

Can Iraq Survive?

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Chair: Steven Erlanger

First of all, it's an extraordinary pleasure to have such a full crowd. My name is Steven Erlanger, I'm the London Bureau Chief of the *New York Times* and we are co-sponsoring this with Chatham House. Just to say a few obvious technical things: this is Chatham House, but this is not under Chatham House Rule. This is on the record and it's being live streamed so be careful what you say – if you care. You can follow it or comment on twitter at #CHINYT. If you could, I know it's like the movies, but if you could put your phones at least on silent that would be much appreciated.

We don't have tonnes of time and we have five speakers who are I think a very good cross-section of opinion in this extraordinary drama that we have going on. We have an Iraq that's seen to be cracking. We have this new group ISIS, which perhaps was a tragedy foretold but for many seems to have come out of nowhere. We have Britain about to vote tomorrow in parliament to bomb alongside the French and the Americans inside Iraq only - lucky Iraq. But Syria is part of the equation, Iran is part of the equation, and perhaps even Afghanistan, which NATO is leaving at the end of the year, is part of the equation. The Americans have been trying to put together a broad-based Iraqi government that will include they hope the Iraqi Kurds for the first time really since 2010. Will that government work? Will it survive? Will Iraq survive? So, what else should the West do? These are the big questions.

We have Dr Ali Allawi who had been in the Iraqi government for a long time, was Minister of Finance, Minister of Defence, he had gone to MIT and the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Dr Abbas Kadhim is at SAIS in Washington. He has been a scholar in America, he was an Assistant Professor of National Security Affairs at Monterrey, he was at the Iraqi Embassy in Washington and has also written some histories on Iraq. Dr Anas Altikriti is the founder and CEO of the Cordoba foundation. He has done research, hostage negotiations, and his expertise basically is political Islamic thought and extremism.

To my right, Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, who was a journalist in a failed part of her life probably, or a successful part. She lives in London, she is the regional Government High Representative to the United Kingdom from the Kurdish Government and represents them here. And on the far side is Ali Khedery who is now Chief Executive of a Dubai based risk analysis firm called Dragoman Partners. He had been working with Exxon, but he was also working in Iraq as Special Assistant to five American ambassadors. He is an Iraqi American. So that's our panel. I'm going to ask Dr Allawi to start, I'm asking people to have five to seven minutes which I will be fairly strict about as I do want you to have a chance to ask questions as you please. So please, sir, Dr Allawi

Dr Ali Allawi

It's hard to encapsulate this epic crisis in five minutes but I'll try. This to me is the worst crisis that Iraq has faced since its inception, because it's the first time that the integrity of the state as a unified home has been seriously questioned. Not only by what happened since June with the incursion of ISIS into the north-west of the country, but also because there has been a fundamental inability to fashion a vision of the country in which all groups share.

This has been a perennial problem since the founding of the Iraqi state. In one way or another these issues were either ignored, transcended, or perhaps subsumed under different headings depending on the epic that we are talking about. Since 2003, all these issues came out to the fore, and now they have been crystallised in this terrible condition in which the state finds itself.

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Nearly a third of the country is occupied by a group that seems to have a fundamentally different idea to what a state means. Their idea of a dawlah is structurally different to that of a nation-state. So we have one issue that is coming up to the fore, which is in some ways a global issue, that is whether the nation-state can exist in the form that has emerged out of the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) or at least in the Middle East since the end of World War I.

We have another issue, which is looming and still unresolved. You can trace that issue back perhaps to the end of the Ottoman empire which is the drive as it were of the Kurdish people for a state that reflects a national and ethnic aspirations and cultural aspirations. Whether that can be fulfilled in the context of a unified Iraqi state is now seriously being questioned.

The third aspect of the crisis is perhaps the most deep, I would say. In the sense that the largest component of Iraq is in fact the Arab population, but the Arab population of Iraq is divided. The divisions in the past may have been defined in sectarian terms: that is certain vision of the state, or certain vision of the state and society as articulated by one or the other, of the major sectarian groups in Iraq. Now it has taken on a different shape. Now there is a structural rejection of the other that goes way beyond sectarianism. Here I am talking about a fundamental shift in the nature that the sectarian conflict has been set in Iraq.

Before it may have been an issue of power and privilege and patronage. Now it is become an issue of demonising the other. And this is stretched into other countries of the Middle East. This has become a fundamental aspect of the crisis in Syria, and it has become a fundamental aspect of the crisis in Lebanon also, and further afield in Yemen and Bahrain. So all these are now being played out against a background of intense violence and of very serious socio-economic and environmental degradation of the conditions in the Middle East.

And here I am talking about the non-Gulf countries, looking at the Middle East from the prism of the Gulf you get an entirely different perspective of what it is, indeed the Middle East itself that is a heartlands – Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan to some extent and Egypt you have a very serious socio-economic and environmental crisis that is now looming and also is now beginning to effect the political climate which goes beyond just sectarianism and ethno-sectarian divisions and a drive for nation-states on the part of the Kurds, and the drive for a fundamentally different political structure, that is encapsulated by the ISIS incursion.

How are we going to come out of this crisis? I don't think it is possible, not as it is being framed right now, not through increasing US and other countries involvement in the war by the bombing of selective targets, because there is a contradiction built into these policies. These contradictions are that its a highly nuanced, and highly delicate path that they have chosen, supporting one group in one country ostensibly because they are friends while in another country they are seen to be enemies. Allying yourself with one faction hoping that other factions that are close to it are somehow quarantined and pushed aside. This will get, I think, the Western alliance into a real twist in trying to define who's their enemy and who's their friend. Who are their short-term allies and long-term allies.

The sustaining of this bombing campaign, which is seen to be part of the campaign against or reversing the ISIS advances, in my mind will not succeed because it ignores fundamental issues about who are the real players on the ground, who are the actors who need to be strengthened, and who are the actors who need to be buttressed.

Above all there is no theme or overarching vision as to how the Middle East should be restructured and reordered. Given the huge array of issues that have emerged out of World War One and a hundred years later have still not been resolved. Any patchwork attempt to resolve this will end in abysmal failure.

There are many reasons why we have come to this terrible impasse: You can start from the occupation which was incoherent, poorly led and poorly governed; to the political class that emerged in Iraq to run the country from 2004 onwards; the huge issues that we have with a dysfunctional political class; We have a state machinery which is nowhere near being capable of running a modern state; and we have superimposed on that a security force that collapsed within a matter of hours after billions, literally billions of dollars that had been expended on it, not only by the United States in the early days but also by Iraq. There are many questions that remain unanswered and that cannot be answered simply by expanding a bombing campaign against selective targets, hoping that certain groups will benefit while other groups will be diminished.

Chair: Steven Erlanger

You said you felt that some groups needed to be strengthened. Could you just briefly explain who you think those groups are and then we will move to the next speaker

Dr Ali Allawi

Well in the case of Iraq, what is happening is that the central government itself has an armed force that is incapable of meeting the requirements of taking back all the territory that has been lost. So it is imperative that we stand up at least two, possibly three divisions that are of professional standards that can meet the task.

At the same time we have to admit to ourselves that in some quarters there are unsavoury groups that are holding the line now against ISIS, particularly north-east of Baghdad and north Baghdad. These groups are one way or another structurally different from the type of groups the United States want to support. These are militias, they have sectarian orientation that are connected one way or another with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. These people are holding the front. Now whether the United States is going to bomb these groups or not, while at the same time hoping that somehow these forces will not be strengthened, I don't know how this will work out.

And in the case of Syria, which is an extension of the Iraqi campaign, how can you differentiate in such fine terms between ISIS, Jabhat-al-Nusra, Ansar Al-Sham and all the other myriad jihadi groups that draw their inspiration one way or another from a version of Islam that seems to be vindicating or accepting this kind of violence? Now we might claim that ISIS is the most extreme of the extremes but they are all part of one way of looking at the world and how do you differentiate between what is good and what is not so good, it is a serious problem.

Chair: Steven Erlanger

That's a solid question, but let's leave it for a bit later. Dr Kadhim please.

Dr Abbas Kadhim

Thank you every much and thank you to the *International New York Times*, and certainly to our host Chatham House. It is an honour to be here. Can Iraq survive? I decided to go by the question and go from

there to help my friend Dr Allawi to solve this whole problem. Is it going to survive? I think Iraq will survive one way or another. Iraq has survived epidemics, natural disasters, four thousand years of bad politicians it will survive this time. And definitely ISIS is no different than the other groups that have been committing the same kind of crimes and murder in the past, from the Khawarij to the Wahhabi invasion in the 1800s and all the way to the 21st century, so we do have more than we see right now and Iraq survived it. I think the quintessential problem, or question that should follow, is what do we mean by the Iraq that will survive?

If we are talking about Iraq the way the map is structured now, that would be a legitimate question but I think there is a situation right now where we will have to sit, and the Iraqis have to sit basically, and ask themselves this hard question, do they want to be holding Iraq and keeping the same map or do they want to have an Iraq with a different kind of boundaries.

There are three components in Iraq that don't seem to see a way to get together, and live together, and co-exist: the Kurds in the north, the Sunni Arabs in the centre and west of Iraq, and the Shia in the south. And the Kurds it all goes back to the question of do we really have an Iraqi identity that we all want to embrace and we all call ourselves Iraqis? And what do we mean by us being Iraqis?

The Kurds are exercising a certain right, an inalienable right actually for any group of people - we have just had a referendum in this country a few days ago - to see if they can fulfil their nationalist estimations. If they cannot bring themselves to call themselves Iraqi and want to be Iraqis and they want to be Kurds with a nation and an entity then so be it, but the only thing is if it is going to be some time do it now please so you don't have to give people more grief and receive more grief from them. Remember disunity with Iraq has cost the Kurds a lot and also cost the Iraqis a lot.

One of the reasons why Iraqi politics is messed up right now is because it has this kind of three dimensional, three fronts for every politician to fight. So that's a question of the very identity of being an Iraqi.

The other question is regarding the Sunni Arabs and the Shia. These are all Arabs and all of them call themselves Iraqi but they mean different things by being Iraqis. The Sunni says I'm an Iraqi and believes he is the only legitimate Iraqi, not every Sunni, I've seen many, I've spoken to many, I went to school in Mosul but that seems to be the growing attitude for a long time. The Shia although being an Arab is not really acknowledged as being a full-fledged Arab even, not for the Sunnis in Iraq, not for the Arab Sunni world, which is also the extension for the Iraqi Sunnis. Until they would go and believe that these are also Iraqis and acknowledge that they exist and that their members are what they are and that they are a part of this make up of the country that will be a problem.

For the Shia the same thing, they are looking at themselves as the majority that has been oppressed for some go to 80 years, some go to 1400 years, and they think that this is their time in 1400 year chance to right this historic wrong. And the question is do they really want to be with us. I've just come back from Iraq, spent three weeks there moving in the middle Euphrates Shia land and I met people from politicians to top clerics such as Grand Ayatollah Sistani and several others in the clerical background and also the average man on the street, took cabs and sat in cafes. And what you see here for the first time in my life, I grew up in the same area that I visited, I visited three provinces that I frequented a lot in my life. For the first time I see a very weak commitment to a unified Iraq in that place.

This is a very disturbing thing for anyone who would like to ask a question and answer it with yes - 'Will Iraq be Iraq as we knew it?'. Why is that? It's because people gave up. There are lots of problems, there is

a lot of killing, a lot of sectarianism, a lot of distress and massacres. Remember the Shia wakes up every morning in Najaf or Karbala and all they see are the people who are simply driven out of their homes and now they are living in the schools and the mosques of Najaf and Karbala, and half of the family has been abducted or kidnapped, and half of the family were killed. Or, with two or three, four, survivors there, and that's big. So it's a big problem from the Shia side and that is a legitimate grievance. The Sunni Arabs have also been caught between their violence that is there, the bombardment that goes on in their areas, their corrupt and opportunist politicians who are being elected.

Let's remember that the a hundred percent of local governments in Salahuddin, Mosul and Anbar is done by elected Sunni politicians so there is a lot of this. I can only accord what Dr Allawi has just said. Iraq was really messed up and ruined by the occupation. It was not served well by even the way the mandates from the UN were fulfilled. The United States left Iraq in 2011 with no military to speak of, no good administration, no functional constitution, they gave Iraq a system they don't even understand. It's the first time an occupier would give a system of governance that is completely different. You know when the British left all these places they occupied and colonised they left monarchies behind, the French left republics, the US did completely the opposite. Now those American advisers barely understand the American system, imagine how they went and advised another. No one looks good whoever was there in that place. Yes the United States did not introduce corruption to Iraq, but it put it on steroids when it went. So I will stop here and then I would be more than happy to talk more about this in the Q&A.

Chair: Steven Erlanger

I just have one quick question that will be hard to answer quickly but I hope you would try – a Maliki government failed to hold the loyalties of all Iraqis. Why was that impossible to do? Was it the sense that Shias are on top finally, or was there not enough reaching, or was it simply too internecine?

Dr Abbas Kadhim

That's a good question. There's no question that the Maliki Government failed and I will tell you that the way things are looking now Dr Abadi's Government is going to fail: it is already failing. There is also the government before that, let's remember that Jafari who was also a prime minister was vetoed and kicked out the way Maliki was kicked out. The problem is not people up to the swearing or selecting of Dr Abadi, all they talk about it was problems with Maliki, now he was sworn in, let's just remember that the Achilles heel of Maliki was that he kept both the Ministry of Defence and Interior, guess what Abadi is doing now – not because he likes it but because it is the best trap to keep a prime minister and keep him paralysed. Don't allow him to put any ministers who are strong, loyal and honest, good people. The system does this, it's not the man. We need institutionalism in Iraq rather than relying on the goodness of the politician.

Chair: Steven Erlanger

Thank you, Mr Altikriti

Dr Anas Altikriti

Thank you very much Steven, thank you to Chatham House and the *New York Times* for this event. I think boringly for everyone here there's going to be a lot of agreement, and I think the one thing that virtually everyone – I'm not going to pre-empt what the others are going to speak about – but I think still now there is an agreement that Iraq has suffered and continues to suffer from gross mismanagement on various levels whether it be internally, regionally, or even internationally.

Iraq has been abused, used for various projects and ideas and interests and the such by internal, regional and international players to the detriment of Iraq itself. Fascinating how a couple of weeks ago I was involved in a discussion in a think tank that is not this particular one that I won't mention to my host here, but in two hours, in addressing the issue of Iraq we spoke, I would suggest, no more than three minutes about Iraq and that is the problem.

In order to understand Iraq you needn't actually talk about Iraq, nor about any internal Iraqi players. We talked about Iran, about Jordan, about Saudi Arabia, about Turkey. We talked about Europe, about NATO, about the US, about the UK, but very little about Iraq itself. The mismanagement goes beyond the political. We're talking about the world's, the West's, our attention here in the UK and United States turns to Iraq every time – let's admit it – when there's an American, or a Brit or something who is hurt or who is killed then we really start to pay attention to Iraq. In the intermittent period, our attention span with Iraq is extremely low and extremely scarce.

We don't spend time talking about why it is that for four years running the Mercer Index speaks of Baghdad - to Iraqis Baghdad is such a beautiful thing – as being the worst city in the world, bar none, to live in. Why Iraq looms, again for the eighth year running, at the bottom of the Transparency International list as one of the most corrupt nations in the world. We don't speak about that but we're more than happy to encourage our corporations to go in and make as much money as possible and such at the expense of the fact that the vast majority of Iraqi people – and I'm not going to talk about Shia/Sunni, Arabs or Kurds – feel alienated, feel disenfranchised, and as if they don't belong. And I agree with Dr Abbas. The problem today is finding enough Iraqis to believe in Iraq as it stands and we will be able to start solving the problem. But we don't and therefore I think the question this particular event poses 'can Iraq survive?' – and I personally, as optimistic as I claim to be – I don't think that Iraq or most regional countries will in the next two or three years have the same borders that we have come to know in the past century. I think that we have entered into a new era, a new phase. Call it a post Sykes-Picot era, call it in an era where new power dynamics will take place, whether ethnic, sectarian or mere power interest dynamics, I think will be the new map. But I want to talk about a couple of points.

The first is the issue of ISIS itself. Now in all the frenzy about ISIS, and I have been one of those who have been hauled from one studio to another in order to condemn them, and the cleverest is the person who can come up with the most flowery adjectives about how to describe ISIS. I mean we've gone through monstrous and evil, and we've gone through despicable and all that, and we've run out of adjectives. But the question is so now what? We've all agreed that they're despicable, we've all agreed as someone who belongs to the world of Islam, they do not represent Islam or Muslims, but the question is why not?

The question we need to start asking is why is it that we are now addressing the situation in Iraq as though the whole problem and crisis started with the emergence of ISIS, when the whole problem actually didn't. Before ISIS, if you remember, there was Al Qaeda. In 2006 the CIA senior official met with me in a very clandestine fashion in a Zurich hotel and for four hours we discussed Iraq. At the very end he said 'I only have one question – where can we find Abu Musab al-Zaqarwi?' After four hours of my voice going hoarse. So I said, well 'why are you asking me?' and then 'if you found him what will that solve?'. He said 'well we'll kill him?' so I said 'and then what?' and he said 'well all of the problems will be solved'. Well that naivety, that naivety and the mismanagement of the case of Iraq runs up until today.

We have politicians, a different government in London, a different government in Washington, yet rehashing the same old tactic for which I came ten, well twelve years ago in 2002, to outline why it is a bad idea, to go through this strategy in freeing Iraq from the clutches of the Baathists and Saddam Hussein. And once again, once you obliterate the physical presence of ISIS and by the way we were told

up until two weeks ago that they were a ragtag gang of 12-15,000 criminals, most of them not highly trained. How is it that the entire whole world – 50 countries no less - signing up to a coalition to fight this ragtag element. It's laughable. It's beyond laughable even. So when we come to the time and we claim victory over this ragtag element, nothing to be really proud of – what do you do with the idea that you have helped disseminate and propagate?

Because guess what – we have studied this since the days of Al Qaeda in Iraq and before that in Afghanistan. How do you fight someone whose ultimate aim is to die? How do you fight someone who actually wishes for nothing more today than for the US and UK to actually bomb Iraq simply because that is how they get their clutches into the young, disenfranchised, frustrated, unemployed Iraqis and bring them to their pool. Because that is what they tell them, they tell them the world hates you, the world has forgotten about you. And with one or two missiles going wrong, hitting the wrong wedding ceremony, or the wrong house, their children - the ones who are left behind - are left behind and they come to them and they say 'do you want to avenge your father?', 'do you want to avenge your brother?' and this is how you do it. So we are basically playing into the hands of these people. You cannot obliterate or annihilate ideas through missiles and guns. Ideas need ideas.

I come here to another element that I want to end with and that is the regional powers. Because unfortunately whether we are talking about Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Gulf countries, we're talking about countries who used Iraq to play out their own proxy wars, to play out their conflicts for the past twelve years. No one, none of those – and I can mention a longer list – none of those has actually done anything for Iraq that has been for the betterment and interests of Iraq.

And one of the things that that catalogue of regional powers, up to Egypt and the such, what they've done that makes us now almost powerless in confronting the danger of ISIS or whoever may come next with the same nihilistic ideology is the fact that they've obliterated the middle ground through which we can negotiate with the eighty to eighty-five percent of disenfranchised youngsters who don't really believe that ISIS or their ideology but simply have nothing better to do. And they are paying them a wage, which for the past ten years they haven't been receiving. So those middle ground, called it political Islam, call it the Muslim Brotherhood, who have now been criminalised by virtually every single one of those countries are no longer there in order to negotiate with those youngsters and bring them back from the brink.

Chair: Steven Erlanger

Thank you, I think you've made the point nicely. Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, in July I think the president, Barzani, said 'the time has come to decide our fate, we should not wait for others to decide it for us'. So the Kurds have a moment. Maybe it's right that you seize it, maybe the Americans would prefer that you don't, what do you think?

Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman

Well I'm sure as everybody here knows, and particularly this very distinguished panel, every Kurd in their heart wants independence. Nobody asked whether we wanted to be divided among four countries, those four countries turned into dictatorships. The Kurds have lived under apartheid effectively. We've suffered genocide repeatedly. We've suffered chemical bombardment, scorched earth policies, Arabization policies. In all of those countries we have suffered enormously, so is it any wonder that we want to run our own affairs? However bad we may be at running our own affairs, we will hopefully do better than this.

The question you pose is whether now is the moment, well, it's a very good question and it goes back to the theme of this evening – 'will Iraq survive?' or 'can Iraq survive?'. Certainly Iraq won't be the Iraq of pre-Mosul, pre June. If Iraq is to stay within one border, in my view, it needs to be effectively three sovereign states within one geographic border. That's the only way we can live together in Iraq.

The very distinguished speakers have already explained the reasons for that. How we got to where we are, the fact that even in non-Kurdish areas of Iraq, the commitment to a unified Iraq has weakened. The only way we can live together is effectively to be neighbours with very high fences and a panic alarm probably. I think that's really the only way. For us to go back to having a centralised form of government is just going to fail.

I think one of the big problems we have everywhere in the Middle East is there isn't a concept of win-win. If I'm negotiating with you, I have to win and you have to lose and be defeated and killed and buried alive, and killed. That's how we think in the Middle East, that's one of our fundamental problems with our character in the Middle East, is we don't believe in win-win.

As with regards to the West and the reaction now to ISIS, the recall of Parliament here in London to vote tomorrow on whether to conduct air strikes against ISIS in Iraq. Well I hope Parliament will vote the right way. It's quite puzzling why Britain has been holding back. It's a key permanent member of the UN Security Council, it's in NATO, it's a leading member of the EU, it's a global player. Whether the British appreciate it or not it is a global player with influence. Why is Britain hesitating to use its influence? And how can you think about striking ISIS in Iraq but not in Syria? As colleagues here have already said, you can't choose one ally in one country but the same ally in another country is not your friend, you can't do it like that. ISIS doesn't recognise these borders neither should we, anyway, that's for the debate tomorrow.

I want to use this opportunity just to tell you a little bit about the situation in Kurdistan, which is relevant to the overall theme of whether Iraq can survive. We have 1.4 million Syrian refugees and Iraqi internally displaced people in Kurdistan region. Kurdistan's population is around 5 million, that puts us on a par with Scotland - imagine Scotland receiving 1.4 million refugees? Even with all the help that Britain would provide Scotland being an advanced economy it wouldn't be able to cope. This is what we are dealing with in Kurdistan today.

We have people who are traumatised, they have nothing, and I mean nothing, some of them didn't even have shoes when they arrived in Kurdistan. Why has Prime Minister Abadi not been to see them? Is he not the prime minister of those same refugees? Those IDPs? Is he not the prime minister also of Kurdistan? Don't you think Prime Minister Cameron would rush to see his countrymen if they were flooding into one part of the country as refugees? That tells you a lot about Iraq, doesn't it?

Why is it that those refugees or internally displaced people, wherever they were from in Iraq, they were entitled to rations, which does the Iraqi government not send the rations for those refugees to Kurdistan so at least they can eat three meals a day. Are we not Iraqis? Are they not Iraqis now that they are in Kurdish territory. This is the Iraq we are talking about today.

And the Iraq we are talking about today, despite the billions being spent on its military, gave up Mosul. Mosul this historic city, this trade centre this city of culture, was given up in 24 hours. What kind of an army is that?

You know I wish I'd bought this book, I saw a book at London City Airport back in July. It's the economist book of data. If you can buy it, buy it and send me a copy as well. I read it while standing at the airport

and I looked at defence spending around the world, Iraq was top by percentage of GDP. As a percentage of GDP Iraq spent more than the United States on defence. What happened to all that money? If that's not corruption I don't know what is.

Why is it the Peshmerga dying, fighting against ISIS, are still not receiving their salary from the central government in Baghdad. What kind of Iraq are we talking about? So I go back to what I said earlier, the only way that Iraq will survive as a country is if within that same border we have three sovereign states who are effectively independent, but if it pleases the world because it's too much for the world to accept the disintegration of the Sykes-Picot map, then fine we will stay within that border but we will have sovereignty. We will certainly have economic independence in Kurdistan. We haven't had our budget at all this year, we are fighting the most well-armed, richest terrorist organization in the world, we have 1.4 million refugees and yet Baghdad doesn't release our budget. What kind of an Iraq is that?

Chair: Steven Erlanger

It's a good question to end on, but let me ask you one other thing. How much do you consider Turkey in this thinking?

Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman

Well Turkey is a key ally for us. It's currently actually providing a lifeline for us. I've described the financial situation we're facing. Turkey is a key friend in that sense. However, we're all looking at the pictures on television of the Kurds at Kobane in Syria and the battles on the Turkish border, frankly I think it's outrageous to see poor impoverished people treated like that when they are trying to find refuge. So Turkey is a key ally but there are certain questions, yes.

Chair: Steven Erlanger

Thank you very much. So last on the panel, Ali Khedery you'll say what you want but you've been involved in a big effort, I mean not the head of that effort, not in charge of that effort, but involved in a big effort by the Americans to create an Iraq that was supposed to be the city on the hill to the rest of the Middle East, what happened?

Ali Khedery

Well I have nothing left to say, as everyone's already said everything. Actually as I was preparing for this event I was reminded of a plane ride Dr Alawi and I took a few years ago. We were on a US Air Force jet that is normally Air Force Two, and we were sitting next to each other and we were debating the situation in the country, and that was I believe 2006, it was Prime Minister Jafari's visit to the White House. What is remarkable to me looking back almost a decade later now, is that the situation has deteriorated dramatically since those dark days, when Iraq was plummeting into civil war.

I think I'm correct in saying that I'm the only member of this panel that is not an Iraqi citizen other than the chair, so I look at this from the perspective of an American, former American Government official and really my purpose throughout my time in government and really even now is to advance American security interests. Obviously our interests for the United States and Iraq are aligned 99 per cent of the time. We want an Iraq that is stable, that is prosperous, that is democratic, where all citizens are treated as first class citizens and are not discriminated against. Unfortunately though the simple reality is that for a wide variety of complex reasons under both administrations – this is not a case of Democrats or

Republicans, George W Bush or Barack Obama, the failure in Iraq transcends both administrations, despite a very hefty price.

I lost 4500 of my countrymen in Iraq, 4500 military and about 1600 civilians and contractors. I lost 33,000 wounded in action. You and I will pay taxes from now until the end of time, and then even some, to pay for the trillion dollar war and that's direct cost, and trillions more in indirect costs. I think there's a simple phenomenon that has marked American policy in Washington, again under both administrations, and that is unfortunately a policy of wilful delusion and denial when approaching the situation in Iraq.

The simple reality is we went in in 2003 based on bad intelligence and the war was executed very poorly, and there's at least one member of the audience who served with me in Iraq in the embassy - a good friend and colleague, who knows that I was among the most vocal within our system in expressing my unhappiness in our policies for much of the past decade. So the question is where do we go moving forward. Everyone knows the mistakes that were made both under Bush and Obama.

The reality is that the situation has been this cancer of the misrule in Baghdad and Damascus, supported by Iran's Revolutionary Guards. This cancer has metastasised again because of this policy of wilful delusion and denial under both presidents. I never thought I would see weapons of mass destruction being used in a wholesale level in my lifetime in the 21st century and that the world would sit back and do nothing. So in Syria what you've seen in the past three years is the Assad government, again supported by Moscow, Teheran, Baghdad and Lebanese Hezbollah, has used chemical munitions dozens of times. To this day it continues using chlorine bombs and barrel bombs. It has executed a genocide campaign where 200,000 have been killed according to the United Nations, 800,000 more have been wounded. Millions more have been displaced, not only in Iraqi Kurdistan, but the second city in Jordan is a Syria refugee camp. Now there's massive contingent issues with Lebanon and now potentially Turkey and Jordan. So the failure of the international community to act on crises like Syria.

The Obama administration's frankly, I don't even know how to characterise it, the fact that they turned a blind eye to the misrule of Nouri al-Maliki in his second term, when there was no defence minister, when there was no interior minister, no intelligence minister. As of only a few months ago the administration was urging congress to expedite sales of F16s, of Apache attack helicopters, the largest Hellfire missiles in American history, M1a1 tanks, artillery, Howitzers, to a government that is clearly helping perpetuate and perpetrate the genocide in Syria, that is clearly aligned with Iran's Revolutionary Guards, that is really a very difficult and vexing issue.

As Dr Allawi touched on, and I think this was, and I absolutely agree with everything he said, the reality is that there is an inherent contradiction and cognitive dissonance in American foreign policy with regards to Iraq and the Middle East. So how do you want to sell F16s to a government whose transportation minister as of only a few weeks ago is a militia commander, that militia is a subsidiary of the Quds force. How do you, after only in January declaring as the president of the United States did, that ISIS is the junior varsity team, now say it's the worst entity in the history of humanity. The Secretary of Defense is saying it, the director of the CIA is saying it, the attorney general is saying it, and the rest of the cabinet. I was on CNN a few weeks ago when the Deputy National Security Advisor Tony Blinken, friend and colleague, said that ISIS did not represent a threat to American interests or to the American homeland.

Now the president of the United States is selling air attacks in Syria and Iraq based on the fact that they are essentially an existential threat. So I think basically moving forward the thing that I would urge President Obama or Prime Minister Cameron or other leaders, if I had access to them, is to say, please get real. No more ideologically driven decisions, no more decisions based on domestic polling numbers, let us

identify our real allies in the region, let us identify as Dr Allawi said our real foes in the region, and let's develop a comprehensive strategy. Because this piecemeal, let's bomb today, and figure out what the political strategy is tomorrow, that's exactly what we saw out of Washington and London in 2003. Am I the only one seeing eerie parallels, that we're bombing and we don't have an answer for the political crises.

Chair: Steven Erlanger

Thank you. I've covered enough run-ups to wars and enough wars themselves to see the pattern. It's not very long ago that Milosevic was the Hitler of the Balkans but wasn't worth a single American boot on the ground. So here we are again in a different way.

Thank you.