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Countering State and Non-State Threats: Protecting American Interests and Security in the Middle East

Speakers:

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Moderated by: Kathy Gilsinan, Staff Writer, The Atlantic

GILSINAN: So great to be here. Thank you all for coming. Thanks for putting this on.

This panel concerns Countering State and Non-State Threats: Protecting American Interests and Security in the Middle East. And you will know the members of the panel, from -- well, from their work and from the introductory materials. So I'm just going to do a quick lightning round of introductions.

We have Kimberly Kagan, who's the founder and president of the Institute for the Study of War. She's a military historian who served in Kabul for 17 months, from 2010 to 2012, working for commanders of the International Security Assistance Force, General David Petraeus and subsequently General John Allen.

David Kilcullen served in Iraq as a senior counter-insurgency advisor to U.S. General David Petraeus, was a senior advisor to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and has served in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Bolivia and Colombia. He serves on the board of directors for FDD's Center on Military and Political Power.

Behnam Ben Taleblu is a senior fellow at FDD where he focuses on Iranian security and political issues. He mostly tracks a wide range of Iran-related topics including nuclear nonproliferation, ballistic missiles, the foreign and security policy of the Islamic Republic, and internal Iranian politics.

So, I'm very glad that we have this panel on Middle East threats since we've heard so much about great power competition. This is the key -- thank you. This is the key issue cited in the National Defense Strategy. There's near consensus in the policy community that after nearly two decades focused on terrorism, American readiness has eroded while China and Russia have studied our weaknesses and built their strength. So the foundational question is, why do we still need to focus on Middle East threats at all? And I'll start with you, Behnam.

TALEBLU: Sure, well thanks so much for sharing that with me and thanks to FDD for putting this on. The short answer is that states still matter. If you look at the framing in the National Security Strategy about great power competition, and some of the statement is by

political and military officials in administration, there is a rank ordering of threats to the American homeland and threats to American interests. And given the various interests that we have in the Middle East, the Middle East, though nonstate actors and through states, presents threats to our security, to our homeland and, of course, to our interests overseas.

Now I do have a -- a -- a stake in this. I do think that the state threat is quite important because there are lots of middle powers in the Middle East that in the region, function as great powers in their own right. And a myopic focus on nonstate actors or the lone wolf actors, or -- or -- or terrorist entities that don't have a state sponsor do not have a state patron, can make us forget about some of the core long-standing features of the region, which is a jockeying between empires that eventually became states in the Middle East.

And the big three my mind right now and anyone looking at the Middle East, obviously are Saudi Arabia, which is the pro-America camp, Turkey, which has been a frenemy kind of camp, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is the decided revisionist power, looking to upend the balance of power in the Middle East.

And states matter because we tend to look at the Middle East and say OK, well this terrain is mostly desert filled with nonstate actors. But the threats that jurisdictions of strong central authority pose to American interests are increasingly becoming more and more acute and it's no longer just jurisdictions of weak central authority that read threats to American interests and homelands, but a strong central power. And I think no threat, no country in the Middle East best exemplifies like the Islamic Republic of Iran.

KAGAN: I would add that of course the Middle East has been an important theater of conflict in which our great -- greater power rivals, including Russia, have gained combat experience, as you heard from General Keane and Michele Flournoy. And the last count we have, actually a problem that we are trying to segregate and separate the activities that Russia undertakes, for example, in Europe, from the activities that Russia is undertaking in the Middle East. That is a false paradigm that we are imposing that the Russians do not really adhere to.

The Russians play the global board and the Middle East is a place where they can contest the kinds of national security outcomes that the United States needs in order to secure its interests. And they have done so. Part of the challenge that we have now, part of the reason why Russia is able to compete in the way that the last panel discussed, is that Russia has gained combat experience capabilities and new ways of commanding and controlling forces, new ways of forming alliances and partnerships in Syria since its full on entry into the war in 2015.

The United States has been so singularly focused on defeating ISIS as a terrorist threat -- a very important requirement as I'm sure we'll talk about, that we have not actually taken steps in the past few years to ensure that Russia does not gain power capabilities and platforms, even terrain from which to deny the United States the ability to conduct expeditionary operations and the ability to secure its entails including the humanitarian interest of the people of Syria and Iraq and national interests that include that free flow of goods throughout the Middle East. Those are important interests, and states are competing there. Let's contest them.

GILSINAN: David.

KILCULLEN: Yes, I -- I -- I agree with what Behnam -- well, I agree with everything that's been said so far. But I think I'd add a couple of sort of concrete factoids. I testified as an expert witness on an FBI terrorism trial last year for a Syrian who came into Iraq during the war in Iraq, sponsored in fact by the Syrian Intelligence Service, designed an advanced motherboard system for setting off multiple IEDs simultaneously. We arrested the guy, the Iraqis eventually let him go, he went to China, went into business with a bunch of Chinese partners, manufactured this thing at an industrial scale in an advanced factory in southern China and began exporting it back to the Middle East by the container-load.

So the Chinese businesses and others have been heavily involved in a lot of the things we were trying to do -- deal with in Iraq. Likewise, to Kim's point just now about the Russian entry into Syria, the unit that went into Syria initially in September of 2015 was the 810th Independent Naval Infantry Brigade of the Russia Black Sea fleet, which is the same actual dudes that took Crimea in April of 2014. So we're not talking about necessarily a strict separation between state and nonstate actors inside the Middle East or outside. We're actually dealing with both state and nonstate threats at the same time in many of the same places.

And as Behnam and Kim both mentioned, in the last 20 years, states actors have watched us struggle in dealing with nonstate combatants, and have adapted and learned to fight like nonstates do. At the same time as nonstate actors have acquired the kinds of technological capabilities that you used to have to be a state to field. So it's much more of an intermeshed set of threats, rather than a strict separation.

GILSINAN: And they're facilitating one another.

KILCULLEN: Yeah. Not necessarily directly, but there's a synergy between what they're doing.

GILSINAN: Speaking of synergy between state and nonstate actors, I do want to drill down into some specific issues here. And Behnam, I'm going to start with you since Iran is in the news. As has been mentioned, it's the anniversary of the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal.

Iran has threatened to suspend its participation and just today or yesterday threatened to suspend its participation in some key elements of the deal. And meanwhile we have the carrier strike group and bomber task force headed to the Persian Gulf.

How, Behnam, do you assess the success of the maximum pressure policy that the Trump Administration has imposed in the past year? And do you see a reasonable chance of its actually driving Iran back to the table under this administration, or what do you think is the most likely pathway from here.

TALEBLU: So there's a lot there to deal with.

GILSINAN: You have 30 seconds.

TALEBLU: Oh Lord. Put it broadly, for the first year of max pressure, Iran's strategy officially and unofficially in the face of max pressure has been max patience. Now the patience has kind of run out for Iran and now they're signaling their escalation options. But the way this state, the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism, has been signaling its options is consistent with its asymmetric regional strategy, which hopefully year two of max pressure will be able to tackle Iran in the region.

Year one of max pressure has had immense unilateral sanction successes against Iran, which took almost half a decade at the multilateral level to replicate against the Islamic Republic.

That is a clear check in the U.S. unilateral secondary sanctions power box. But for year two, you want to have Iran impeded in the region and, you know, to David's point about the marriage or the synergy or the symbiosis between states and non-state actors, Iran's involvement, these maligned activities that everyone is talking about, is not just it sending, you know, its IRGC abroad but it -- creating the Shiite foreign legion, its ability to engage and graduated escalation in theaters of conflict like Syria, like Iraq, like Yemen, like Bahrain, like Lebanon, what has made and sustained a country with a GDP as weak as Iran to a threat to American interests for so long.

So if max pressure is going to be successful in year two, it's going to be about contesting the territory, where this supposed Iranian land bridge is going to be traversing, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, ultimately into the Eastern Mediterranean, its going to be about stopping the flow of money, ammunitions, and men along this land bridge.

So it's making sure that max pressure has a regional component in year two. The kind of escalation that Rouhani wants to entertain, Iran's President, is of course to say that you can't afford to continue this sanctions pressure. And he is going to dial up the pressure on the nuclear file. He's going to threaten nuclear blackmail, I think was the term used earlier this morning. That Iran will incrementally put its feet outside of the nuclear domain.

And if you're looking at this where it's graduated or incremental, it's basically Iran taking the grey zone concept and applying it everywhere. Iran operating in the space between peace and between war.

And something that I was a little disappointed about has been our over reaction to the deployment of the American carriers to the Persian -- the American carrier and bomber squadron to the Persian Gulf.

Because we've had such a myopic view on some of these non-state actors and such a militarized view of what our foreign policy has to be. So it's not a partisan criticism but it's a long-standing issue.

Because our involvement in the Middle East for the past 20 years has been checking and combating these territories where non-state actors like Al Qaeda and the Taliban fight in that we forgot how to deter states.

That a carrier in the Persian Gulf is actually a tool of coercive diplomacy. It's not a predicate to war. There's a great quote by John Huntsman that Brad, the CMPP director, and I just used in a recent piece, which is "a carrier can represent 100,000 tons of international diplomacy" and I think that's exactly what's going on here.

GILSINAN: Do you -- and just a quick follow up on the -- on the year one year two issue that you raised: Do you see the ability to roll back Iran's activities in the region as being possible through sanctions and coercive diplomacy alone, or do you see there having to be some other hypothetical tool at work there?

TALEBLU: It's going to require a regional component in everything along the DIME Paradigm including diplomacy, including information, including the military, which means things like creative deployments, which means forced posture, which means hardening our assets there. You know, a lot of the countries at the Gulf Cooperation Council fear the Iranian missile threat much more than we do because of the sheer distance between them and Iran.

That means making sure that we can sell American missile defenses as opposed to stripping American missile defenses, which is what happened last year, and making sure that they can integrate their missile defenses and have a layered missile defense approach in the Persian Gulf, much like Israel has a very sophisticated rocket short range, medium range missile defense architecture in their country to offset this rising Iranian threat.

But to kind of go back to your first point, Iran says "no, no, no, no" until it's forced to say "yes." I always say that the predicate for war making, and peace making, and deal making with the Islamic Republic is the eight year Iran-Iraq War, and in that conflict for the first 7-1/2 years, Ayatollah Khomeini, the founding father of the Islamic Republic said, "war, war, war until victory."

At the end, he drank from the poisoned chalice, quote unquote, and accepted the ceasefire. The goal of all of this -- missile, military, regional sanctions has to be how do you get Khamenei, Khomeini's successor, to drink from the same poisoned chalice? And it can't just be by sanctions alone, but sanctions will be a heavy part of it.

GILSINAN: All right. Turning to ISIS, Kim, the Institute for the Study of War has been tracking the rise and fall and possible resurgence of ISIS, and you've produced a lot of useful maps that news organizations like mine have relied on to -- to track territorial control in particular.

OK, so as recently we declared the territory 100 percent retaken. What does that mean and what do you see as the next phase now that the so called caliphate is gone? Is it even correct to assume they no longer hold territory?

KAGAN: ISIS is a really thoughtful and resilient enemy. And it is -- it has had a strategy that has evolved from its loss of terrain, of territory, of military power as Al-Qaeda in Iraq, as the U.S. and Iraqi forces ousted it from the areas around Baghdad during the surge.

And in the period after the United States departed from Iraq in 2011, ISIS -- then first Al-Qaeda in Iraq and then renamed and reflagged ISIS, actually had a strategy to regain its preeminence of power and its military strength.

And it did so first by laying the groundwork in areas that were not supporting the government of Iraq, and were frankly ignored by the government of Iraq. And then moving little by little against the Iraqi civilian populations and the Iraqi military until it was able to take Fallujah and to take Mosul and to race for Baghdad.

This is ISIS. It can go from being a terrorist organization that in the year 2000, our military commanders in Iraq were saying was less than 3,000 strong, to an organization of 30,000.

And now it has become clear that it is not clear how large ISIS is or was. But out of that last bit of territory that our Kurdish partners cleared, there are 70,000 men, and women, and children who are now displaced in the Al-Hawl refugee camp in Syria. That's a lot more than 30,000 that we estimated at the beginning.

And the reason I bring this up is because we cannot underestimate ISIS again. We cannot imagine that just because it has lost territory, and just because it is not fighting as a conventional threat with columns of tanks that it has abandoned its military campaign or lost its military capabilities. On the contrary.

What we're seeing inside of Iraq and inside of Syria is that ISIS is in all of the support zones -- places where it can stage, and supply, and base, and recruit, and grow -- that, from which it grew in the 2011 to 2014 period.

Secondly, we're actually seeing ISIS adapt according to its own stated plan from 2014 and 2015. At which -- in which time ISIS recognized that the United States, the Global Coalition would come after its territorial caliphate and ISIS prepared for that contingency in a variety of ways.

First to fight in Iraq and Syria. Secondly, actually to send offshoots throughout the globe, to create a global organization that would continue the fight. And lastly to seed in place different kinds of cells that pending the loss of the caliphate would actually activate. And we've seen these cells, and these extraordinary outflows, either fighters that have been in Iraq or Syria, or those who were urged to stay in place by ISIS' leadership, emerge and conduct deadly attacks in places like Sri Lanka on Easter.

We have an ISIS that is still following the strategy it set for itself in 2014 and we have a -
- we have remnants that can reconstitute into territorial control in Iraq and Syria, that can

reconstitute into a guerrilla force, and that can conduct global spectacular attacks. This is a real threat and the United States has not won.

GILSINAN: So that's a good segue to David to talk a little bit about -- given your involvement in developing strategy in Iraq in the past, how do you see some of the same patterns repeating themselves with regard to the rise of Al-Qaeda and Iraq first, which then later morphed in to ISIS, and given the sort of new way or war that the U.S. used to prosecute this one -- sort of the by, with, and through relying on local partners, do you see any more sustainable victory coming out of this, or are we just -- you know, to channel Elvis caught in a trap?

KILCULLEN: I think we're in a bit of a cycle, I'm not so sure it's a trap. I mean, I think -- so you characterize it as a -- as a new model, and in the context of Iraq it was new, but you know, if you go back to 9/11 and you look at the periods of time where we've actually achieved significant battlefield success -- the first one was the fall of the Taliban in October to December of 2001.

The next one was the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Then was the surge in Iraq where we achieved about a 96 percent reduction in insurgent activity in a six month period, which is not proof that counter insurgency works because that's not in the doctrine. But like we don't expect that to happen, right? So something else was going on. And then of course what's just happened in Mosul and in Raqqa and with Kurdish partners in Syria. And in each case, we've had a rather similar model, which is a relatively light footprint -- U.S. Military presence forward, paramilitary elements of other government agencies, very comprehensive air and maritime support, and then I would argue most importantly, a motivated, a large scale ground partner that is from there, you know.

Like what -- when the last Taliban stronghold fell on the seventh of December 2001, we had about 310 CIA and a couple thousand military in Afghanistan. We have 50,000 Afghans fighting with us against the Taliban. That's why we beat the Taliban, not because of we're sort of military legends, it's because we had local partners. Likewise, we had 110,000 Iraqis with us during the Awakening in Iraq. That's why the surge worked, not just because of our sheer naked tactical brilliance, as you know as fighters. So, I think as we -- as we look at the situation now, I fully agree with Kim, we want to avoid precipitant or complete withdraw that A, allows ISIS to regenerate, and B, morally, we, you know, abandon our Kurdish partner on the ground, which is critically important that we don't do that.

But there's another point here which is to figure out how to transition from military success to long term political outcomes. And we are actually very good at the military piece, we suck at the transition part, and I think that's what -- can I say that? -- that's what -- I think that's what we have to think about, how to -- how to improve our performance to be able to better transition from military battlefield success to long term stable political outcomes.

GILSINAN: Alright, that's a good note to -- with which to go to Q and A. I will make the moderators impotent plea to leave these in a form of a question and if you could please stand and wait for the mic and identify yourself.

QUESTION: Yes, my name is Peter Wilson of RAND Corporation. The panel seems to me we have a screaming contradiction in our objectives and one is trying to sustain some sort of positive strategic relationship with Turkey while simultaneously protecting our interest in eastern Syria and supporting the Kurds, which the aspiring Sultan Erdogan defines as an existential threat. So how do we square that circle?

GILSINAN: Who wants it?

(CROSSTALK)

KAGAN: I'll -- I caught the ball. The United States has pursued an approach to regain the terrain that ISIS controlled in the Euphrates River Valley. That did rely on a local partner, the Kurdish Syrian Defense forces, plussed up with Arab locals. And we have partnered with those forces, obviously, to retake terrain that once belonged to ISIS.

As we take a look at the United States and its long term grand strategic objectives, whether it's the preservation of the NATO alliance and a free and secure Europe, or whether it is the elimination and security from terrorist attacks in the homeland, we will find contradictions in our approach.

What I think the United States did for very understandable reasons, back in 2014 and 2015, was focus on the very severe threat of ISIS without thinking through all of the strategic consequences for our policy with Turkey and all of the strategic consequences of that policy with Turkey for our policy with Russia. What do we now do? The United States actually owes it both to the Turks and to the Kurds to begin to broker a negotiation between -- between Erdogan and between the SDF.

That is going to require compromises on both sides and it is going to require U.S. commitment to both sides. So, we can't actually be naïve. We are not out of this, rather we're in the thick of a problem that is a natural consequence of what we created. This is where American leadership is actually required. American diplomacy and, if necessary, a good bristling of American deterrence.

TALEBLU: Just a brief footnote to Kim and David's excellent comments here. We should not be in the business of proving Iran's narrative and strategic leaders right. And what I mean by that is, David mentioned the moral and global component, Kim just mentioned the need to reconcile with both states and non-states -- non-state actors. There's a line from Qasem Soleimani about Iraq in 2010 that was reported in the New Yorker in 2013, but it basically applies to every theater of the Middle East where we leave and Iran, the opportunistic actor, steps in.

And this is the Soleimani line; "We're not like the Americans. We don't abandon our friends." Let's think about that line. We should not be in the business of proving the commander of the Quds Force, of the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism, correct. We shouldn't be in that business.

KILCULLEN: Neither the Kurds nor the Turks.

TALEBLU: Yeah.

QUESTION: Kamran Bokhari, Center for Global Policy. It seems like, between ISIS and Iran and its allies, we're constantly trying to counter both Shiite and Sunni radical actors. And it seems to me that we're caught in the causality loop, where we go after ISIS, Iran rushes into that, to Behnam's point, where -- to further that point, it finds opportunity and backs Shiite militias. We're providing airpower, the Iranians and Qasem Soleimani in particular is mobilizing Shiite militias, and we defeat ISIS. And that creates space for Iran.

And then somehow we -- the pendulum swings in the other direction and says, OK, we need to now go and counter Iran. How do we escape from this causality loop?

GILSINAN: Who wants it?

(LAUGHTER)

(CROSSTALK)

TALEBLU: I mean, there's no way out but through, right? Taking only a CT approach or taking only a COIN approach or only focusing on the Sunni extremists at the expense of the Shiite ones or vice versa, risk perpetuating the cycle of conflict. But as a decisionmaker, you should ask yourself, at the highest level, is the Middle East worth fighting for? What are our key interests there? And if you can clearly establish what those interests are there, what the U.S. will and will not fight for, then you can have a broader sense of the picture of, who first then who next? Right?

Clearly the threat from ISIS was important. And we had to tackle that through primarily military means. But that doesn't mean that the mission is over and that doesn't mean that we should be turning these temporary, you know, marriages or temporary alliances that the U.S. had, which I think was a mistake by the way, into longer-term partnerships or risk grandfathering in the gains that Iran and some of these Shiite militias have made.

KILCULLEN: Just another comment -- sorry, Kim.

KAGAN: Please, go ahead.

KILCULLEN: Just, I think we may have talked ourselves into a false sense of how much we're spending and how costly our engagement is. And just to put some numbers on it, in the entirety of U.S. engagement in Syria until the beginning of this year, we lost two people killed. We lost another four people in January. Now, that's tragic, and any death is tragic. But it's not unsustainable from a military standpoint. Broadening the -- the geography slightly, the entire coalition lost eight people last year in Afghanistan. We've lost seven people this year so far in Afghanistan.

Again, any death is tragic, but it's not unsustainable. And so the question about should we disengage, in a very large sense, we've already disengaged. Like, we're not -- we don't have 200,000 troops deployed in the Middle East, right? We have a couple of thousand in Syria, probably going down to 400. Special Forces friend of mine in Syria said the other day that the entire mission is hanging under the tweet of Damocles, right?

(LAUGHTER)

So, who knows, right? But let's say 400, right? In Afghanistan, we've got roughly 14,000. Even if we half that - again, these numbers don't break the bank. We can - we can keep doing this forever. But back to the previous conversation, our partners may not necessarily be able to do that. Our weakness in Afghanistan is that the Afghan military's lost 45,000 troops in the last four years.

I don't know -- no one knows how many the Kurds have lost. So that's -- that's the bit that I think we need to be focusing on.

GILSINAN: All right, we've got two minutes till the end of this, so Kim, I'm going to let you have the last word.

KAGAN: Thank you very much. The United States has, at times, approached the problem of the conflict in the Middle East and the extremism -- the violent extremism of Sunni and Shia as though it were wise to let this tension play out, as though it were wise to use one to defeat the other. It is foolish to do so. And when in fact, what we have seen is that violence breeds violence and in ungoverned states, breeds ungoverned space.

And it is in that ungoverned space that all sorts of extremists are able to grow, radicalize others, gain military force and use it and project it against our allies, against our citizens, and against innocent human beings. The United States has a responsibility to lead and the United States has a real responsibility to recognize that war is for a political objective. That political objective is not simply the defeat of ISIS, it is in fact the creation of conditions in places such as Iraq and Syria in which ISIS and Iranian-backed proxies cannot flourish and cannot challenge our alliances, our allies, our friends, and our homeland. That's what we're in the Middle East for.

GILSINAN: All right. So, our time is up. Thank you for this great conversation. The next session immediately following this one will be a conversation with representatives Elissa Slotkin and Michael Waltz, moderated by FDD's Jonathan Schanzer. Thanks very much for your attention.

(APPLAUSE)

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