

PANEL PRESENTATION
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[Transcript produced from digital recording.]

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MODERATOR: I didn't say any real words of introduction about Kim, but I do think it is important to point out we talk a lot about results here, and we talk a lot about strategy. If ever you want to understand exactly what the ingredients were that ended up with the cake that we have now, it is Kim's work that will lead you there.

She has written a great deal about it in the standard, but in addition, you can find on her website, which I am hopefully flagging for her, UnderstandingWar.org, a really excellent interactive understanding of a whole variety of operations that you see to get into the guts of just why it is that we are succeeding where we are succeeding on the ground.

So, with that short introduction, Kim.

DR. KAGAN: Thank you very much, Danielle.

Today, I actually would like to talk about something I don't usually talk about, namely Iraqi politics, and it has been a truism in our Washington debate and discussion that although the surge has reduced violence in Iraq, it has not induced political progress and, therefore, it is a failure.

I do not think that that truism is true, and I would like to take you through how the surge has affected Iraqi politics, what the Iraqi political situation looks like right now, and where I think it may be headed over the next six to eight months.

First, I think we need to go back to 2006 and remember what was causing the logjam within Iraqi politics. We have a very weak prime minister, Prime Minister Maliki, who does not control his

appointments to cabinet positions. So, if we think to other parliamentary-style governments, for example, to Britain, we think about a prime minister being able to appoint all of his ministers and, therefore, have them execute the policies that he desires to execute.

Prime Minister Maliki could not do this. That is not how the Iraqi constitution functions, and in the face of increasing violence and also in the face of parliamentary opposition, Prime Minister Maliki was extremely weak and not actually able to execute policy.

By the end of November 2006, the Sadrist Trend had essentially pulled its parliamentarians out of the Council of Representatives, making it impossible for legislation to pass and creating what was an insuperable roadblock to any legislative progress whatsoever because it was not possible to get a quorum within the Council of Representatives once that group had withdrawn.

So, as we really turned into the surge itself, we had the Sadrist Trend, the party of Moqtada al-Sadr essentially thwarting whatever desires of Prime Minister Maliki there were and making it impossible for any legislation to get passed, in addition to creating a violent environment on the ground in Baghdad, and we have to remember that at that time, the Iraqi security forces were not capable of securing the population of Baghdad, and they were challenged by militia groups, by sectarian-minded groups, by al-Qaeda in Iraq, and since Prime Minister Maliki not only did not have control of his security forces, but did not have control of a militia, he had no way of affecting the violence on the ground any more than he did the legislation.

I will fast-forward a little bit through 2007 to remind you that it was quite quickly after the surge was announced that Moqtada al-Sadr left Baghdad or Najaf or wherever he likes to hang out for Iran, and it was at that time also that a number of his closest comrades were arrested by special raids in the dark that really made it less possible for him to function within Iraq and created sort of competition among a variety of factions within the Sadrist Trend and its variant militias that really lasted through the summer of 2007.

Moqtada al-Sadr announced a cease-fire of his militia groups in January-February 2007 at the beginning of the surge, reiterated that cease-fire again in August of 2007 and then again in February of 2008.

But what happened over the course of the summer of 2007 as the power of Sadr really became diminished and as al-Qaeda in Iraq became less able to launch its spectacular attacks and thereby intimidate the government of Iraq was that a faintly working coalition among the leaders of political parties within Iraq began to take shape, and Prime Minister Maliki, along with his Shi'a and Kurdish colleagues, developed a mechanism for discussing legislative issues, even without having a legislative process that was well underway, and these discussions became known as the Three Plus One talks which really involved the three leading figures within Iraqi politics and across parties, talks that begin essentially in August of 2007.

So it is really at the end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008, as a result of those talks among party leadership, that we began to see the legislative process in Iraq rekindled and a variety of parliamentarians return, but also a variety of political parties able to work on some of the major benchmark legislation that had been so essential to our Congress' view of what the next political steps were inside Iraq, and therefore, we saw the passage of legislation, such as the Debathification law, the Provincial Powers law, which enabled the Iraqi government to begin to function and to create a certain kind of pattern of reconciliation at the national level that is not really sort of a wonderful Kum Ba Ya moment, but really a series of bureaucratic obstacles overcome that might allow reconciliation in the future.

Right now in Iraq, we actually see the fruits of this benchmark legislation really generating a new level of vigorous discussion and indeed competition among political parties.

On the one hand, we have the rise of some new political parties, in particular, the Sahwah or the Awakening Party, that is derived from the Sunni tribal sheiks in Anbar who have essentially opposed al-Qaeda within the province and worked side by side with U.S. soldiers and Iraqi security forces in order to defeat al-Qaeda within the provinces.

They have formed their own political party, really concentrated in Anbar, but also spread a little bit to the north and east of that, and they are engaged in a competition with the existing Sunni political parties and in particular the IIP, the Iraqi Islamic Party whose leading figure right now is Tariq al-Hashimi, and we are seeing a rivalry between these two parties as they compete for different Sunni political interests.

The IIP was a party of exiles. The Sahwah is a party of indigenous Iraqis. The IIP is a party that has been focused on one segment of the Sunni population. The Sahwah is focused on the tribal segment of the population. So we are seeing not only the growth of new political parties within the Sunni movement, but a competition between the old political parties and the new political parties that is likely to characterize Iraqi politics over the next year or two years.

In addition, we are seeing competition among Shi'a parties, particularly among Prime Minister Maliki and his Dawa party and the party whom we abbreviate severely right now as ISCI, the "Supreme Council," as it refers to itself, within Iraq, and they are competing for the votes of Shi'a throughout Baghdad and throughout the south.

The rivalry, I think has been sharpened by Prime Minister Maliki's growing strength in light of the operations he has conducted against the militia groups in Baghdad and in Basra, and that has really paved the way for these two parties to dominate the Shi'a vote within the upcoming provincial elections.

And the competition is fierce. We can see Prime Minister Maliki bidding for essentially the ability to provide services to people in Sadr City, in Basra, and throughout the south as a way of strengthening his political hand. We also see almost everywhere we go the posters of ISCI and its religious figures competing with Maliki's so-called secular Dawa party.

In addition, we have a limited degree of flux and change within the Office of the Martyr Sadr and the Sadrist Trend as their parliamentary leaders essentially split themselves from the militia leaders and really tried to find their way to some sort of safe haven, so that they can continue to participate in national

politics, even though the Sadrist organization as a whole has been so gravely troubled and, quite frankly, almost defeated by the recent operations.

So we see a little bit of a power struggle within the Sadrist Trend. Those parliamentarians who now exist are facing up to the fact that they really don't have a place to be in a political infrastructure that supports them fully, and so they are in flux in a set of interesting debates amongst themselves, generated not least by the fact that the government of Iraq has determined that parties that have militias are not permitted to run in elections and, therefore, really they have caused a degree of separation among these parties.

The OMS cannot associate itself as closely with the militias, nor can the Sadrist Trend parliamentarians associate itself with the militias, and we have a competition or struggle within that party.

We have a great deal of friction as well generated by the Kurdish parties. I think we saw that quite clearly yesterday, as our good friend, Talabani, decided that he would veto the provincial election's legislation because it did not contain wording that suited him and the interests of the Kurdish regional government.

And finally, in addition, we see the proliferation of secular political parties and lots of independents, so that there are now 502 -- yes, that's right -- 502 political parties that will be competing in the upcoming provincial elections.

What does this mean, and why does it matter? First and foremost, it tells you that there is a vibrant Iraqi political life, and that there is perhaps not only the political progress that we have seen in the passing of the benchmark legislation, but also a new and vibrant kind of discussion, really quite rambunctious, not neat, completely messy, quite vigorous, and we do not actually know right now what the parameters of Iraqi politics are going to look like this time next year.

So, as we talk about Iraqi politics, we have to understand that those politics are in flux. The terms of the discussion are now being set, and all of the politicians and the political parties are finding their

space in the political spectrum and the way in which they will function and compete with other political parties.

So the rhetoric that we hear from Iraq's political parties is different from what we heard before and is unusual to us, the United States, whether we hear it through the newspapers or whether our general officers or State Department folks, our ambassador sees it on the ground and has to wrestle with the fact that suddenly there is a new dynamic.

Whereas, last year there were essentially three moving parts in the Iraqi political system, and they didn't really move at all. Now all of a sudden, we have many moving parts, and it is very hard to figure out how to balance their interests with ours and how we the United States should engage in this new highly political discussion within Iraq.

The second thing I would tell you is that this political competition is why Iraq's provincial elections that one hopes will be held sometime at the end of this year or the very beginning of next year is so important.

On the one hand, the provincial elections are a way to enfranchise those who did not vote in the elections last time, particularly the Sunni population, but they are also a way of resolving some of the differences and the competition among all of these different fractious groups, and also paving the way for the national elections that will take place in 2009.

I think we have learned from past experience that our elections in Iraq are not necessarily the end of a political process, but rather the beginning. So, as we head into these provincial elections, we have to make sure that we don't see them as simply the culmination of the surge and the new Iraqi political process, but as the start of whatever Iraqi politics will look like next.

That is why I think we have started to hear from some of our commanders on the ground that force levels in Iraq really must stay where they are through Iraq's provincial elections, not simply to secure the

elections, but also to mitigate the fact that those elections will generate competition among political parties and possibly a great deal of friction when their outcomes are known because I don't actually think that free and fair elections will necessarily determine one party is the winner in this struggle, but rather set the conditions for provincial elections coming up again in 2012.

And so there is a risk that we have in these provincial elections that they will, on the one hand, cause some content among groups that had not been enfranchised before, but also may provoke a violent response from those groups that do not receive what they expect, and therefore, it is very much in our interests, the interest of the United States and the interest of Iraq, to preserve stability through and possibly beyond the provincial elections.

I will conclude there and turn this over to Fred.
