



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“Iraq and Afghanistan: Sustaining Success and Achieving Victory”

Foreign Policy Initiative Forum: Advancing and Defending Democracy

The W Hotel, 515 15th Street NW

September 22, 2009, 10:00 AM

As part of the Foreign Policy Initiative Forum on “Advancing and Defending Democracy,” **Kenneth Pollack** of the Brookings Institution, **Michael O’Hanlon** of the Brookings Institution and **Lieutenant General (Ret.) David Barno** of the National Defense University contributed to a panel on the current missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. **Thomas Donnelly** moderated the discussion.

Pollack expressed his increasing concern about Iraq. Historically, there exists an “astronomically high likelihood” for civil wars to reignite very quickly. Only the long-term commitment of an external great power can mitigate this risk. The U.S. made a fundamental mistake in 2003 when it created a security vacuum in the cities and allowed the worst elements of Iraqi society – some of them appointed by the U.S. - to govern the country’s population centers. During the surge, the U.S. filled the security vacuum and allowed average Iraqis to finally do the right thing and not support militias and extremists out of fear. But as the U.S. presence has begun to draw down, there has been an increasing reluctance by the U.S. to assert itself in Iraqi politics. As a result, many Iraqis, including but not limited to **Prime Minister al-Maliki**, have begun to work around and against the constitution. In turn, this has led Iraqis to lose faith in the future, succumb to fear and lend support once more to nefarious forces.

It is therefore essential for the United States to continue to use its influence to pressure Iraqis to play by the rules of the game. Iraqi officials are afraid the U.S. will force them to rely on “frustrating, cumbersome democratic politics” that stands as a bulwark against a resurgence of civil war. If the United States exerts all its remaining influence as it continues to withdraw its troops, then “*inshallah* Iraq will be a secure and stable country.”

O’Hanlon reiterated Pollack’s argument that while the U.S. must exert its leverage on Iraq, it does not require, nor is it possible, to modify the troop drawdown schedule. Turning his attention to Afghanistan, O’Hanlon defended the plan put forth by **General McChrystal** that will require additional troops to link isolated “ink spots” held by U.S. forces to create a contiguous swath of stable, friendly territory safe for building institutions of good governance. But O’Hanlon also defended President Obama for taking time to make the correct decision. After all, it is a difficult decision to triple the troop presence in Afghanistan in one year’s time, especially in the aftermath of the Afghan elections. Unlike al-Maliki in Iraq, **President Karzai** has not sufficiently helped the United States secure Afghanistan. The U.S. must therefore determine how to put pressure on the Afghans to clean up their act.

General Barno encouraged the panel to decipher the “endgame” of Afghanistan, especially by considering the regional implications involved. Barno reiterated McChrystal’s four challenges: defeating the Taliban strategy of running out the clock of U.S. involvement, rebuilding trust between

the government, the ISAF and the people, recreating a unity of effort within NATO and reframing the Afghanistan narrative to clearly dictate the benefits of success and the costs of failure. Barno insisted the United States must commit to a long-term presence – not necessarily with thousands of troops and civilians – to ensure our allies and enemies that the U.S. will not forsake its interests in the region.

During the question and answer session, Pollack described the sense in the Persian Gulf that the U.S. is pulling back its presence just as the environment is growing more dangerous. A string of essential events will occur over the next year, including the January elections in Iraq. There are indications the Iraqis will revert back to a closed-list election that previously proved disastrous and led Iraq down the path of civil war. This decision stands in stark contrast to the success of open-list elections during the recent provincial elections that stabilized the country. Furthermore, al-Maliki is pushing to host the referendum on the Status of Forces Agreement during the January elections. Given the overwhelming popular sentiment against SOFA, all Iraqi politicians will clamor for the mantle of Iraqi nationalism and the agreement will not survive the election. This would be a “very, very dangerous step” for Iraq as the stabilizing influence of the United States will “go down the drain overnight.”

Moving to Afghanistan, General Barno admitted he is not a big fan of metrics. NATO must identify a handful of “critical metrics” dealing with levels of violence, popular perception and corruption but not become mired in number crunching. O’Hanlon further discussed how to gain leverage over the Afghans. At some level, the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan should be a function of Afghan performance. While the elections provide obvious reason for concern, the Afghan institutions should also be commended for finding and investigating the claims of fraud. Such action is progress “we can build upon.”