involved, these are very real divisions and interests, coupled often to the fact they can be existential. If you can't work it out, you end up killed. This is not something where you simply wave a few political wands, talk about smart or soft power, and everybody suddenly becomes something they are not today.

I think that it should always have been obvious that trying to figure out peacefully a resolution of the dividing lines between Kurd, Arab, and minority would take a lot of time. And the more time it took, as long as you could do it peacefully, and work out clear boundaries and working relationships, the better. The same is true of what is happening between Sunni and Shi'ite, what's happening in Baghdad, which is still divided into Sunni, Shi'ite, and mixed areas. It's going to take time to open up markets, lines of communication, make it safe to move from one area to another. It's going to take time to show that you can move money into Iraq in ways, which don't favor one group over the other in ways, which are unacceptable, that government services will be provided in ways that don't discriminate.

You mentioned these councils. Now, understand, there are many different tribal federations inside Iraq. And each operates to different rules, different principles, and different mixes of interest in given areas. Essentially, what we're really talking about is still in the case of the Sons of Iraq, which is the new term for these, or sometimes Daughters of Iraq, they're all going to be very local. To make things work, you've got to transfer these people not into some sort of complex political solution; you've got to find jobs for people 18 to 30. You've got to take them either into the Iraqi security services or find ways that they can earn a living, have a family, go back to something approaching the society they had before the invasion.

This is beginning to work, but it's going to take sustained funding and development. It means that local authorities need to be elected, frankly. They're not going to come out of these groups. They're going to have to come from a mix of them and the other people in each area. It means you need stronger provincial governments because this central government is not going to get fixed in ways which can go from the command kleptocracy that existed in Iraq under Saddam Hussein to something, which can honestly deal with provincial and local interests.

And that type of development is a very time-consuming difficult problem. You need to have not simply provincial powers but provincial and local elections. You have to correct the disaster of the way the U.S. organized national elections with closed lists that did not represent anyone by area in Iraq, and have open-listed elections. And those can't occur before 2009. For these groups that are part of the tribal awakening that are Sunni to be represented, you have to have a new election for the national assembly, the COR. That won't occur before 2009. And you also have to remember that many of these people are emerging with almost no previous administrative or political experience. And it's going to take them time to learn how to work together.

So the answer to your question is extremely complex; it's going to require a lot of aid and governance and a lot of patience and a lot more realism outside Iraq as to how long this will take and how much help is needed. I was very impressed – and I think there will be some significant new announcements from the U.N. in the course of this week – as to the progress the U.N. and others are making in taking a softer, more time-consuming but more realistic approach to dealing with these issues. I'm impressed by how much we've learned and how much the military understands the need to create local

and provincial power, not simply focused on national elites. But none of this is going to be quick or easy. And all of it is going to have to not simply reflect the ethnic differences and sectarian differences on the map but the very different tribal and economic conditions that exist in each area.

Q: Tony, close to home, I was going to ask you. With your former association – I don't know if current association and friendship with Senator McCain – are you still in advising capacity to Senator McCain?

MR. CORDESMAN: I am not going to, from a CSIS viewpoint, discuss any aspect of partisan politics. That is not what we do at the center. And besides, we have, I think, either a strong minority or a majority of Democrats in CSIS. I don't want to find out what the balance of power is the hard way.

(Laughter.)

MR. SCHWARTZ: It's right down the middle. Howard?

Q: But you are on talking terms with Senator McCain?

MR. CORDESMAN: Again, I already answered your question.

Q: Thank you. Yes, you spoke about the oil revenue and the importance of first being able to spend the money. And before –

MR. CORDESMAN: I want to interrupt you immediately. Spend the money usefully, wisely, and without corruption. Let me say, I hope all of you as reporters will gang up with absolute viciousness on the next U.S. official who says that the Iraqi ability to spend the budget is by itself a measure of merit. The question is spend it on what, to do what, with what honesty and integrity? And no one should be allowed to get away again with saying, oh, wow, they're spending the budget.

Q: Yes, so my question really was how important do you see the legislation that was passed this week in the Iraqi parliament on a budget and on provincial powers. Is that just a step or is that also like oil revenue law that it's what's behind it that's more important than the passing itself?

MR. CORDESMAN: I think the answer to your question is actually I guess yes to both. It is extremely important to have these steps take place. Iraqis need to see it. And they take them very seriously.

You can't move forward until these laws are passed and take form. But is it going to take time to figure out what these actually mean? Will everybody be watching to see if these laws are actually enforced effectively? Are they going to see what they get relative to what other people get out of these laws? The answer to that is yes. Passing a law in Iraq today has none of the meaning it would in a Western society because the institutions

are not yet ready to ensure that the rule of law dominates over ethnic, sectarian, tribal, and personal interest.

And in any case, we're talking about laws which are operating in societies – in a society – which had never really implemented these concepts. We're not restoring some kind of rule of law. It didn't exist under the Turks, the British, the monarchy, or the military dictators. We're talking about establishing new ways for Iraqi society to function. So it is going to take time.

So do I believe the three laws that have been passed, the potential for passing the petroleum law, are absolutely important in winning consensus, in moving toward accommodation? Yes. Do I also believe it's going to take perhaps a year or more to see what they really mean? The answer to that is yes as well.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Marcus.

Q: How likely is an extension of the ceasefire by the Sadr militia? If I'm not mistaken, it's running out fairly soon.

MR. CORDESMAN: I think that the question is not will there be an extension of the ceasefire as much as will the basic core of the Sadr militia not take any hostile action. I can't tell you whether Sadr, who is oddly absent from any physical presence and open leadership, will extend the ceasefire or will attempt to use the lack of a formal extension as a political leaver. But as long as the Sadr militia does not use violence broadly against either its rivals as Shi'ites – and the struggle there is probably going to be more serious in the future than the struggle of the Sunnis – as long as it allows the special organizations, the extremist Sadrist groups which have acted out in spite of the ceasefire to be attacked, as long as Sadr operates at a political level, that's what really counts.

I would like to see an extension of the ceasefire. Certainly everyone in Iraq, at least most people in Iraq would. But I think we need to judge by actions, not simply by whether he issues a piece of paper.

MR. SCHWARTZ: John, in the back.

Q: Yeah, thanks. To follow up on that, how much command structure is there in the Shi'ite militias, both those formerly the SCIRI, now ISCI and the Sadr militia?

MR. CORDESMAN: Well, an honest answer to your question is, until people really start fighting, it's very difficult to know in some ways how effective the command structure is because issuing commands in peacetime is always far easier than it is when you come into conflict. I think most people would say that within the Badr organization, there is a reasonable level of coherence and discipline, and that ISCI operates with a fairly coherent structure and a hierarchy that functions in broad terms. There are very few reports of any kind of rogue activity of the kinds of extortion, extremism, or other problems that affect the special groups within the Sadr organization.

The Sadr organization seems to be very, very uncertain. There are obvious extremist elements. There are splits taking place within the Sadr organization. It is too early to determine how serious they are. It's also a much more populist and local movement. That means that if it comes under pressure, it may act out in different ways by province or city inside the Shi'ite areas in the south. But until – and hopefully this point will never come – these organizations actually have to take on something other than sort of rivalry and division and the odd act of violence, it's very hard to know how real the command structures are.

The discipline, the training of the Sadr organization remains very weak. It has improved in some ways but it keeps splintering and shifting, so it's difficult to know who's been trained to do what. And it's obvious that Sadr cannot always exert discipline, and even when he tries to expel a leader, the leader doesn't always leave. The Badr organization has had I think much better sort of coherence in training. The question is, does it have the same populist or popular base that the Sadr militia does, and I think most people would say that if there was an election in most ISCI-dominated areas today, ISCI probably would lose the governorate and control that it has over the police in most of the areas in the south simply because it hasn't been able to demonstrate that even when it becomes the governor or the head of the city, it can govern, spend the money, or share the capital that goes through the central government.

Q: I have just a quick follow up. Is there much of a sense there that they're paying – with this just being the Shi'a and even Shi'a militia are paying much attention to the election here and potentially waiting out, waiting for what they might perceive to be a democratic-led withdrawal or a significant reduction in U.S. forces, the same way the British are leaving in the South?

MR. CORDESMAN: Well, let's put it this way: After being constantly asked who is going to win the U.S. election during my trip to Iraq, I started asking Iraqis who they thought would win the U.S. election. I didn't find any which didn't have a strong opinion not only as the candidate they wanted but how they thought things would work out and what its impact would be on Iraq. So, yes, Iraqis are paying very, very close attention. There's a time lag, and one problem is that they are not comfortable with the sheer confusion of candidates that existed in the past. But I think now we are down to a much narrower mix of candidates. One other thing that's going to come up is they're likely to have much stronger views about what this could mean.

I think it's also clear that at least al Qaeda is going to try to use the American electoral cycle to influence events through acts of violence – suicide bombings, atrocities, whatever, between now and November. It would be amazing if it didn't.

Q: Kind of following on that question, can you see a scenario in which in the next five years U.S. forces are in bases within Iraq – far fewer U.S. forces than are currently there now – they're in bases within Iraq, and on occasion come out to do specific counterterrorism missions, but that they're far fewer; they're not – they're not doing the

same things they do now. In other words, could those bases – would they be sustainable? How would that work? Because some of the candidates have talked in terms of that kind of presence.

MR. CORDESMAN: Well, I think first, when you talk about strategic over-watch, within that is always the possibility until the Iraqis have established a much better degree of governance and development and security that, yes, as the U.S. troop level declines, the U.S. will provide enablers, whether it is in terms of airpower, mobility, reinforcement in emergencies. But when you visit the bases, it's quite clear that there also is a plan to transfer these bases and facilities to Iraqi troops, to steadily reduce the areas where the U.S. is presence, to shift the U.S. role as much as possible over time to advisory or embedded roles, to eliminate the need for partner units for the Iraqi army and air force.

The problem is, this is still a very conditions-based process. The Iraqi forces have had to expand extremely quickly. Many of them, I'm afraid, are being overrated in terms of – there's no such thing as an instant battalion or an instant division, and you'll see that in the charts I provided in these handouts. But the basic structure I think is going to be one where the United States is not seeking permanent bases, but it may have a very strong advisory role. It also is going to have to at least work out some arrangement with Iraq that says very clearly to Iraq's neighbors that any type of military incursion would probably involve U.S. action, and not simply that, of Iraq, because it's going to be at least half a decade before the Iraqi army or Iraqi air force can deal, for example, with any kind of pressure from Iran.

Q: Thank you. Did you get – on this most recent trip to Iraq, did you get any sort of sense of I guess the breadth of displaced peoples that are returning, but more importantly, I guess, the ability for the U.S. command to properly handle the people that are being absorbed that are coming back in any sort of complexities of the returning displaced people?

MR. CORDESMAN: Well, first, this is a United Nations and Iraqi government responsibility. I think talking to the U.N. team, one thing that's very clear is that the U.N. has some very capable people today. And they are seeking very actively to expand the role they have. The U.S. can establish local security; it can't deal with refugee problems. We can't sit there and try to adjudicate property laws in Baghdad, who owns a given house, who should get it back, what level of compensation should be paid. If we did that, we would make any effective Iraqi move toward accommodation and governance almost impossible because everyone would see us as either interfering or essentially as a substitute for the government that has to take on the mission.

The truth is, this is going to be very slow. It is not a climate where everyone can rush back. It isn't just a matter of security; it's a matter of money. The kind of money being paid to people who return is just enough to keep them basically alive. For them to really return, there have to be jobs. You have to, for many, figure out how you reintegrate some of the most skilled, educated professionals in Iraq back into the

ministries or into the health system or into teaching. And that means people have to be paid and the government has to move money forward.

And at this point, you can ignore the whole refugee issue. A very large percentage of the teachers in Iraq today are not being paid. They're essentially waiting for the government to pay them. And this has been going on for more than a year. So to bring displaced people back isn't a matter of simply having them cross a border and be secure. It's a matter of being able to give them effective government support, some kind of development options, and a life, which is very different from simply leaving Syria.

Q: I have another question about Iran. To what extent to you think is Iran interested in stability at this moment in Iraq? To what extent can they be a spoiler of that stability?

MR. CORDESMAN: I think that Iran is interested basically in Iran. And it has been, since I worked there under the shah, more an opportunistic power than some deep strategic thinker. But the fact is that Iran would not be backing the Hakim faction in having the idea of a Shi'ite federation if it didn't have political interests that basically see a Shi'ite-dominated region within Iraq as serving Iran's interests. It would not be throwing money, arms, and training at all of the Shi'ite militias unless it had an interest in maintaining its level of influence.

Its ultimate goals, whether they are to have a major level of influence in Iraq, whether they are to create a friendly power, whether they are to create a strategic buffer, I think the answer at this point is possibly all of the above because I don't think Iran has that kind of clear single strategic option. And I think it is being very clever in the way that it is trying to exploit all of the Shi'ite factions at the same time and basically find out what it can get.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Marvin.

Q: If the U.S. pulls out along the terms that the Democratic candidates have suggested, which I would characterize as – the way I read it is they would perhaps have bases or perhaps take on the task of watching – of protecting the borders. And in any case, it would get to a situation where people in effect are saying, well, it's their country; they ought to settle this. What do you see happening? I mean, is there going to be a civil war? Are there going to be some other grouping in that way?

MR. CORDESMAN: Well, quite honestly, I've read through the websites and I can't figure out what any of it means. It's sort of nice conceptual nonsense, but why should it be any different from the other parts of the websites on this particular campaign? The best I can say is that the approach to Iraq is no sillier than the approach to economic recovery.

Frankly, the realities are this: Whoever is elected is going to actually become president in 2009. It's going to take the president at least four to six months to put a team

in place. The conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan – and the new president has to deal with two wars, which is almost totally ignored on these websites – are going to be very, very different. I believe that a president of both parties is simply going to have to adjust to reality. I'm old enough to remember presidents with secret plans that were going to win in various wars. I remember a president who was going to withdraw U.S. troops from Korea.

I don't mean by that that you should not take these debates seriously. But first, I think a president is going to have to be much more pragmatic. On the day you're inaugurated, you better start thinking about your legacy and not how you had to run for your political base. And would most of these ideas work? No. Most of them are ridiculous. We're going to be on the borders where and do what? Draw me a map. Does this mean anything? It's sort of vague, semantic, conceptual rubbish.

We're going to reinsert U.S. troops into the middle of a civil conflict? How? How do you do it? What's the tactical method that you suddenly send airpower in to decide a civil war, particularly if it's a slow, gradual, civil conflict? And why does it make it better? We're going to send in Special Forces and they perform a miracle? Let me say we've tried to do that in much smaller countries which were much more fragile and the miracles didn't work out too well.

I wish I could take some of this seriously, but my honest answer to your question is I hope none of you take it seriously, you know. It is opportunistic political rubbish, and Americans are just as good at that as Iranians. (Scattered laughter.)

MR. SCHWARTZ: This is a bipartisan approach we're taking here. Howard, let me say that the Republican candidates of the past, the one who felt we should double the GNP spend on defense without explaining how, or the one that had 200,000 more people in the military by snapping his fingers, bipartisan credibility is at risk.

Q: Another country is having elections a lot sooner than our elections – Pakistan. And you spoke of the war in Afghanistan is really an Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict. I'm wondering what impact you see potentially from those elections.

MR. CORDESMAN: You know, it's a very great question, but until we see how it plays out, I don't think any of us know. First, the question is will the elections be seen as legitimate? Then can they be legitimate? Are the parties ready for the election? If no party wins, the elections create an obvious recipe for further problems. If Musharraf attempts to exploit the elections, he could create even more serious problems and potentially raise questions about the reaction from the Pakistani military. If the successor to Bhutto – the successors, I should say, do emerge, we know almost nothing about the actions they would actually take or the political strength they would have.

So I think until at least a month and probably several months have elapsed, after these elections, if they're peaceful, we're not going to know what they mean. And if they lead to immediate conflict, one of the great problems we have here is our focus may be

on the Balochi border where Omar's bases, and on what is happening in the tribal areas, but for Pakistanis, their focus is going to be on the rest of Pakistan, and it's not clear that they're going to be in a position to deal quickly or decisively with the issues in Afghanistan. We had people like Ambassador Schaffer and others could give you a better prediction than I am, but I think it is very dangerous to assume that elections in this case have predictable results.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Gordon.

Q: Quick question. (Off mike.) Is it not the organization – (off mike) – helped create this situation where – (off mike).

MR. CORDESMAN: Well, no, I don't really think it is because when you look at the actual command-and-control structure, when you look at the rules of engagement, I don't find people in the United States military objecting to those. What I do find – and it's very difficult sometimes to figure out what's happening – some countries basically say they are not putting caveats on their use of force when it is quite clear they are. And in talking to NATO commanders, that's a major problem. Others much more openly are standing aside, putting limits on their forces in terms of combat in ways which mean they can't go where the problem is. Essentially they're seizing the high moral ground and staying there in safety while others do the fighting.

But I think if this was an issue where all of the countries involved were willing to commit their forces to NATO command, we wouldn't have a problem. The problem – let's be blunt about it – is Italy, Spain, Germany, and France. And it is their rules and their problems which are the basic issue. If they were willing to commit their forces to NATO command, I think NATO could operate quite effectively, and that is certainly the impression I have had from U.S. officers, as well as those from Britain and Canada.

MR. SCHWARTZ: We're going to take one more and then that's going to be the last question. But I do want to make an announcement that if you haven't received notice yet, on February 27th, we will be having our first CSIS Schieffer School of Journalism series, and it's going to be focused on Afghanistan. Nick Burns will – Undersecretary Nick Burns will be on the panel. General Barno, who is the commander in Afghanistan until recently will also be on the panel, and also Steve Coll, a journalist with the New Yorker, who's covered Afghanistan extensively. And I hope all of you can come and you will receive invitations to that. And with that, we'll have our last question right here.

Q: Following up on what you just said about Italy, Spain, Germany, and France, is the problem that the political consensus in those countries that they say we – we're not sure why we should be engaged in Afghanistan, or is it that there is a political consensus to be involved in Afghanistan, but they just don't want to follow through on the practical steps needed to do what's done.

MR. CORDESMAN: Well, first, I don't think there's any sort of common theme and the debates within each country are somewhat different. But I think basically, people

who went into this war saw it really in many areas as simply a matter of peaceful nation building exploiting success that had already been decisive. The countries involved often have talked about out-of-area operations. They were talking about out-of-area operations when I was part of the NATO international staff in the mid-1960s. But it's one thing to talk about out-of-area operations and it's another thing to basically engage in real combat for the first time since World War II.

These are nations and political societies which often have either very little practical experience with war or have seen it in a very different kind of context. And people could see the national interest in the Balkans. The Balkans is not really out of area unless you feel that the ferry ride from Ancona to Dubrovnik is defining out of area. This is out of area. And I think that each of these nations is going to have to decide for itself whether it can actually play a useful role.

I have to say too, having been in a lot of these debates before they became engaged, many people would talk about peacekeeping as if all you had to do was send in uniformed theater ushers, and they could just sort of stand there and keep the peace or make it better. Now they're realizing that peacekeeping involves peacemaking and is often violent. And a lot of them are learning for the first time that political rhetoric is very different from military reality.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Dr. Cordesman, I want to thank you for an excellent briefing, as always. And thank you all for coming. There will be a transcript of this briefing up on CSIS's website later today. That's www.csis.org. And I will also be sending it out to you who have attended. Thanks again for coming. And please let us know if we can help you with any of your reporting on these issues. Thanks again.

(END)