

Center for American Progress



PANEL DISCUSSION:

“THE NEXT STEPS IN IRAQ’S POLITICAL TRANSITION”

MODERATOR:

**BRIAN KATULIS, DIRECTOR,
DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY,
CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS**

FEATURING:

**REND AL-RAHIM, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
THE IRAQ FOUNDATION**

**JON B. ALTERMAN, DIRECTOR, MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM,
CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

**LESLIE CAMPBELL, SENIOR ASSOCIATE AND
REGIONAL DIRECTOR, MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA
PROGRAMS, NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE FOR
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

**MARINA S. OTTAWAY, SENIOR ASSOCIATE,
CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE**

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BRIAN KATULIS: Good afternoon. I'm Brian Katulis. I'm with the Center for American Progress. I want to invite you to today's panel on "The Next Steps in Iraq's Political Transition," and I want to thank you for braving the cold weather out there to participate in what I think will be a very lively panel.

The Center was founded in 2003 as a research and educational institute organized to develop new progressive ideas and policy proposals. So over the last two and a half years or so, we've been engaged in policy debates over key domestic and international policy and security questions, including the important question of Iraq. On Iraq, we've produced a number of policy papers and strategies aimed at offering constructive alternatives and new ideas about what to do and where to go in Iraq. Most recently we released a strategy called "Strategic Redeployment," which I co-wrote with my colleague, Larry Korb, with the aim of trying to get Americans to think anew in different ways about where to go in Iraq. "Strategic Redeployment," which is in your packet, calls for a recalibration of how the United States operates in Iraq, with less focus on military solutions for problems that don't have military solutions, and a greater emphasis on the diplomatic, political, and economic powers of the United States to address the many challenges in Iraq. You can find most of the materials on the Center in the packet and on our website.

What we'd like to do today is to take a half-step away from some of the political debates that we have here in Washington; the debates on and the focus on troop reductions, and look more closely at the recent elections in Iraq and the many challenges that lie ahead in Iraq's political transition. And we're very fortunate to have a distinguished panel of experts to help us walk through all of these issues related to Iraq's complicated political transition.

And so the first half hour or so, I'm going to offer a couple of questions to our panelists to get the discussion started, and then a little bit after 1:00 we'll open it up to you. We'd like to cover a lot of issues and give you an opportunity to ask some questions of our expert panelists. Before I introduce the panelists, I'd like to ask those of you with pagers and cell phones to kindly silence them so we can keep our discussion focused today.

First on the introductions: Marina Ottaway, to my left, is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace where she's a key part of the Democracy and Rule of Law Project, a research endeavor that analyzes the state of democracy around the world and the efforts by the United States and other countries to promote democracy. Her current works focus on political transformation in the Middle East and reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan. And she has a very interesting paper, which is available at the back table, in the back room there, on the political transition in Iraq.

Sitting next to Marina is Jon Alterman who is the director for the Center of Strategic and International Studies' Middle East Program. Prior to joining CSIS, he served as a member of the policy planning staff at State Department and as a special assistant to the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs.

To Jon's left is Rend Al-Rahim, who is the executive director of the Iraq Foundation. From November 2003 to December 2004, she served as Iraq's representative to the United States and the Iraqi chief of mission. She is a native of Iraq and a co-founder, in 1991, of the Iraq Foundation.

And finally, last but not least, we have Les Campbell, who is a senior associate at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, or NDI, where he has directed the Institute's democratic development programs in the Middle East and North Africa since 1996. Before joining NDI in 1994, Les was the chief of staff to the leader of the New Democratic Party in the Canadian House of Commons.

I'd like to kick things off today by asking our panelists to offer a few thoughts on last week's elections – parliamentary elections in Iraq, and I'd like to start with Les. Les, NDI has been deeply involved in Iraq since 2003 providing political party training and support to nearly 14,000 Iraqi election monitors, among many other activities. And I wanted to ask specifically about some of the allegations of electoral fraud and irregularities that have surfaced in recent days, including earlier today: the largest Sunni Arab party in Iraq saying the results of the Baghdad vote, which were released yesterday, were fraudulent and calling for a revote.

Given that you've had many monitors on the ground, I'd like to ask you to offer some comments on those allegations of fraud, and then ask the other panelists to provide some analysis and what they think has happened and the implications of last week's elections.

LESLIE CAMPBELL: Thanks, Brian. Thank you very much and it's a pleasure to be here, and I also look forward to the discussion. Although it is a little early to know exactly what has happened after the election, I think as you know from the news, the votes are still being gathered and compiled and analyzed and, in fact, the workers and monitors, which I'll describe in the minute, is also still very much a work in progress in the sense that more than 14,000 individual Iraqis were deployed to monitor the voting on election day. And each one filled out a questionnaire in each of the polling stations that they visited: a total of more than 3,000 polling stations, and those questionnaires are being tabulated and analyzed and the idea is to look for violations that look systemic.

And I think there are some of those, and maybe I'll sort of speculate a little bit on what happened without having the benefit of the full analysis. But just to step back slightly for a second, I should mention that – Brian mentioned that at NDI I've been directing NDI's programs in the Middle East for about a decade, and what has been happening around the political process in Iraq is remarkable. I'm about to qualify that in a little bit, but before I qualify it I want to say that in terms of political party

development, the number of candidates running, the seriousness with which the political parties take the political opening that they have in Iraq, the sophistication of the parties and how they organize themselves, recruit volunteers and campaign, is absolutely remarkable and there is nothing like it in the Arab world.

Also, there is no Arab country where there has been such thorough and complete monitoring of elections by local people as there has been in Iraq and so the quality of the monitoring of the elections surpasses anything we've seen in any other Arab country. And thirdly, the seriousness of purpose of the Iraqi election commission, and its independence, rivals anything else in the Arab world. And in fact we've seen through the referendum in the election of last January that the Iraqi election commission does its work very professionally. So before I now qualify everything I've just said, I have to say that using sort of my landscape, or my comparison group, which is every Arab country from Morocco to Yemen, what happens in Iraq is unique, remarkable, and stunning under the circumstances.

Having said that, this election from preliminary reports appears to have suffered from many, many problems. Most of those problems probably occurred prior to election day. For example, there are very credible and in fact pervasive reports of the police forces – primary the police, but also the Iraqi National Guard and others, and in the north and Kurdish Peshmerga – though they don't always go under that name – intimidating people and trying to extract a certain type of voting behavior.

These reports have become overwhelming in the last few days, and as the monitors are sending in their reports and going through them, it appears that there has been widespread intimidation by various types of police and security forces who are – who affiliate themselves with one group of parties or coalition of parties or another. This is particularly a problem in the south, where there has been a clear, almost coercing of voters to vote for the 555 Coalition, which was the coalition of the largest and prominent Shi'a parties.

And in the north, actually, all three electoral events of the past year – the election of last January, the referendum, and now this election – there is no doubt that Kurdish security forces exerted a lot of pressure on Kurds to vote for the two main Kurdish parties, the PUK and KDP. And those reports have been consistent throughout the three electoral events.

What is a little bit unclear, and I know that Brian alluded to some of the news this morning of an unexpectedly, or at least what appears to be an unexpectedly high result for the Shi'a parties in Baghdad province, and I know that representatives of these Iraqi Islamic Party and others are sort of crying foul, because they expected to do better in Baghdad. I think – we've talked to people associated with Ayad Allawi's coalition – sort of a more secular, democratic coalition – and they also, given these initial results, are feeling like there may have been some foul play because they were expecting to do better in Baghdad province.

I'm not sure exactly what to say about that. We don't have enough information from the monitors to confirm what the complaints have been, but there also appears to be some evidence, even in Baghdad province, that the police forces, who appear to be largely partisans of the Shi'a party coalition, may have done – may have behaved in a manner that possibly drove up the vote for the Shi'a coalition, but it is going to – actually, it will take many weeks to figure all this out. It's going to be a kind of a messy process.

MR. KATULIS: Great, thanks Les.

Rend, you've been a passionate advocate for democracy and political transition in Iraq. How do you view the elections last week?

REND AL-RAHIM: Well, first of all I should point out I've just come back from Baghdad, and I should further point out that I was actually quite involved in one of the campaigns – in working with on of the campaigns. And I – in the last three weeks leading up to the elections we filed – a campaign that I was associated with filed no fewer than 54 complaints to the electoral commission about violations. And the campaign was always very clear to consult the electoral law, to consult the regulations promulgated by the commission, and the rules of conduct, which have the effective law. And so we would always cite chapter and verse, and in three weeks we have presented 54. And that is during the campaign, not during the elections, as Les quite correctly said.

So we do have – and also, just to elaborate a little bit on what Les said, one of the biggest problems that exists in Iraq is the presence of militias. Even through the Transitional Administrative Law and the constitution both say that militias should be disbanded, that there is no place for militias, they persist, and they persist in two kinds. One kind are militias who have come now under the cover of government institutions, either primarily the ministry of interior, both in Baghdad and the Kurdish region, or under the cover of the national guard and the military, and that's one type and in a sense the more dangerous type of militias because those are the one that are totally partisan, and yet identify with the government and therefore it is very difficult to control them.

The other type of militias are the ones that are not under the cover of government, and I did a tally of them: there are about eight of them in Basra alone who are sort of loose-running, armed militias. In the last few days of the elections in Baghdad, somebody told us about a new type of militia that is called the "Squadrons of the Angel of Death" who were running around trying to intimidate people into voting for a particular list, rather than other lists.

So this climate of intimidation and pressure by armed groups is an undeniable factor in these elections. The elections of course, were hotly contested, and if there was anything that reminded me of the United States, it is the kind of adversarial, negative campaigning that went on in Iraq. We did not really think that this would happen. We kept saying that culturally Iraq is not conducive to negative campaigning, and yet when you have these, really, sort of epoch-making elections, because these are for a permanent

parliament, a four-year parliament, a permanent government which is also four years, and also a parliament that is going to review the constitution and introduce amendments to the constitution, so these will seem as very decisive for Iraq's future.

There is absolutely no room for any coyness in the campaigning any longer. And, at points during the campaign it became downright vicious, and political parties were engaging in ad hominem attacks across the board. I don't think any party was exonerated from that kind of dirty, negative campaigning. Of course, we also saw rampant use of religious symbols and heavy, heavy involvement of clerics, both on the Shi'a side and on the Sunni side. Clearly more on the Shi'a side, but it was a use of religious symbols that many Iraqis felt was unwarranted in the campaign.

A lot of the voting was based on sectarian gut feelings; you know, Sunnis voted Sunni, a lot of Shi'a voted Shi'a, Kurds voted Kurdish. And the unfortunate thing is the common ground of Iraqi sensibility, Iraqi identification, was really not that strong. It was carried by a number of smaller parties, not just by Ayad Allawi's party, but by a whole host of other political parties which really didn't fare very well.

My analysis is that there are two reasons for the failure: first of all, because Iraqis are still voting their grievances, they're still locked in the past, they're still voting as – they're voting their victimhood. For the Sunnis and Shi'a, it is past victimhood. For the Sunnis, it is a perceived present victimhood. And to come up with a national, broad-based Iraqi agenda away from the sectarian and communal identity feelings is going to be a difficult task, and it is a task that's going to take quite a long time to develop that kind of identity. Part of the reason is not just simply the people were voting their victimhood and their fears, but also the intimidation we talked we talked about: the violence on the streets and the fear of people of being pressured into voting one way or another.

I think that is good for now.

MR. KATULIS: Yes, great.

Jon, you've been working at the Middle East for several years and you're a leading analyst on the Middle East. Maybe you can talk a little bit about these elections and what they mean for Iraq and the broader region, too.

JON ALTERMAN: Thank you. First, I want to thank you and the Center for American Progress for having me and congratulate you on the work that you at the Center have done. I also want to say what a pleasure it is to be not only on a distinguished panel, but a panel that is so stacked with old friends.

Let me start by suggesting that Iraqis did not turn out in record numbers this election because Iraqis had become democrats. Iraqis turned out because they wanted to secure their community's place in the allocation of resources in Iraq.

Now, this matters for a very specific reason. And let me tell you this: if you remember one thing about these elections, what's important about the elections is not who wins; what is important about these elections is who loses and what they do about it, because what has to happen from these elections is that people say, "I didn't win this time, but there's a process whereby I can win the next time." And it is that – it is not the benefits of winning, but the acceptance of losing that characterizes democratic systems.

Now, here is why I'm worried in Iraq. As Rend suggested, the voting was remarkably along sectarian lines. It's hard to shift the numbers if the Shi'a have 59 percent. They can have lots and lots of kids on the Kurdish side or the Sunni side before you start moving the Shi'a percentage of 59 percent down. If the Kurds have 20 percent, if they are voting as Kurds, they're going to stay at 20 percent. If the Sunnis stay as Sunnis, they are going to be voting as 20 percent. The only time these numbers can move is if people are voting on the basis of things that can change: ideas, ideologies, movements. That's what shifts the numbers.

But if Iraq is moving, as I fear it may be, toward a sectarian division along lines that don't change very easily, you run the very serious risk that the rules get written in such a way that you don't have a share and they are going to stay written so you won't have a share. And that increases the risk that people are going to defect from this system. They're going to say, "Democracy can't give me what I need," and they're not going to let the democratic system continue.

The risk is especially severe in Iraq because the natural resources, which are the basis for the economy, as you all know are located in the north and the south of the country. There is every incentive for people in this system to have resources decentralized: the Kurds keep what they want in the north, the Shi'a keep what they keep in the south, and the mixed center of the country is stripped of resources.

Think about the centers of countries. Think about capitals in the Middle East. Capitals in the Middle East are incredibly populous. They have all of the elites and you're seeing people who will look and say, "The country that we built for 80 years is being stolen out from under us." If that's the future of Iraq, it's not going to be a country. What matters is not who wins the election; who wins the election will take care of itself. What matters is who is going to lose this election and what they're going to do about it.

MR. KATULIS: Great. Thanks, Jon.

Marina, maybe we could bring the discussion a little bit forward to looking towards the next steps. In your latest policy brief, "Back from the Brink: A Strategy for Iraq," you make the argument that the October constitutional referendum actually pushes Iraq not on a path to stability and democracy, as Jon was suggesting there, but rather towards division and largely autonomous regions.

First, what's your take on the elections? And then, next, what are the most important next steps that the United States and the international community need to take to support Iraq's political transition?

MARINA OTTAWAY: First of all, I think that it's quite clear that the election confirmed the trends that we have seen in the general elections and in the referendum. In other words, people are voting their identities. There is only a small percentage that is not voting their identities and you – and it remains to be seen even how much Ayad Allawi – how much support the Allawi coalition has gotten from across the board rather than from Shi'a who are not in favor of an Islamic state. So I think that this is not a surprise.

And this in fact confirms that it is very unlikely that after these elections the process of revising the constitution, which is going to be allowed through a special process for a period of about four months – it is very unlikely that that process is going to lead to a drastically different constitution from what we have now. Particularly the most salient characteristic of the constitution that was approved within the referendum is that it establishes a country – it provides for federal system which has an incredibly weak center. I don't think I can think of another federal constitution that provides for such a weak center. Essentially, the power is going to be almost completely in the hands of the regions.

I don't see how that characteristic of the constitution is going to be amended after a vote in which the people have voted their identity. Essentially that establishes – reestablishes that the Kurds, whether people do it voluntarily or because there is a discipline imposed from the outside, but it certainly shows very clearly that the Kurds are voting unanimously in a certain way for a Kurdish region that is autonomous to the point – you know, almost to the point of being independent of the rest of the country.

It confirms that the Shi'a have been either convinced or coerced to some extent – I don't know what the balance is between the two – in voting for Shi'a parties that are now also committed to a very loose federal system and the building of a strong Shi'a region.

The only ones who are not going to be – who are not committed to the building of a strong region of their own are the Sunnis, who are still holding out for the idea of a more centralized state, no matter how much better Sunnis are represented in the government after this new election or in the parliament.

Let us not forget that the Sunnis are not barely 20 percent of the population, and even – and in addition, they are divided so that they are never going to be a particularly strong voice in the parliament and in the government. So it seems to me that what this election does, it confirms that the future of Iraq at this point – whether or not we like it, whether or not it's a good thing or it's a bad thing – it is going in the direction of a country with a very weak center and very strong regions.

So the question is what should the U.S. do from moving forward? And I would argue that the discussions that have taken place that have been reported in the press, which I think do reflect the views of administration that it may be possible to put together a secular coalition of Sunni parties, the Allawi's coalition, and the Kurdish parties that can form a bloc – you know, a counterweight to the Shi'a alliance and that that coalition might then be willing to amend the constitution in the direction of a more – recreating a more centralized state.

I don't think that plan – that view can possibly work because even if there should be a secular majority in parliament, and of course we don't know until we have the final count, the differences between what the Sunnis want and what the Kurds want; that is, a more centralized state and an almost completely decentralized state, are so huge that they are not going to agree on a common program of constitutional revision.

So essentially we have a very decentralized Iraq and I think it's time for the U.S. to start asking would make such a decentralized state work. In other words, can a very decentralized Iraq work at all? And I argue that the only answer is: it might work, if the Sunnis are in a position to form their own region. In other words, a state in which you had a strong Kurdish region, a strong Shi'a region, but the Sunnis end up – the Sunni areas, the Sunni provinces are governed by a weak central government in Baghdad, is not a system that is ever going to start – to function, so that I would argue that at this point probably there are – we really don't have any options but to try to convince Sunnis that it might – that it is in their interest to try to form their own region and essentially join what has become now the reality of the country.

It could take – in order to make it possible for the formation of this region, I think the issue of sharing of oil revenue becomes crucial, because as the constitution is written now, if you go beyond the first statement about how oil revenue is going to be apportioned equitably among all the groups and regions of Iraq and start reading the fine print, you can only conclude that at this point that the Sunnis are not going to get very much of the oil revenue. In other words, it is not possible – as the constitution is written now – for the Sunnis to form their own region.

And I think that the efforts of the U.S. government at this point should be directed to make it possible to reach a decision on a more equitable division of the oil revenue so that the Sunnis can in fact become part of this very decentralized Iraq, which I think is what is in the cards for the future.

MR. KATULIS: Great. Thank you, Marina. Marina, you raised the issue of the process of revising the constitution and I'd actually like to take it back to Rend, and ask you about all of the revisions that you think are required and then open it up to others, because certainly this is an important issue. This was a deal that was struck on the eve of the October referendum and there are a lot of groups out there with different interests for revising the constitution.

What's your take on it? What are the highest priority issues that need to be discussed in the revisions for the constitution?

MS. AL-RAHIM: Well, Brian, I think we should all remember that on – you know, the Sunnis were brought into the constitutional process very late in the day when a draft constitution had already been written, and under U.S. pressure some Sunnis were included in the commission. As a result, on October 12th, three days before the referendum, some last-minute amendments were made to the constitutional draft and those were – it was sort of a trade off: the Islamic – the Iraqi Islamic Party, which is one of the major Sunni parties in Iraq, said that they will support the constitution if there is an amendment allowing for a revision of the constitution by the new parliament. This was a trade off. They will support the constitution provided we have that opening for revision in 2006.

This is an extremely important issue for Sunnis and I think, even more than the makeup of the government, this is going to be the make-or-break point for the Sunnis. Now, I personally have spoken publicly and have written that this constitution is simply unworkable. What we have now is not a constitution for a state, it is – I was quoted – I've said, "There's no there there, if you look at the center is supposed to have." I mean, the central government has absolutely no powers, no authority whatsoever.

And there are, in fact, contradictions throughout the constitution in what regions can do, what the central government can do, and so on. So I don't think this is a workable document, quite simply. You can't construct a state on the basis of that document. However, I don't know whether the Shi'a bloc in parliament, or the Kurdish bloc in parliament will want any major revisions. In fact, as far as we know, both the Kurds and the Shi'a has publicly stated that they like the constitution as it is, that they really see no need for any revisions. They may be willing to tinker on the edges, but that where it comes to the central issues about federalism, decentralization, oil revenues – Marina was saying – they really did not see the need for them to acquiesce in any of those revisions.

I think this is going to be the central issue that is going to determine whether Iraq descends into more violence or actually comes together as a country: whether the Shi'a and the Kurds are willing to compromise, whether the Sunnis are also willing to play along with this.

Now, one of the problems that we have, and I'd like to talk about this a little bit, is that so far the political process in Iraq has been following a timetable set down by the Transitional Administrative Law: the TAL. It was a very clear roadmap with clear deadlines for holding the first elections in January, the referendum on the constitution in October, the current elections. After these elections, we're unmoored: the TAL doesn't coming to play anymore, the Transitional Administrative Law is replaced by the constitution, and the constitution doesn't really have deadlines.

We know we've got four months to revise the constitution, but we don't have a document that really imposes deadlines on us the way that the TAL did. We are going to be set loose in a way, and this is a little bit worrisome because in the past, because of those deadlines and because of U.S. insistence that we met those deadlines, whether we like it or not we had to come up with the goods on specific dates. Now we don't have that.

And I would also argue that the ability of the United States to influence the political process in Iraq is diminishing rather than increasing. I am not sure I can write down five tools of policy that the United States can have and can exercise and can utilize in order to influence the process or to have a say or a measure of leverage in the political process. Sure, the U.S. has 150,000 troops in Iraq and this is not something to be scoffed at. However, they are there for security purposes. They have not been used as a political leverage point, nor can they be. And I am not sure what the U.S. can do compared to what the internal dynamics in Iraq dictate, and also compared to what our neighbors can bring to the scene.

For example, the Iranians have had a very large influence in southern Iraq, an increasing influence I should say, over the last two years. Other countries in the region, particularly Arab countries, are becoming a little more involved in the political process. Certainly they have worked with the Sunnis in order to persuade them to join the – to participate in the political process, to go to the polls. In the elections we saw the Arab League conference in Cairo in which all Arab countries participated. We don't have tangible results out of that yet, but in other words the countries of the region are beginning to bring in something to the table.

Our neighborhood, in my view, has more leverage in Iraq, for better or for worse, than the U.S. has. And certainly the internal breakout of forces in Iraq is going to be the dominating factor here. So I do worry a little bit about the future in terms of how we can build coalitions, how we can come to the table together and reach this consensus. And if democracy is about who loses, democracy is also about compromises, and I don't know to what extent the different parties can compromise.

There's a rather worrying sense of triumphalism in Iraq, which is very distressing in my view and it doesn't help anyone. How do we get over that? How do we become will to compromise is something that is of concern.

MR. KATULIS: Great.

Jon, you recently worked in the upper echelons of the State Department, but what do you think of the comments that Rend had to offer here about the diminishing influence of the United States and the role of regional actors? And if you were to advise Secretary Rice on the path forward in terms of a regional solution, how do you look at the Arab League initiative? How do you look at some of Iraq's neighbors? What are your views on that?

MR. ALTERMAN: Thank you. I do think the region component is very, very important. Partly because as Rend correctly suggested, the regional actors really have a great ability to influence what happens on the ground. In many cases, they have long ties to individual parties in the countries and they understand divisions between the country much better than we do. It seems to me that part of this solution has to have a regional component.

Now, initially the regional countries basically opposed the U.S. goals in Iraq because our goals were that Iraq was going to destabilize the region in a positive way. And not surprisingly, the people who depend on stability in the region thought that was an awful idea and they weren't behind us. And now as they see Iraq potentially teetering on chaos, they have swung into support, and I think that's constructive and we can build out from it.

But it seems to me that one of the other things that Rend alluded to, as Iraq seems to be suffering from sectarianism and triumphalism, that part of the problem is that pieces we're trying to put together in this country are too large. And one of the problems you have when you're in the upper echelons of government – I served in the lower bowels, but that's a separate issue – is that you're trying to simplify it, especially when you you're to explain things to busy people.

And we have been in a rush to slim down the number of different actors, to talk about Sunni and Shi'a and Kurdish groups and keep the Kurds together as a very, very important component of U.S. policy for a decade. To keep the Sunnis together and figure, well, the Sunnis have to come along. And if you think about this as a mosaic, you can't make a very nice mosaic out of four pieces: right, assuming the Sunni, the Shi'a, the Kurds, and some small secular group. You can't do it with four pieces. And the fact that the Shi'a bloc is united at something like 60 percent – the Shi'a bloc is a bloc. It's a coalition of parties and I think our policy has considered that a victory. I was – yeah, I just heard Steve Hadley, who was speaking at CSIS earlier today, and one of his complaints in response to the last question was, you know, "The Sunnis came to us, but they couldn't agree on how many demands they had. Some had seven, and some had eleven, so we couldn't really bring the Sunnis in." That's good.

It's good that there's not a Sunni lists of demands. There needs to be a range of Sunni lists of demands, and you bring in some Sunnis and you hope to have other Sunnis follow them. Some Shi'a leave the coalition because it seems to me that if we're trying to put his puzzle together with the pieces we have – the small number of pieces, we're not going to be able to make it stick. All of these pieces have outside actors, and all of them support them. When the Sunni insurgency dies in Iraq, it's not going to be for lack of money or weapons.

MR. CAMPBELL: Can I jump in, Brian?

MR. KATULIS: Yeah, go ahead.

MR. CAMPBELL: I mean, partly on this plan and partly on a previous point, because one of the things that I notice in these discussions, especially when we start getting into policy questions and so on, I think it's easy to lose sight of people's aspirations and what the people of Iraq want. And I think you are safe to say that Iraqis – part of the reason – I think there is some basic reasons why Iraqis vote the way they do. One of the reasons, as Marina mentioned, is identity, safety: there is security in numbers.

You look around, you find a party that represents your sect or your tribe, your region, and if they have a militia, so much the better because you're afraid that the other sect or tribe might be coming to get something you own. We've seen that in Bosnia and the parallels are pretty clear between Bosnia in its first elections and Iraq right now. And I agree with that, and that's true, and that's happened with the Kurds and the Shi'a for sure.

I think Sunni population is moving in that direction because they're seeing the other groups banding together. And you know, they look around and they say, "I can choose this coalition that might not do that well, or I can go with this bigger group that will give me more safety." That's one thing. But on the other hand, the Kurds and the Shi'a population of Iraq, to simplify it a little bit – and I agree that we should then disaggregate it a bit, but to simplify it, have been waiting for this moment for a long time. And they've been presented with the opportunity of what is, despite its problems, as free an election as has occurred in the Arab world and they voted exactly the way they want to.

I mean, I talked about some of the intimidation and it's there, and the government resources were abused, and I could probably do a whole good list, but I think if you kind of cut through the BS, they voted exactly the way they wanted to vote. And I think that there is something okay about that. I mean, I think there are many problems (unintelligible) okay about that.

The second issue, and I think you mentioned this, Jon, too, as well, is that you mentioned that it didn't matter who won or who lost. And I agree that in fact losing and understanding that you may have a place at the table even if it's only one chair out of many, and trying to expand that – you know, using it as a wedge and trying to expand that room and organizing better and living to fight another day is very, very important.

But the other thing that is interesting about Iraq that sets it apart from the rest of the region is that the groups or parties that win the majority of the votes form the government, and this is fairly astounding. And I think that we already saw the Sunni population realize that from the last election, and quickly organize themselves to try and gain political power.

My last point, because I'm much more optimistic, I think, about this than at least Marina and Jon – probably Rend and I more or less agree, although I think you're more world-weary because you're in the trenches and I'm not – but I'm more optimistic in the sense that, to go back to the Bosnia example, successive iterations of elections – not just

national elections, but local elections, electoral events of various sorts – and some years of experience tend to take the edges off of these things.

I think that these first elections are dramatically going for these blocs. And this sort of conflict through the electoral system – those edges will be taken off with successive iterations. And I'd also suggest that it's not so terrible – and maybe I'm being overly optimistic now. It's not so terrible that there's a very important and profound political, sectarian debate going on through this electoral process. That's so far not a terrible thing. I think the trick is what happens from here on in. Is this managed in such a way that it doesn't erupt into more open conflict?

MR. KATULIS: Great. Thanks.

Before I open it up to the audience, I'd like to give Marina just a minute, and then Jon also if you would like, to respond to what Les had to say there.

MS. OTTAWAY: I just wanted to make a small point. It may not be a good idea, it may not be in the interest either of Iraq or of the United States, to have these large pieces of mosaic. We don't – I think Jon is right: you don't put together a very nice mosaic out of four pieces or more three and a half pieces, but that's what we have. I mean, whether or not we like it, that is what Iraq is made up of at this point. So these are the pieces that have to be put together.

It's also important to keep in mind that winning coalitions usually do not disintegrate; in other words, it is true that the Shi'a coalition is a fairly heterogeneous coalition, that it has had a lot of tensions inside over the months and so on, but usually a coalition that gets – may get the majority of the vote is certainly going to get the plurality of the vote – those coalitions usually do not disintegrate. They may bicker inside, but nobody has an interest in walking out of the coalition under those conditions.

The coalitions that do disintegrate are the ones of the losing side. In other words, it is the Sunnis who are much more likely to get into conflict with each other than the Shi'a or the Kurds, who have only interest in staying together. So that I think the idea that somehow we can break – this mosaic might be broken up into smaller pieces, which – and I'm not sure that that's what Jon was implying, but I don't think that is a reasonable expectation at this point.

MR. KATULIS: Jon, quickly? Do you have any –

MR. ALTERMAN: Let me just very quickly agree with Les that I think it's great that people get to vote for who they want to. My point was that as a policy issue, it seems to be our policy has been working toward unifying these communities and then unifying the national whole out of the communities. And I think that was a mistake; that we would have been better off and will be better off in the future working to slim down – peel people off of these individual coalitions because then people can trade back and forth and people can actually feel they have a choice to vote instead of saying, "I'm a

Shi'a so I vote for the Shi'a list," instead of "I'm a Shi'a and this is my understanding of where Shi'a fit into the broader Iraqi society."

MR. KATULIS: Great, thank you.

Okay, just briefly.

MS. AL-RAHIM: I'm sorry – a very brief question. One of the – I want to go back to something Marina said earlier about giving the Sunnis their own region and therefore creating a three-region state. I don't think that's workable and I don't want to go into detail about why I don't think it is. I think that that really will start the breakup of Iraq. Now, we can discuss that and say, "What's so bad about breaking up Iraq?" But to say that Iraq can stay as a unified state with three sectarian-based and ethnic-based regions is – I don't think works at all.

The other thing looking forward: yes, we've had sectarian elections. Yes, there was intimidation, but the test for Iraq is going to be "Are we going to have another set of reasonably free and fair elections in four years time?" The test is not just (won elections?). I don't count last January's elections as valid elections. Those were elections that were done for certain political reasons and so on. Many in the population didn't participate. These are the first real elections in Iraq. If Iraq can hold together as a nation, as a state, and if politics can evolve in Iraq without violence and then we can hold another set of elections in four years time that are reasonably free, then I think the prospect for political evolution away from the identity politics that we see today and towards a much more profound understanding of what politics is about, then I think we're home clear.

And I'm already looking ahead, Les, to the next elections and I worry that we may not get there. (Laughter.) And I also worry that we won't have the Transitional Administrative Law to make it happen and so on, so it's the next four years towards the next elections that are going to be the crucial thermometer.

MR. KATULIS: Great. Thank you, Rend.

We'd like to give you an opportunity now to ask some questions and we'd first like to give the right to journalists. Any journalists or members of the media, if you can raise your hand we'll have a microphone come over to you. If you could state your name and affiliation and if you have question that you want to direct to a particular panel member, please do so.

Q: Thank you. Spencer Ackerman from the *New Republic*. Let me see if I can try and ask a question that can bridge Les and Rend with Jon and Marina. Les, you mentioned that successive iterations of elections tend to take the edge off things from a sectarian point. Jon made the point that if the Sunnis don't feel that their interests are represented after the next four months – possible reiteration of the constitution – they

may very well leave the process entirely. And I think everyone would agree this is a very real fear in Iraq.

Would it possibly make sense – I'm interested in what the panel thinks – for the U.S. to take the position that rather than having this one-time process of amending the constitution – of revising the constitution, we would support a process whereby you have continual amendments to the constitution like perhaps in several other countries? Or would that at least allow us the prospect of keeping the Sunnis on board enough to hopefully take the opportunity to take sectarianism down a bit, or would it also run the risk of reinforcing it because it keeps all the crucial issues of sectarianism still alive?

MR. KATULIS: Okay.

MR. CAMPBELL: I'll jump in. I mean, on the one hand your suggestion makes sense and the other hand I recoil at it a bit because I think that the obsession with the constitution over the past year was at the price of things that were more important; for example, security, economy, rebuilding infrastructure. I mean, the governing of Iraq in this past year was abominable. I mean, the government performed poorly. I agree that the Shi'a coalition will hang together because they have a shot at power, but the infighting and the inability to get along and the sort of paralysis involved in the past year was shameful.

The constitution process was – you know, despite the best attempts of many to make it more inclusive was really a kind of backroom, smoke-filled room thing in the middle of the night which excluded a huge group of people, as Rend mentioned. So I think I would recoil at the idea of leaving the process open because I think it hasn't been that positive. I should disclose, though, that I'm a Canadian and most Canadian's have never really thought much about constitutions. We're a bit like the British: we have one, but it doesn't – you know, we're not that worried about it. Life seems to go on. In Canada, we talk a lot about administrative decentralization, which means that you make decisions and they have an impact obviously, but you don't – in Canada we haven't been able amend our constitution for many, many decades. It seems to be impossible.

So my suggestion would be that within the political system and within what we now – you know, we now have this, as Rend said, a permanent, democratically elected legislature, that there's nothing stopping the politicians that are now elected from moving forward and putting in place laws. I now forget how many laws and maybe –

MS. AL-RAHIM: Fifty-five.

MR. CAMPBELL: Fifty-five that need to be enacted just to make the constitution work. So I guess my suggestion would be, have the legislature – the parliament move forward to enact the 55 laws that are required to make the constitution operable and see how that works out – see what direction the country is going in. That's where you can have – in a sense that would be your suggestion, where you have – you're going to have this kind of ongoing debate about how the country's structured and governed without

having to have the specter of sort of an open constitution there because when you say constitution everyone thinks it's a life and death struggle. You know, they really think it's a life and death struggle; that if you get the wrong word in the constitution, this community is sort of doomed for the rest of their existence. And so I think it would be much better to move forward just passing normal laws and then people wouldn't feel quite as doomed if the passage of that law goes against their interest in the short term.

MR. KATULIS: Great.

Marina?

MS. OTTAWAY: Yes, I just wanted to clarify one point. The constitution does – the constitution can be amended. In other words, there is a process which is built into the constitution for amending these documents, and that does not expire. It's like the U.S. Constitution: there is a process for amending it.

In addition, there was an agreement reached in October that provides for a special process for amending the constitution and that is what is only going to last for four months. But even after the four months, the constitution can be amended. I'd like to say that I totally agree with Les that sort of – the constitution by itself is not going to solve anything. In other words, what is – the question is, how can the political process be moved forward? And not necessarily by continuing to play around with this document.

MR. KATULIS: Jon or Rend, do you want to –

MS. AL-RAHIM: Well, first of all, you can't have a rolling constitutional amendment. The more important issue: first of all, the Iraqis are in a sense hung up on the idea of a constitution. You understand we haven't had a constitution since 1958 – not a permanent one anyway. And Iraqis, a little bit like Americans, are very legally minded. We have a very large – huge number of lawyers in Iraq. (Laughter.) So they've sort of become obsessed with the idea of a constitution.

But most importantly – most importantly, the Sunnis are going to use this amendment process as a test – as a touchstone for whether they are really part of the political process. It's not just elections that determine that, it's not just participation in the government. They are going to use the constitutional amendment to measure whether they have real acceptability in the country and whether they matter for anything in this country or not. That's the reason why we have to do it.

MR. ALTERMAN: And just to be a little bit crass – I mean, a lot of this is about money and if you have the votes to keep the money in the periphery and not siphon it off to the center, then a lot of people are going to take that and then you have a permanent Shi'a-Kurdish coalition to keep the Sunnis from doing exactly what Rend suggested: getting a voice in the country. That strikes me as leaving the Sunnis with very few options and some of them are going to take violence.

Now, you could imagine a different scenario in which the Shi'a community in Baghdad felt that it was not in their interest to divide the country in that way, but that would require breaking up this remarkably strong Shi'a bloc and not making that kind of deal. But, ultimately, if you've got one pie, you've got to decide how many pieces you're cutting it in and it's – I've got small kids. If you can cut one of them out and give them larger pieces, sometimes that's exactly what they want.

MR. KATULIS: Great. Any more journalists? Up front here.

Q: Okay, my name is (unintelligible). I'm former (unintelligible) (fellow?) of Brookings (unintelligible). My question is the future status on Saddam Hussein. Twenty-four years ago, I worked in Baghdad during the Iran/Iraq War, so my image about Saddam Hussein was not so bad. Taking the look at the Japanese – you know – the status immediately after the Second World War, Japan accepted unconditional surrenders after the atomic bomb twice. The bottom line is to maintain the status of our emperor. I think for a Sunni and like Saddam Hussein, I guess is like a Emperor Hirohito. So I'm not sure, so I wonder if in Iraqis' view about Saddam Hussein and the view of the Middle East as well as United States about the future status of Saddam Hussein.

MS. AL-RAHIM: I have a very short answer to this. Saddam Hussein is not viewed as Emperor Hirohito, and I don't think any Iraqis would want him back as a swap for coming into the political process. I just don't think the analogy works.

MR. KATULIS: Okay. Anyone else?

Right here –

Q: Corey Flintoff from National Public Radio. One of the big tasks that the new government will face is creating an oil law now, and it seems that since that is one of the most potentially divisive issues, is there a way that the oil law could be written to be a unifying factor, and is there any way that the United States could influence that?

MR. KATULIS: Okay.

MS. OTTAWAY: The constitution is very ambiguous on the use – on the issue of oil because it says the policy is going to be decided by the central government in cooperation with the regions. In other words, there's supposed to be a partnership there. Now, so far what we have seen is that the Kurds have been first one off the block and they have signed an agreement for exploration with a Norwegian oil company. They are beginning of the drilling was just announced. So there is very clear really a tendency now, certainly on the part of the Kurds – I suspect the Shi'a will try to do the same once the region is formed. There is no Shi'a region as of yet – to try to take things in their own hands and to jump ahead of the central government.

Now, I think that is probably one of the most important things the U.S. could do is to try and bring those decisions – you know, to convince the parliament essentially that

it's much better if they take back as much of the decision as possible and not leave it completely to the regions. So I think that law is, in fact, crucial.

MR. ALTERMAN: I agree. I was on a panel with Peter Galbraith last week – the World Affairs Council. As you may know, he is an advisor to the Kurdish regional government. And his basic attitude was, “The Kurds got what they got. They're not giving any of it back. There's no reason they should, and everybody else can go suck an egg.” (Laughter.) I completely agree with Marina: the only way forward is to begin to break down some of that entrepreneurship and bring back some power and resources fundamentally to the central government.

MR. CAMPBELL: If I can just add, there are many, many different assistance programs going on in Iraq, but one of the organizations that's active there is headquartered in Canada called the Forum of Federations, although it's sort of an international organization that includes, as members, most of the federations in the world. And they've been advising on a variety of these issues. And there are many, many issues – as I mentioned, in this sort of term “administrative decentralization,” there're many issues to be decided including using national revenues to equalize the provinces of the regions, and what we in Canada and of course everyone in a federation calls fiscal federalism. Many undecided issues – and there are many different models and ways of skinning the cat. I guess I'm mixing analogies here but (laughter) – that haven't even – we haven't even started to discuss with Iraqi politicians and decision-makers the ways of managing resources and equalizing revenues and so on, and these are extremely important issues.

MS. AL-RAHIM: I know that the Norwegian company has actually signed an agreement with the Kurds, but if I were an oil company – a major oil company, I would be a little cautious about going in and signing agreements with regional governments without the safety net of a national regulatory system simply because the situation is so unclear and the last thing you would want is for the central government to come up with regulations and laws that end up undercutting anything that regions have come up with. I don't know the extent of the Norwegian deal in Kurdistan, but certainly seems to me that even if regions have certain regulations, they should be underpinned by a national policy rather than a completely sort of chaotic system of everyone for himself.

MR. KATULIS: Great. Are there any other journalists here? Right down in front.

Q: Martin Walker with UPI. I'm wondering what future role there will be for the United States, other coalition countries beyond the provision of security and the assistance in military and police training? Whether the provision of aid is going to give some kind of leverage? And I'd like to hear from each of you what you think the future U.S. and other outside role should be, if any?

MR. KATULIS: Les, do you want to start? We'll go down the line.

MR. CAMPBELL: If you can just to clarify the question. The future outside role in terms – you mentioned aid, but primarily in aid, or –

Q: (Off mike.) I'm wondering beyond the provision of security and security training and the provision of some kind of aid, is there any other role that you think is going to be useful?

MR. CAMPBELL: I believe strongly since the beginning of this process or the end of the formal part of the war that it's important to have other countries, other aid organizations, other influences in Iraq. One of the moments – there are several moments that stick with me the most about Iraq – which happened during my first couple of visits were the heartfelt declarations by many of the Iraqis I met that they felt that the war and getting rid of Saddam Hussein meant that Iraq was joining the rest of the world. I don't know how many people said that to me in the first few days, really, after the fighting stopped.

And they really – this is what they seem to want more than anything else: to travel, to join the world, to have other people come to Iraq to be part of something they saw as much greater than themselves. And I think one of the many mistakes and one of the sort of horrible outcomes of the way things have gone is that the majority of the people, the organizations, the firms, the contractors, the NGOs, and so on, have been Americans. Some British, some others, some Danish and so on – you know, one or two Canadian, but the vast majority American. And what I would hope would happen – and I'm always optimistic that maybe this will happen, is that in the coming months on issues – I just mentioned advice on fiscal federalism and the structures of government.

This shouldn't just be an American operation at all. But on rebuilding, on humanitarian assistance, on exchange programs, on providing technical expertise, and even things like building the oil infrastructure and electricity infrastructure and so on, I would really hope that this is no longer a more or less exclusive American endeavor with some British help; that it becomes an international endeavor. I think it would be extremely good for Iraq and good for the rest of the world. So it's my personal observation.

MS. AL-RAHIM: Yeah, I think one of the sad things is that most Iraqis now feel that the United States – all the United States wants in Iraq is stability at any cost; that the United States doesn't really care what kind of government – what kind of system prevails in Iraq so long as there is stability. And the rhetoric that is connected with victory in Iraq that comes out of the White House and the administration is always tied to questions of the insurgency, of terrorism, and so on, so victory is tied to stopping Iraq from becoming a source of terrorism and instability and so on.

I would have hoped that there would be a greater role for the U.S. in Iraq than simply – I mean, we had stability under Saddam – in a sense I mean of course – I certainly thought he had weapons of mass destruction, but other than that there was relative stability. Is that all we want in Iraq? Is that all the U.S. aspires to in Iraq? We

went into this enterprise with a lot of rhetoric about freedom, about democracy, all of which has remained undefined. What do we mean by that? Were the elections that just took place the epitome of freedom and democracy? Is that what we're looking for, those kinds of elections? Is there a division in the country into its sectarian and ethnic parts a vision for the country that is satisfactory for the U.S.? I would really hope for the U.S. to have a much better agenda in Iraq, an agenda that's much more tied to a democracy in the sense of pluralism, in the sense of human rights, in the sense of multiple free and fair elections without the interference of militias; that really we bring Iraq into a better condition than most of the countries of the region in terms of democratization.

I think in the end what will remain – if anything remains of the U.S. presence in Iraq, it won't be bridges, it will not be roads. It will be a political imprint. That's what I think we should call on from the U.S. – a political stamp.

MR. KATULIS: Jon, Marina do you have anything to add?

MR. ALTERMAN: Just – I mean, as I understood your question, you're asking about international involvement in assistance and other kinds of things in Iraq. There's going to be a huge amount of international involvement in Iraq. I think the danger that we have to guard against and others need to guard against is that doesn't become a side of proxy battles: that in giving assistance to our people, we don't end up spending all our energy fighting against other people and then you have what is intended to grant stability leading to instability.

I guess that's a danger, but my sense is that the idea that Iraq would not be a place with a lot of people with a lot of interest, partly because of the oil wealth in the country, is just not viable. There will be a lot of countries and we need to be there with others, but also trying to lower the overall temperature.

MR. OTTAWAY: You are asking about what role the U.S. can play beyond the security, but I would like to bring it back to security because it's the role that U.S. plays in security that's going to determine what it can do in other areas. Because if the new government in Iraq feels that it has now strong enough militias, that it has its own way – as we have seen with prisons of the ministry of interior on its own – to deal with the problem of terrorists – not one that human rights organizations would like very much, but that can cope with some of these problems on its own, then I think the possibility of the U.S. exercising a political influence on those issues that we were discussing on the writing of an oil law and trying to get the Iraqis to forge coalitions and so on, then I think the role of the U.S. – the influence on the U.S. decreases very rapidly. So that it seems to me that the political influence that the U.S. can exercise at this point – it's very much tied to its security role and therefore it may be decreasing in the coming years.

MR. KATULIS: Great. Next question? Let's head to the back, back there. And if there is a panelist that you'd like to direct your question to – a particular panelist, that would be great.

Q: Jim Lobe, Inter Press Service. I guess Mr. Alterman, but everyone else should feel free to comment. I wanted to ask or go back to the regional question. To the extent that U.S. influence decreases and the influence of other regional powers may increase, I would like any comment you have on what the United States should do to encourage that influence or discourage it, and who in particular it should engage? Iran is obviously a big issue at the moment.

MR. ALTERMAN: It seems to me that lots of different regional parties have different interests. People have noted the various connections Iran has with various parties. Arab states have connections to the Sunni community. The Turks have their own difficult relationship with the Kurdish community. I think all of these ultimately are going to matter, and having a solution to Iraq is going to require reaching out beyond the individual communities to bring in some of the surrounding countries who would otherwise use the communities as agents of influence. We have had very successful discussions with the Iranians on two sets of issues: one is Afghanistan and security in Afghanistan, and the other is the stupid and simple, but very, very important task of navigating in the Persian Gulf. You know, our ships don't bang into each other, we don't hurl insults at each other because we've actually worked out a modus operandi. You don't have to have an exchange of ambassadors to do that and it seems to me that that is one of many negotiations we should be having.

MR. KATULIS: Great. Next question? Right here in the middle.

Q: Jessica Matthews from the Carnegie Endowment. I would like to hear from the other three panelists a response on the question of how far we are to having a de facto, if not de jure, Shi'a region because Rend said that she thought that a Sunni region was a bad idea, and I can certainly understand why, but if there is – or if we are certainly – you know, we're 80 percent of the way to having it a de facto and ultimately a de jure Shi'a region, then what is the alternative to a Sunni region if the country's to stay together? So that's my question. How much in today's reality on the ground is the appearance of a Shi'a region ingrained – inevitable?

MR. CAMPBELL: Well maybe I'll start with more anecdotal observations on the sort of negative side of about whether or not there's a Shi'a region. In other words, to argue that there isn't. I would put forward that the structures of local government are extremely undeveloped in local and provincial government. They have very little power. They don't function well. They don't – they're not providing services well. So if you look at the provinces that might comprise a Shi'a region administratively, politically – they're not very strong. And so I think just as sort of an observer I would say that it doesn't appear to be a region in the sense of regional government.

Having said that, I think most of – most of you have seen in the news the stories of the emergence of these sort of shadowy – semi-shadowy kind of enforcer police/militia/religious figures that have started to take over many, many towns and villages; but also started to take over Basra. In NDI's work in Baghdad and the same with our sister organization, IRI, ironically we have run into our greatest danger in Basra,

which is often – you know, the news is always described as sort of tag line above Basra is always, “the relatively calm, relatively safe Basra.” We don’t find it calm or safe at all because it’s completely dominated by these – by death squads almost that seem to run with impunity.

And my understanding is that many of the small Shi’a towns and villages in the south are even worse. In Basra at least you have sort of competing militias and you can make friends with one and maybe they’ll protect you from the other. In many of the towns and villages in the south, there’s only one group that controls and you’re with them or not. So I guess the existence of these kind of police/militias/religious Shi’a enforcers would tell me that something’s going on below the radar that is very quickly consolidating vast parts of the south into something that seems to have some kind of organic link somehow to the political leadership. So I think you could probably argue both ways. Again, a sort of bird’s-eye view, you might say, “Well, I don’t see any structures for a region,” but if you’re on the ground as we are, you realize that someone’s in charge and it sure isn’t the central government, so –

MS. AL-RAHIM: Well, I agree with Les completely both on the lack of the administrative capability, but also on the fact that militias are beginning to run affairs. The issue of the Shi’a region – by the way, the Sunnis have asked for an amendment to the constitution not to deny a region to the Shi’a in the south, but to defer that decision.

The problem is that we are – we live in a pressure-cooker environment. The last three years have been highly emotional, very turbulent for Iraqis and we are working through all kinds of a legacy of grievances, of oppression, and so on and the militias play upon this because it’s power. It’s not a question of what’s good for the region or what’s good for Iraq; it’s a question of what’s good for their power.

And I think that if we could defer that kind of decision until such time as we have real politics as opposed to gut politics or visceral victimhood politics, I think we will be able to work out the federalism part of the constitution much more reasonably. And perhaps we won’t have – by the way, historically there has been – there has always been quite a difference between the deep south – Basra, Amara, and so on, and the holy cities – Najaf, Kabala – and as far as I can see those differences are still there in terms of culture and temperament and so on, except that these militias are consolidating their power.

So I would argue that if we could wait for a few years, then I think we would have a different type of federalism emerging in Iraq which is much more workable than what is being forced upon the country right now.

MR. ALTERMAN: Can I also just very quickly observe that the north is fairly uniformly Kurdish; the south is really uniformly Shi’a, and the middle is fairly diverse with a lot of lumpiness in there. So if you can slice off the top and bottom, but what you’re left with in the middle isn’t a Sunni slice, it’s a mixed slice with all the complexity that that implies.

MS. OTTAWAY: Yes. Very quickly, I just wanted to reply to Rend's point about it would be better to wait before these decisions are taken. You cannot just wait. I mean, it is true that there is no regional administrative capacity at this point. There is not much a central administrative capacity either. (Laughter.) I mean, it's not that the central government is now firmly in control. The problem is that nobody is in control, so that we can't just defer a decision. Either the decision is to rebuild the central government's administrative capacity or the decision is to build the administrative capacity at the regional level. A decision has to be taken and I would argue that it has to be taken rather quickly because it's not – because the present situation – you know, it's not tenable essentially.

MR. KATULIS: Great. We're running quickly out of time here and what I want to do is take two more questions together, so that we can close up on time here. First, right here in the front and then one in the far back. Sorry, Antoine.

Q: Thanks. Alan Makovsky from the House International Relations Committee. This is really a follow-up to the previous question and it's for Rend. Given the fact that, at least based on news reports, the leadership of the dominant party in the leading Shiite coalition seems intent on pursuing the idea of a federal Shiite state, what is your assessment for the likelihood that this will happen or that it can be headed off?

And related to that, so long as the Kurds are insistent on maintaining their federal prerogatives, is it really possible to convince the Shiite that they should back off similar demands?

MR. KATULIS: Yeah. Hold on a second. And then in the far back.

Q: Michael McCall (sp) from Stanford and Carnegie. I wonder if you could say a little bit more about the winners. We've heard about the importance the losers, but we haven't heard much about the winners: what their policies are, what they're going to do.

In particular, I'm wondering why the headline of this election is not "Islamists win the first real and free election in the Middle East" as Les said. Why hasn't that been the headline? And tell me why then SCIRI and Dawa is different from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or even Hamas and Hezbollah. And I don't necessarily see that as a bad thing. I think maybe that's a good thing that these kinds of groups are participating in the elections. I don't quite understand why we don't talk about them that way. And interesting – this word "militia" is very interesting. In Basra, they're militias; in the West Bank and the Gaza, they're something else. Hezbollah – why are they different? Tell us how they're different and why this – the headline is not "Islamists tied to terrorist organizations won the first free and fair election."

MR. KATULIS: Rend, do you want to take a stab at Alan's question first and then –

MS. AL-RAHIM: (Laughs.) Yes. Well, the Shi'a coalition, of course, Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim wants, and he's the one who first proclaimed the nine-province region in the south. What's interesting is that Moqtada al-Sadr is not interested at all in a region in the south, and for reasons which may be tied to the fact that he thinks, why simply confine yourself to the south when you can have all Iraq for yourself? I mean, he sees it as a diminishment of Shi'a power. That – I haven't asked him the question, Alan, I have to say, but that's my guess and it makes sense. If I were a Shi'a political leader, that's how I would think. Why confine myself to the nine provinces south of Baghdad? I want the whole of it. So for people like me who are not keen on a nine-region province, Moqtada al-Sadr is my natural ally, and so he may yet come to the rescue.

And I should mention that everything I've heard about the results of these elections are – the Sadrist are claiming that the sweeping victory of the Shi'a alliance really comes from their presence on that list, and I can well believe it and they are going to ask for the lion's share. And so – and Jafri has as much as said that they will get a very important share of the government, so I assume that they will be listened to by Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim and others in the SCIRI on the issue of the region as well. But, you know, who knows? This is all in the future.

MR. CAMPBELL: Can I – maybe I'll take a quick stab at some of this, Mike, because I've – we at NDI have been having – we have to think about these issues a little more than I'd actually like to because we're about to do a big observation mission in the West Bank and Gaza for the upcoming election, and have been engaged in a lot of other similar questions. I'll just take a few stabs with your question on why the respective militias of Hezbollah and Hamas are perhaps different from SCIRI. I would say that the main difference is that the Bader brigades in Iraq are primarily a defensive organization. I'm not going to – I'll try to keep my judgment out of this, but they would argue that they are a defensive organization – civil defense, basically. They're not an offensive organization. They would argue that they are not using a militia to achieve political goals; that they have – that they're engaging in the political system to achieve those goals. I think that's how they would argue the difference.

I think you're right that the headlines should be a little bit different and particularly Dawa and its leader, Ibrahim al-Jafri – very brotherhoodish. Ibrahim al-Jafri attends meetings of the other Islamic leaders when they happen. In fact, Marina and Carnegie put together a meeting that I was at in Kuwait where al-Jafri was there with many other Islamist leaders and he fit perfectly well within that milieu. SCIRI's a different animal and it's a much more revolutionary, Iranian-tied organization which has, I think, a much grander agenda.

But why I think the headlines aren't what you suggested is that I just think the public, whether they know all the details or not, maybe realizes intuitively that the Shi'a parties are – because of their historical worrying about their own lack of political and civil freedom, they actually are – they do not have an expansionist agenda. They are actually interested, generally speaking, in maintaining free space and maintaining some civil rights and some human rights and they have – they just have limited ambition,

whereas the Sunnis Islamists throughout the region are – I’m generalizing a lot – they are not interested in maintaining civil and – well, people are worried they are not interested in maintaining civil and human rights and that they have an expansionist and sort of region-wide agenda that the Shi’a parties don’t.

MR. KATULIS: Okay. Marina?

MS. OTTAWAY: Yeah. Why the headlines don’t say “Islamists win the elections.” I think there are two reasons. First of all, we don’t want to admit yet what is happening. We are hiding behind the fact that the final results are not out. Secondly, I think there is a myth which is going around and keeps on appearing in a lot of newspaper articles that the – no matter how well the Islam – the Shi’a coalition does, they have to form a – (march?) in alliance with other organizations because the constitution requires that two-third majority to support the government. That’s simply not true. It requires a simple majority, so that in fact I think we will get to the point where we have to admit that that is the case.

More, though, in terms of substance I think it’s important to keep in mind that it is Islamists call – you know, these Islamists are not going to be able to impose their will on the entire country. In other words, it is not going – the Sharia is not going to be applied in Kurdistan. You have – the system that is created by the constitution is so highly decentralized that the central government really cannot impose anything on any region, on anybody, and I think that it would be very, very hard under the present conditions for a Shi’a coalition to impose its version of Sharia on the Sunni regions as well. So that essentially, this is a coalition that’s going to very definitely create something which looks very much like an Islamist state in a Shi’a region, but not in the entire country.

On the issue of the militias: why don’t we talk it? Because nobody knows what to do about that. You know, if you go beyond the normative statement, “the militia should be disbanded,” which is what everybody says the constitution says, but you ask the practical question, by whom – who is going to take on the militias and disarm the militias, then it becomes clear why we don’t talk about them very much because nobody has an answer to that. The U.S. is not going to disarm the militias. They have enough trouble with the Sunnis insurgents.

MR. KATULIS: Okay. Jon?

MR. ALTERMAN: Let me just make three very quick points. First, to reinforce – you know, part of the reason this isn’t just an Islamist victory is because the Kurds are anything but Islamist, so there’s an important secular victory as well. Second, I think another reason is that the Sunni and the Shi’a don’t agree on what Islam says people should do, so that sorts of breaks down that coalition.

On the militia question where you have the same issue among Palestinians and among Iraqis is if you wanted to disband the militias, what do you give them to do? I mean, there’s an argument and the argument we’ve used to bring the militias into police

work is people know how to use guns already; you might as well have them pledging loyalty to some sort of central state. And the question is, do you kill the state in the process? But in that way, what do you do with guys who have weapons and know how to use them? The problems in Gaza, for example, and the problems in southern Iraq are almost identical.

MR. KATULIS: Great. I think that will be the last word. Please join me in thanking our panelists for a fascinating discussion.

(Applause.)

(END)