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Annual Conference Transcript
Crafting a Successful Iran Strategy

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Begin Transcript

ILAN GOLDENBERG: Thank you very much for joining us for this panel. We've had an interesting day thus far. Now we're going to sort of talk about a really easy issue, "Crafting a Successful Strategy for Iran." That sounds like a good, easy, simple panel to work through as we were just sort of saying up here.

Before we do and before we get to our discussion, my name is Ilan Goldenberg. I run the Middle East Security Program here at CNAS. And we wanted to do a little interactive polling with you. So, folks, pull out their CNAS app, pull out your phone. And you hop over in your schedule to this current session, "Crafting a Successful Iran Strategy," and click on that. And you click down, you should see a live poll. Now, if we can put that up on the screen please. And click on the live poll.

You should have a first question that pops up, which is, will the Iran nuclear agreement survive for the next four years, yes or no? And let's see how the audience is actually doing. Interesting. We are looking at roughly 60/40, 42. So that's a pretty interesting, contentious disagreement there which will make for an interesting discussion. And that's probably where I'd put it, 60/40. It seems like a reasonable answer.

Bold.

Innovative.

Bipartisan.

Now, if we go to the next question which should pop up, do you expect that the United States will have a military confrontation with Iran in the next four years? All right. That's pretty reassuring, 75/25, no. Actually, I don't know. Is that reassuring? Twenty-five percent is still pretty high, so maybe I'm less reassured.

Right. Well, that's obviously the topic of discussion for this panel and obviously some very heavy and important issues that we'll be weighing here. So I'd like to just quickly introduce our panel. We have a great group to discuss this, former Senator Kelly Ayotte, Republican from New Hampshire, who also is very active on the Senate Armed Services Committee previously. Senator Chris Murphy, Democrat from Connecticut, who's also on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Liz Rosenberg, my colleague who runs our Economics, Energy and Security Program at CNAS and is a real world class expert on sanctions and formerly at the Treasury Department. And Matt McInnis, who's a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and has a long career in the Defense Department and intelligence community working these issues.

So maybe let's go back to that first question and start with you, Senator Ayotte. You know, when you were in the Senate, you opposed the nuclear agreement and obviously were a part of that very big debate, but there is this question now, you know, we're two years on from that debate. And at least thus far, the administration has been pursuing this strategy review and has said that until that strategy review is complete, it's not really going to make a judgment one way or another on the Iran nuclear agreement. Do you think that at this point the Trump administration should keep the Iran nuclear agreement even if you might have disagreed with it at the time or is there still opportunity, do you think, to renegotiate or walk away from the deal? What do you think they should do?

FORMER SENATOR KELLY AYOTTE (R-NH): Well, thank you, Ilan. I'm very honored to be here with this panel, especially with Senator Murphy. And I will say that if you look at where we are opposing the JCPOA, as I looked at it at the time, giving Iran – dismantling hard-won sanctions, putting them in a position where at the time the administration did not deal with the ballistic missile program, giving them relief on the arms embargo or dealing with their support for terrorism and also relief – economic relief and a window where they can continue research and development in a 10 to 15-year after that period really being able to go forward in developing nuclear weapons and having – actually, sprinting to a nuclear weapons then.

So if you're Iran, of course, if you look at what the State Department said about Iran actually technically being in compliance, strategically they're going to continue to try to be in technical compliance with the JCPOA. It makes sense for them strategically to wait it out, to continue their research and development. And so the administration is in a tough position right now because if they were to pull out of the JCPOA, as much as I thought it was a very poor deal for us and for security, they will be alone. Russia and China will block any actions that they could potentially take. You will also probably have few, if any, European partners to join them. And one of the strengths prior to the agreement was, of course, not just our sanctions but the multilateral sanctions.

So what I do hope happens right now, I can see the administration saying we're not going to pull out right now the JCPOA because of that and being left in a position where they don't have anyone that is going to join them to strengthen any action they would take if they pulled out, but I think what the Congress did recently in passing legislation to impose sanctions on Iran, on the ballistic missile program, to give the opportunity to impose sanctions for their terrorism-related activities, that's something that's been a long time coming.

And I hope that the House will get over their – (inaudible) – problem and figure it out and get this legislation going forward because if we don't deal with their ballistic missile program, that is very, very dangerous. That's something that shouldn't have been left out of what happened at the time. We know Iran will claim, by the way, if we impose sanctions on ballistic missiles that that is a violation of the JCPOA. I still think, first of all, it's not, even though they'll claim it is, but I think it's really important that if the administration stays in the JCPOA, which I don't see a lot of action for them to get out right now at the moment, they get tough with them on this missile program, on their support for terrorism, on their human rights violations. And that's where I think the opportunity is.

MR. GOLDENBERG: Thanks.

And maybe, Senator Murphy, I imagine you have a different view on some of this perspective, especially on the nuclear agreement itself. So maybe before we sort of dive a little deeper into the regional developments and things like that, we can take get your take on this question.

SENATOR CHRIS MURPHY (D-CT): There's no doubt that Kelly and I came out in different places. Again, I'll join her in thanking you for having us on this panel. I look forward to the discussion.

And, you know, to me it's really not a framework of looking at it as a good deal or a bad deal. To me, it was a vitally necessary deal – that it was important having been given the opportunity running these sanctions for long enough to impose a real cost on the Iranian economy, the willingness of our partners to join with us in these negotiations, to take this issue of a nuclear militarized Iran off the table, at least for the foreseeable future.

And I think a lot of the dispute was whether you try to settle all of our issues with Iran at one time or whether you take the most troublesome off the table that may actually make it more likely, not less likely, that you're able to effectively deal with issues like their treatment of citizens with respect to human rights, whether it be their actions in the region or their support for terrorist groups. To me, it was important to take that issue off of the table.

And they have complied with the agreement. And to the extent that many of us thought this was also part of a broader strategy to try to empower the relative moderates – and that is a truly relative term – inside Iran in the long term, the recent elections, you know, may indicate that that longer term strategy is playing out.

Now, I haven't been a cheerleader of these new sanctions because I do worry about proportionality. We've given some pretty significant pre-endorsements to the president and I am hopeful that he will use it in a way that doesn't seek to intentionally unwind the nuclear agreement, but there's no doubt that all of us that supported that agreement said that we were doing so in anticipation of the fact that we would come together later, Republicans and Democrats, to craft a new strategy to try to take on the ballistic missile program, to try to push back against their support for terrorism. And I think that's what these sanctions can do if properly used by this administration.

I know we're going to talk about the broader set of policies here, but I think it's important to realize that if you want this successful counter-Iran strategy, you do have to look outside the missile program. I think we've done some good things, the sanctions amongst them. I think the administration is taking a series of other steps that, frankly, are going to be detrimental in trying to keep Iran inside a box in the short and medium term.

MR. GOLDENBERG: I'm just curious to go back on that if you wanted to expand on what you think they're doing that would make it difficult to keep Iran in a box.

SEN. MURPHY: I mean, let's be honest about the ballistic missile program. We talk about the ballistic missile program through the prism of Israel. And it's important to do that because that program does present an existential threat to Israel. But those missiles are pointed at Saudi Arabia. And to the extent that we are serious about trying to lessen the imperative that the Iranians feel to build up their ballistic missile program, then it's probably not smart policy to be loading up the Saudis with more weapons than ever before.

We've sold more weapons, offensive weapons, to the Saudis over the course of the last 10 years than we did in our entire history of arms sales to the Saudis previous to 2008. So my criticism of the pace of arms sales to the Saudis is certainly connected to the Yemen campaign, but it's also connected to what I believe should be a broader strategy of recognizing that the Iranians are building missiles in part because of the pace of sales that we've provided to the Saudis.

MR. GOLDENBERG: That's a good, interesting – you know what? Actually, Liz, I want to sort of turn to you and then we'll transition to the region, but I wanted to follow up on some of the statements by both the senators about, you know, this recent congressional legislation, and, more broadly, you know, the role that sanctions should play in crafting a new strategy. I mean, is it possible that as we talk about this broader strategy in the region and towards dealing with the other issues that we have with Iran the sanctions play a useful role or have we basically taken those off the table because of the JCPOA? How do you use them?

ELIZABETH ROSENBERG: Right. Thanks for the question. And it's a pleasure to be here with you all.

There's an important role for sanctions. It's a well-trod path here, obviously. We've seen them be useful for messaging, for creating economic leverage, obviously, and as has been discussed, to those people who would say, deal supporters who would say that more sanctions now endanger the deal and cannot be compatible with a future tough strategy on Iran, I don't think that's right. We've seen the past administration and this administration use what are certainly tough sanctions on Iran related to support – for ballistic missiles and support for terrorism, even human rights, abuse of human rights. And that can be and should be a part of the U.S. policy going forward. It continues to express concerns in these domains.

All that said, surely these aren't the only tools to pursue these concerns and in a number of cases it may not be the most appropriate tools, may not be – shouldn't be the tools that policy leaders look to in the first instance to pursue these concerns as I think we'll get into in a moment to address regional competition and even aggression. There may be a role for sanctions as a messaging strategy and also to complement true deterrent in the military realm, but there are other tools – intel, military, et cetera – that can be useful there. And that's something to bear in mind, particularly when sanctions seem in the fore right now as a policy tool that, in fact, there's a broad sweep of tools that policymakers will need to keep in mind in those instances.

MR. GOLDENBERG: In your assessment, Liz, do you think that the recent legislation that was passed in any way helps in this process or endangers the JCPOA in any way or is sort of – you're sort of agnostic about the legislation?

MS. ROSENBERG: I have plenty of strong feelings on this, but I think – as a legal matter, I think I would associate myself with what was already said that I don't – it doesn't put the United States in a position of not supporting the deal or in abrogating the JCPOA in some way. However, to those people who are – and there are many – concerned about what has been called the spirit of the deal and keeping in the spirit of the deal, surely any such measure, this or others, will be seen as antagonistic to deal supporters and unhelpful to others.

Now, that said, I think actually the JCPOA as an agreement is pretty strong and can withstand quite a lot of critique from all sides. The incentives are still there for all sides to stay in it. So the criticism offered on Iran in general and on specific areas that these sanctions go to in particular that can be compatible with this deal, I don't think it will undermine it.

MR. GOLDENBERG: Great. So I want to I think pivot and spend more of our time actually – because I think the JCPOA at least I view it more as – it's more the past than the future. The future, at least the next few years, where the debate at least has moved in Washington has been more on this question of Iran's regional role, and that seems to be more of where this administration is putting the focus, although we could debate which is actually the most important, but I do think, Matt, turning to you, I'd be interested in your take.

So we do have – I'd say we've put the nuclear program in a box at least for a few years while we're dealing with these other challenges. That's also a debatable assertion. But there are these other challenges, what's happening in Syria and Iran support for the Assad regime there, you know, Shia militias in Iraq and also, you know, some of the meddling in Yemen.

How do you view Iran's – what is Iran trying to accomplish in the region? Are they doing well at it and are there ways that we can start to counter some of those things or that we already have been using to counter some of those things that make sense?

MATTHEW MCINNIS: Thanks a lot and thanks for having me here on this panel. I think what's you're seeing in particular with the administration is an idea of taking the nuclear deal as something that probably needs to be, you know, as opposed to this centerpiece of our Iran policy, as more of a component of a larger strategy. At least I think that's the aspiration of the Trump administration, which I think in general is a good idea. I don't think having the nuclear deal as a centerpiece of how we approach everything is necessarily, you know, the right way to go about things.

And this is the reason why I think in some ways I think Liz is right but I would perhaps disagree that, you know, we didn't push it as much as we should on Iran's regional behavior during the negotiation period and during the implementation where I think there was a fear that if you push too hard on the Revolutionary Guard Corps' activity, on human rights, et cetera, that that would put the deal at risk. And I think that there is a degree of hesitation to go as far as we probably should.

And I think you've certainly seen a desire by the administration, you know, since January, to push harder on those areas. I think the exact policy and how to, you know – you know, how to engage the right amount, that's not – before we can determine where we want to go with the deal (versus ?) other aspects in the region, that's still being determined. And so we'll see how that goes.

But, as you're pointing out, there are huge challenges for us of how we want to conduct both our counter-ISIS campaign in Iraq and Syria and how we also want to conduct, you know, our efforts against Iran and Iran's influence, its destabilizing activities, the term we like to use and some of us may need to unpack that better, as well as in Yemen and elsewhere.

And I think what the U.S. needs to focus on is understanding areas where Iran's kind of core existential interests are as well as those areas that are the more opportunistic areas where Iran has really expanded recently. And I think we need to kind of divide up our strategy and focus on areas that we can make the most gains on and, frankly, are the most troublesome for us, and recognize those areas where Iran is most entrenched in the region are going to take a longer term strategy.

Say, for example, where Iran is in Lebanon, where Iran is in Damascus, in Western Syria, its interest there in preserving Lebanese Hezbollah, preserving Assad's regime. Those are areas that we have to kind of approach, you know, as a long-term strategy, as well as Iran's interest directly in Baghdad, Western Iraq and Southern Iraq. Those are areas where Iran is going to fight tooth and nail for its influence.

But areas that Iran's – you know, the Shia militia, the popular mobilization forces have been growing in their activities as they fight ISIS in Northern Iraq, Western Iraq, and as we increasingly see potential, you know, tensions in Eastern Syria, as we operate against ISIS, you know, fears of a potential land bridge that may be being built by Iran to be able to move directly on the ground, not just using air but using, you know, land capacity all the way from Tehran to Beirut. Those are the things that we need to be very concerned about – about potentially, you know, being able to interrupt and prevent from being entrenched. Those are opportunities Iran is being able to exploit because in many way of the counter-ISIS campaign.

And then, also, obviously Yemen is a huge concern because this is an area that, frankly, is not an existential interest to Iran. It is to Saudi Arabia and to some of the other Gulf States. But Iran has been using this as an opportunity to really get underneath Saudi Arabia's skin and basically I look at it as a cost-imposing strategy that they can – the Iranians can put a little bit in and get a lot out of that investment to really get the Saudis and the Emirates and others to throw a lot of money and personnel and time, distraction – even us.

And we have to be careful over a long term of how they've been using their partnership with the Houthis as that, over time, that partnership can become a true proxy relationship and where you don't want the Houthis to become like a true Hezbollah-like organization because then, eventually, Iran will treat them like Hezbollah and then they will defend them like they'd defend Lebanese Hezbollah and it becomes an existential issue for them. And then, it becomes a real disaster for us there and to being able to ensure freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

MR. GOLDENBERG: So a question then actually to both senators in terms of – I'd be interested in your perspectives on this, both in terms of – so the regional dynamic and what makes sense to push back against Iran, but also the risks. I mean, one of the major risks that we see is the potential in eastern Syria at least for a confrontation inadvertently between the United States and Iran or Assad forces.

We've seen a number of instances just in the last month or so where U.S. shooting down a Syrian airplane, taking out in some cases a number of Shia militia forces, and that's sort of roiling us into potentially a broader conflict with Iran as, basically, ISIS disappears and we find ourselves operating in a much closer space with these groups, how concerned are you about that? And also, you know, what is the Senate's role in this? Because are we going to end up – if we start shooting down Syrian planes, when are we at the point of need an AUMF that actually justifies something like that?

SEN. MURPHY: We're beyond the point of needing an AUMF. There is currently military activity happening inside Syria that is unauthorized, right? There is no legal authorization for military activity against ISIS. There is clearly no legal authorization for military activity against the Assad regime and the administration itself has testified to that before Congress.

I mean, my only dispute with the premise of the question is this – is the word inadvertent. I mean, there is, in my mind, nothing inadvertent about the existing set of military confrontations that are going on between the United States and Syria and Iran. You have to understand that if you're going to put 1,000 troops inside Syria, if you are going to assist in the retaking of Raqqa, the ultimate result of that will be to put U.S. forces in direct confrontation with either Iranian forces or Iranian proxy forces. And the administration has telegraphed that they aren't going anywhere – that they're going to hang around to help our partners hold territory that is taken from ISIS.

And if that's the case, then you are previewing a very long-term confrontation between U.S. forces and Iran and Russia. So far, you haven't gotten into a shooting war. We've shot at them, but they haven't necessarily shot back with any U.S. casualties. I worry that it's just a matter of time and it begs the question as to why Congress isn't convening a process right now to decide whether or not we want to provide an authorization that I think is long overdue.

FRM. SEN. AYOTTE: Let me just say that this has been – if we look at what's happening in Syria, in part the administration's dealing with inaction from the prior administration. I mean, this has been a long time coming. If we're going to deal with ISIS, we can't just deal with the Iraqi side. They're trying to have a strategy to also deal with ISIS in the Syrian piece of it.

And so I hear what Senator Murphy is saying in terms of the issues and the concerns that can arise. We've seen it with the recent activity with the drone shot down, but this is – Iran's support for the Assad regime has been undermining also our efforts, I think in many ways, with what we're trying to accomplish against ISIS, as much as they say that they're not doing that. And we've seen the same thing at times with Russia as well.

So as I look at what's happening in the region, is the choice just we do nothing? I agree. I think there should be an AUMF, but having – both of us having served there, we know that the political will to get an AUMF done right now doesn't seem to be present in the Congress. I'd love to see the Congress take up an AUMF and have the administration come to the Congress working with them and say, here's our strategy of what we're going to accomplish, what we need to do, and what authority we need to do it. It has to go hand in hand.

But I don't think the alternative is to say we're not going to do anything, because they do have to deal with what is a real threat, with what is happening with ISIS, and you can't just stop it at the border and say, okay, we took care of Iraq, we're just going to let Syria continue to devolve.

MR. GOLDENBERG: Does anybody else want to hop in on this question or we can – we can also move on in sort of a related question, and really for any of you. You know, part of this is also driven by this, and Senator Murphy got at it a little earlier, this question of, you know, Iran-Saudi competition in the region. And President Obama famously said, you know, they need to learn how to share the region. That's one perspective. It's clear President Trump has a very

different perspective based on his visit to Riyadh, you know, the famous picture of him on the orb with King Salman.

And so I guess a question really for all of you or anybody who wants to chime in is, you know, what is that balance? How do we deal with that? I mean, I think Senator Murphy already started to get to it, you know, with the perspective that if you just give the Saudis a blank check, you might actually make things worse. So where is that – you could also argue that if you walk away from them, you just make them insecure and aggressive in that way. So how do we deal with this competition that we're sort of stuck in the middle of?

MR. MCINNIS: If I can jump in on that issue, I think in general, I think we saw out of the Riyadh summit what at first appeared to be a fairly successful event in that we had, you know, on the face of it unity, you know, both to fight terrorism as well as directly or implicitly a good unified front against Iran, and at least for the broader, you know, policy to push back Iranian influence in the region. And I think this was in many ways the pendulum swing away from the previous administration.

You know, regardless of the specifics of policy, there was certainly an impression among Gulf leaders that President Obama was really not on their side and was basically kind of leaving them to figure out the world for themselves there, which, you know – (inaudible) – how you look at that principle, the system as it had worked for so long had depended on, you know, a degree of both U.S. underwriting security as well as American leadership there.

And that – and once you kind of pull that back or that American leadership became uncertain, the rest of the states began to kind of try to figure out their own way. And that wasn't particularly working very well. And I think that certainly as we've seen the last few weeks, the need for good and fairly clear American leadership, you know, not necessarily American intervention everywhere but American leadership is very much needed, and I think these states are in a situation especially in the Gulf region where they have a lot of differences.

And I think that we do have common interests of fighting terrorism and of confronting Iran that I think – that needs to have constant, you know, reassurance and reiteration from Washington to be able to manage some of these internal differences of foreign policy that these states have. And I think balancing that – because, otherwise, what you're going to have is this insecurity cycle and security that really kicks in between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

And there's – frankly, there's another side to that in that Iran, as much as I do worry, and Iran is taking advantage in some ways of this current crisis going on among Qatar and its neighbors, but Iran is also likely to be seeing the situation as potentially getting out of hand as well in that you could see both sides seeing increasing instability is going to increase both sides' efforts to, you know, heighten the proxy activity and heighten each other's defensive activities, fearing that either side is going to take aggressive moves towards each other.

And I really worry that that if the U.S. does not have a kind of clear leadership and communicate that clearly, we're going to have an increasing escalation in the Gulf.

SEN. MURPHY: You know, I would argue that the U.S. should have a policy to counter the spread of Iranian influence in the region and we should also have a policy of countering the spread of Saudi influence in the region. We should understand that though the Iranians do lots of terrible things to destabilize the region, so do the Saudis, and the most lethal, most homeland-oriented elements of the international jihadist movement are Sunnis, not Shias. And so for us to be weighing so heavily on the Sunni side of the developing set of proxy wars I think misunderstands the nature of the threats presented to the United States.

And this risk we now confront of there being two sets of proxy wars in the region: a set of proxy wars between the Shia and the Sunnis and then a set of proxy wars within the Sunni world, within the GCC because of the Saudis' perception that we have given them this blank check to go after all of their enemies is very, very dangerous.

And so I would hope that we could craft a more fair-minded conversation about the way in which Saudi money eventually flows to a form of Islam that forms the building blocks of the very extremist movements we're seeking to fight, and also at the same time understand that we have to have a fulsome strategy to counteract that same flow of money to terrorist groups that comes out of Tehran. It doesn't seem that we are understanding the duality of our challenges right now in the current administration.

FRM. SEN. AYOTTE: I would say there's no doubt that we should be pressing Saudi Arabia for the support they have for Sunni extremism – no doubt. But it's a different conversation. The Saudis are our allies. The Iranians are not our allies, we all know that. I mean, we are their great Satan. So I just think it's a very – it's a tough conversation you have with a friend versus a very different relationship obviously we have with an adversary.

And so I think that you can't put them on equal footing, and what the Trump administration is doing – in part there was this feeling among the Saudis and other Gulf nations under the Obama administration that they were left on their own and that they didn't have our support and that the support was really on the Iranian end. And so the Trump administration I think is trying to counter that.

And I think, hopefully, I do agree that, yes, we do need to make sure we're dealing with Sunni extremism, but I don't think you can put them on the plane.

SEN. MURPHY: I think that's a very fair point. I would just add one piece to it. I don't know that there's ever been a more important time to have an ability for the American secretary of state to be able to talk to the Iranian foreign minister. And what greatly worries me is that this separation that we have had from a previous dialogue that we were able to have with the Iranians makes it much harder to unwind one of these potential conflicts we're talking about before it sets off.

And so that's another reason why I think we should be a little bit more strategically positioned in the region because if we are going to put our forces within such close proximity to

the Iranian forces, the fact that we have to talk to them through the Omanis rather than directly makes it more likely that something like that sets off in a bigger and a more volatile way.

MS. ROSENBERG: I'd just add one more thought in here. Congress, of course, has a number of important roles to play on setting the terms of the conversation for this policy conversation with Iran. One of those most recently has been this set of sanctions but Congress also has an opportunity to signal to the administration and to the Iranians that, in fact, simultaneously there should be appropriate engagement on issues of common interest, particularly to manage miscalculation.

And one way to do that is to instruct the administration to offer certain specific licensing opportunities for the U.S. to continue in those sets of conversations. So, from my perspective, I think that would be a really useful context to – or accompaniment to the set of Iran sanctions that I have no doubt will pass.

FRM. SEN. AYOTTE: I think one thing interesting to follow is Senator Corker's recent announcement that he is going to – he's the chair of the Foreign Relations Committee – going to put a hold on foreign military sales until there's a resolution of what's happening at the GCC. So I think that's obviously what you're saying is that's the type of leverage also that, hopefully, can bring people to the table so there isn't a greater regional conflict that continues to brew.

MR. GOLDENBERG: And I'm sort of interested – I mean, you know, there's maybe this balancing act between the perspectives that you guys are saying. I mean, if there was this view – I think whether the view is justified or not, there certainly was a view by the Saudis under the Obama administration that they were being abandoned to Iran. But now there seems to be, you can also argue, an opposite view that they've been reassured to the point where they feel they can do almost anything, including go after Qatar in this particular case, which is not – now looks like something that's really not in the U.S. interest.

So I'm sort of curious if maybe you can find a balancing act and also how you think this latest GCC crisis that we're dripping into, how that affects our Iran policy and our overall regional policy and what it says about how we've been conducting ourselves for the past few months?

MR. MCINNIS: Yeah. I mean, I think this particular crisis has been a real kind of a surprise – I mean, in some ways it shouldn't have surprised us and did surprise us. I mean, some of these problems go back for a very long time among Doha and Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. We had a miniature version – we thought it was a big version, but it was a miniature version back in 2014 of this crisis. It was papered over then. I think there's hopes we may be able to paper over it now, but I think the divisions are very deep and I don't think that we're going to come to some type of resolution that truly resolves all the problems.

And I think we're going to be kind of dealing with these cleavages among those three capitals for a long time, and particularly how it affects, you know, what's happening to Qatar and

how Kuwait and Oman are going to feel after this situation of how this is going to affect their relationships with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

And I think Iran is – you know, is looking at this scenario, you know, both, as I mentioned earlier, as an opportunity but also as a potential, you know, worrisome – are they going to see from their perspective, getting in the Iranian mindset, you know, does this mean that Washington, you know, is in Riyadh are very much going to have a very strong policy against them pushing back, you know, from the Gulf and how they're going to be calculating against that.

So, for us, I think this is – you know, for the U.S., I think that the Qatar crisis, you know, allows – in some ways, it allows us to kind of peer into – open up the box and peer into in a way that we haven't in a long time the internal workings of our allies. It's like looking under the hood of our car that we've been wanting to go with to use against Iran in a more effective way and we kind of realize there's a whole bunch of problems in the engine.

And so we're getting a chance to kind of try to fix some of this stuff. I don't know if we're going to be able to, but I do think it does allow us to understand not only some of their more deeper intricacies of the counterterrorism financing problem because everyone in the region has a counterterrorism financing problem, let's be honest. And then also how we can make this work potentially better or more realistically if we're going to put together a regional effort against Iranian influence or a more effective effort against Iranian influence. So I think that's the silver lining if you want to use that for the crisis.

But, overall, I think it's putting us in a situation where we're going to have to reevaluate how much, how far, how fast we can go in organizing a good, strong diplomatic front with Iran because you do see the region kind of breaking up into different camps, in this kind of Qatar-Turkey axis that may be developing in this kind of middle ground that's still tied with us from a security structure standpoint because Turkey is still a NATO ally, Qatar is still an ally, but it's moving in a kind of a greyer area. It's going to create new space for Iran, Russia, everyone to play in a more multi-polar Middle East. So I think this is going to be a new challenge for us. I don't think it really totally undermines our Iran policy, but it makes it more complicated.

SEN. MURPHY: Let's just be honest about the challenges here, and I don't mean to be too political but I'm glad that Senator Corker took this stance to try to be helpful to Secretary Tillerson's efforts. But let's understand why that happened. That happened because Secretary Tillerson could not create an alliance with the president of the United States on this matter and so, instead, he turned to the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

And so, so long as Secretary Tillerson is trying to be very constructive in putting out these flames, while the president of the United States is feeding them with fuel and fire, everyone in the region is going to be hyper-confused about what our policy is.

But I think you're right that this issue brings out into the open some really important questions that we should talk about, the future of political Islam, right? This ultimately was –

you know, yes about Qatar support for terrorist financing but a lot about the fact that Qatar is talking to the Muslim brotherhood and talking to elements of the Islamic community that wants to have a voice politically. And we've never known what to do about that.

But this maybe is an opportunity, I think you're right, for us to think about what our position is going to be on how elements of the Islamic community participate in politics. I don't think Obama or Trump have done a really good job of articulating how we see that future playing out.

MR. GOLDENBERG: I'm curious, Liz, just – we can't mention counterterrorist financing without at least giving you a chance to – I mean, do you agree with Matt's assessment that the Gulf as a whole have similar problems or are the Qataris – do they deserve being singled out the way they have been?

MS. ROSENBERG: I definitely agree that there – it's a region wide problem. The Qataris and the Kuwaitis have been singled out previously for major deficiencies in going after terrorist financing – the fundraising, bundling, transference through their jurisdiction for good, technical, empirical reasons.

Just to the point of we should have this conversation with – you know, the broader Sunni allies in the region, Saudi Arabia has done quite a lot on their own domestic terror finance problem, but – as has been said previously by people in the Bush administration, the most recent Bush administration and Obama administration, but they have the furthest to go.

So we may not – before we place blame too narrowly on the Qataris, we should recall that this is a systemic problem is very serious.

MR. GOLDENBERG: I'd like to maybe finish with a question for Senator Murphy and for Senator Ayotte as we're getting towards near end of time, but, you know, two years ago when we were debating the Iran nuclear agreement, it was everywhere, all over the front pages, a huge political issue that then became almost a vehicle through which you can have a much broader foreign policy debate. I don't think it was just about Iran. But if you look at the Iran question today, and certainly even before the election, it gets a lot less attention is my sense.

You know, is it still that huge political issue? Is it less of an issue? Is that – when you talk to people or you talk to voters, when you talk to constituents, you know, and does that create an opportunity for more bipartisanship or does that take the issue off the table altogether and make it something less relevant or where there's less opportunity? I'm just interested for the perspective that you've got from talking to people.

FRM. SEN. AYOTTE: I was a – when it comes to foreign policy issues, usually the economic issues dominate and I think that's what you see right now among the American people. But these foreign policy issues, as you know, without security you can't have freedom, you can't have prosperity. They are always there behind the scenes. But there are opportunities for bipartisanship here.

And I think, you know, having served on the Armed Services Committee, where almost every year in the Senate Armed Services Committee we voted out the defense authorization practically unanimously. There is I think – even when there’s acrimony on whether it’s health care or the budget, some opportunities for bipartisanship among the Congress on these issues. And even though it’s not on the forefront of the American people’s minds right now, it’s really important with the role especially the Senate has to play here in making sure that our foreign policy is strong. And our relationships with our allies aren’t just forged by the administration; they’re often forged by members of the Senate and the Congress and the relationships they have on many of these programs that impact other countries.

SEN. MURPHY: My sense was always that Lindsay and John and Kelly and others make sure that the Republican Caucus was talking about foreign policy. That has not historically been the case in the Democratic Caucus. We very rarely talk about these issues at a strategic level. And part of the reason that I and Senator Paul forced this vote, this resolution on a portion of the Saudi arms sale was because it was an important opportunity for both caucuses to talk about how we wanted to intersect with the administration’s policy in the Middle East.

And to the broader question, I’ve had what I call three supermarket moments in my time in Congress where an issue was so burning hot that somebody couldn’t even wait to get to me, you know, from one side of the supermarket to the other and they just yelled – I know – they just yelled at me from one side of the supermarket to the other about what they thought. Two of them were health care, the 2009-2010 debate and then this debate.

And then, the third was that one weekend in 2013 where we were considering an authorization of military force against Syria, where the entire country was plugged into this question because they remembered what happened in Iraq and they had strong feelings on both sides. But this is one of those issues, right, questions of war and peace that aren’t on people’s mind until they are and it is all of a sudden a dominating, all-consuming topic in this country. And that I think is the worry that we are creeping towards a shooting war in the Middle East that is going to surprise the heck out of a lot of Americans when it happens.

But once it does, and if we do get into a situation in which a handful of Americans have been killed and we’re contemplating a massive retaliatory strike on Iran or on Russia, it will be all that we talk about as members of Congress, which is why we should be talking about it more with our constituents, talking about it more within our caucus so that we are ready for that moment if, God forbid, it happens.

MR. GOLDENBERG: Well, thank you. That seems like a great note, an interesting note to end on. I don’t know great – not in a positive way but in the important, makes me feel good about the fact that we’ve just had this discussion. So I’d like to ask the audience to join me in thanking our panelists. (Applause.)

MR. GOLDENBERG: And what we're going to do is ask everybody to sit in place and I'd like to invite to the stage Shawn Brimley as well as last year's Bacevich fellow Nick Heras for the presentation of the 1st Lieutenant Andrew J. Bacevich Fellowship.

End Transcript