

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

U.S. STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
AN ADDRESS BY SENATOR JOHN MCCAIN

Washington, D.C.

Thursday, June 6, 2013

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Featured Speaker:

THE HONORABLE JOHN MCCAIN (R-ARIZONA)
United States Senate

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. INDYK: My goodness. Welcome, everybody, thank you very much for joining us here at Brookings, I'm Martin Indyk, Vice President and Director of the Foreign Policy Program. And it's a real pleasure, both personally and institutionally, to have an opportunity to welcome Senator John McCain back to Brookings, especially on this very important occasion. Senator McCain certainly is somebody who needs no introduction, but he deserves an introduction.

He is surely known to you all by now as the Senator from Arizona, Republican Senator from Arizona who has served in the Senate since 1986, before that, he was a Congressman from 1982 to 1986, representing Arizona for the Republican party, and, of course, he was the Republican party's nominee for President in the 2008 election. Those headlines don't begin to capture the incredible public service which he has rendered this nation, both as a veteran of the Vietnam War and, since then, in his public service in the U.S. Congress and the U.S. Senate.

You cannot turn a television on on Sunday mornings, on any Sunday, it seems, these days, without seeing John McCain expressing his opinions on the key issues of the day where he plays such an important leadership role, particularly recently, has played a very distinguished leadership role on the issue of immigration reform. Which, thanks to his efforts, and those of others, it

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looks likely now that we will achieve an historic change in our immigration laws. But, of course, Senator McCain has played a leadership role more than anywhere else in foreign policy and defense policy, and that's where we have an opportunity to hear from him today.

He is, as you probably know, just back from a trip to the Middle East, one of countless numbers that he's made over recent years since the Arab revolutions and awakenings. And, in particular, he traveled into Syria on this last trip, and it's in this context that Senator McCain has prepared a major address which he has honored us to deliver from this podium today. After he speaks to us, Bob Kagan, who is a Senior Fellow in the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings, a great foreign policy expert and commentator in his own right, will lead a conversation with Senator McCain.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming Senator John McCain (applause).

MR. MCCAIN: Thank you, Martin, and I guess you had to mention that I ran for President (laughter). After I lost, I slept like a baby; sleep two hours, wake up and cry, sleep two hours (laughter). Thank you for your kind introduction, and it's always a pleasure to return to the Brookings Institution, a premier policy institution, I believe, in Washington, D.C., America, and the world. It's a bastion of

conservative thought (laughter) and it's always great to see my friends and my enemies here. So I'd like to make opening remarks and then I'd be happy to respond to any questions, comments or insults that you might have.

As Martin mentioned, I traveled last week to Yemen, Jordan, Turkey and Syria; this is my 12th separate trip to the region since the events known as the Arab Spring began in December 2011, and what I can say categorically today is that I am now more concerned than at any time since the darkest days of the war in Iraq that the Middle East is descending into sectarian conflict. The conflict in Syria is at the heart of this crisis. Last week, together with General Salim Idris, the Chief of Staff of the Supreme Military Counsel, I met with more than a dozen senior Free Syrian Army commanders in southern Turkey and northern Syria. It came from cities across Syria, including Qusayr, Homs, Damascus and Aleppo. Many of them were joined by their civilian counterparts, and all of them painted the same grave picture of the state of the conflict in Syria.

Assad has turned the tide of battle on the ground, his foreign allies have all doubled down on him, Iran is all in, Russia is in, Shia militants are flowing in to fight from Iraq, and Hezbollah fighters have invaded Syria by the thousands. They were decisive in retaking the critical city of Qusayr, and now they are leading tanks and artillery to air power and ballistic missiles. And according to a recent UN

report, there are, "Reasonable grounds, including the French conclusion, that there's no doubt that Assad's forces have used chemical weapons." The President's red line appears to have been crossed perhaps more than once, and it should come as no surprise that new claims of chemical weapons used by Assad are already surfacing, as I heard in Syria.

The result of this onslaught is that Syria, as we know it, is ceasing to exist. More than 80,000 people are dead, a quarter of all Syrians have been driven from their homes, the Syrian state is disintegrating in much of the country, leaving vast ungoverned spaces that are being filled by extremists, many of them aligned with Al-Qaeda. Some now put the number of these extremists inside Syria in the thousands. They're the best armed, best funded and most experienced fighters, and every day that this conflict goes on, these extremists are having more and more effect, and the commanders I met last week don't want to trade Assad for Al-Nusra.

The worsening conflict in Syria is now spilling outside of the country and stoking sectarian conflict across the region; Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey are each straining under the weight of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, including ten percent of Jordan's population is now Syrian refugees. Think about if the population of the United States, if ten percent of our population

were now refugees. Can you imagine the strain that we would feel on our government and our capabilities. Terrorist bombings have struck Turkey, Syrian groups are firing rockets into Shia areas of Lebanon in retaliation for Hezbollah's intervention in Syria and old sectarian wounds are being reopened in Lebanon.

The situation is even worse in Iraq. The conflict in Syria, together with Prime Minister Maliki's unwillingness to share power, is radicalizing Iraq's Sunni population. Al-Qaeda in Iraq is back and stepping up attacks on Iraqi Shia. In response, Shia militias are remobilizing and retaliating against Iraqi Sunnis. More than 1,000 Iraqis were killed last month alone, the highest level of violence since 2007. Some experts now believe that one watershed event, similar to the bombing of the Golden Mosque in 2006, could tip Iraq back into full scale sectarian conflict.

Extremist forces also gathering momentum elsewhere in the region, the fall of governments across the region has opened ungoverned spaces that now stretch from the Arabian Peninsula to the Horn of Africa, across north Africa all the way down into Mali, and even northern Nigeria. Al-Qaeda affiliate extremist groups are now on the march throughout these vast ungoverned spaces. Iran is also seeking to exploit the present chaos. Indeed, every Yemeni and U.S. official I met last week in Sanaa said that Iran is a greater threat in Yemen today

than Al-Qaeda. Put simply, the space for moderate politics is collapsing as the Middle East descends deeper into extremism and conflict.

A sectarian battle line is being drawn through the heart of the region with Sunni extremists, many allied with Al-Qaeda, dominant on one side, and Iranian backed proxy forces dominant on the other. What is more disturbing, however, is how little that most Americans seem to care. Most are weary of war and eager to focus on domestic issues, but some hold a more cynical view. They see the Middle East as a hopeless quagmire of ancient hatreds and a huge distraction from worthier priorities, whether it is rebalancing toward Asia or nation-building at home.

For those of us who believe otherwise, and who believe the United States must lead more actively in the region, we, we have to answer a more fundamental question: Why should we care about the Middle East? One reason is that we have enduring national interests in the Middle East that will not be diminished, not by our fatigue with the region and its challenges, not by our desire to focus on domestic issues, not by the growing importance of other parts of the world, and not even by the prospect of American energy independence. The Middle East has always been more important than oil, and it still is. The United States has friends and allies in the Middle East who depend on us for their security

and who contribute more to the defense and wellbeing of our nation than most Americans will ever know.

But, believe me, Americans will know it very quickly if global trade and energy flows, not to mention U.S. warships, can no longer transit the Suez Canal, through which approximately eight percent of the world's sea borne trade passes. They will know it if we lose key Arab partners such as the Kingdom of Jordan, along with their vital military intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation, and they will absolutely know it if Israel becomes beset on all sides by even more hostile governments and more violent extremists.

In short, if the Middle East descends into extremism and war and despair, no one should think America would be able to pivot away from those threats. Our national security interests will suffer, and that is an inescapable reality. It is the lesson of September 11, 2001, and to believe otherwise is not only naive, it is dangerous. The Middle East also matters because much of the world views it, rightly, as a test of American credibility and resolve. For decades presidents of both parties have said the United States will deter our enemies and support our friends in the Middle East.

They've said we would not allow Iran to get a nuclear weapons capability, and they have said, as this President has said about Syria, that we

would not tolerate the use or proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. If the United States now signals that it is unwilling or unable to meet its own stated commitments and enforce its own declared red lines, that message will be heard loud and clear far beyond the Middle East, it will demoralize our friends, embolden our enemies, and make our world a far more dangerous place for us. But, ultimately, there's a more positive reason why we have to care about the Middle East. This region is now experiencing a period of upheaval unlike any time since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Over the past three years, we have seen millions and millions of ordinary men and women rise up peacefully and lift their voices and risk everything on behalf of the same values we hold dear: freedom and democracy, equal justice and rule of law, human rights and dignity.

They are doing so against impossible odds, and at times in the face of merciless repression and violence. These brave men and women are taking a chance on themselves, many for the first time, and they're asking us to take a chance on them. Not after they have succeeded in their struggles, but now, when they need it most, when their fate hangs in the balance and when American leadership can still be decisive.

I know some of our initial hopes for the Arab Spring have dimmed quite a bit, in part because of a lack of U.S. leadership, but those hopes have not

gone out. And, so long as men and women across the Middle East still harbor hopes for a future of peace and freedom and prosperity, the Arab Spring will remain the greatest repudiation of everything that Al-Qaeda stands for. Ultimately, this is how our long fight against global terrorist groups will be won. This is how conditions of lasting peace will finally be secured across the Middle East, not through drone strikes and night raids alone, but by helping people across the region lift up democratic governments and growing economies that offer hope.

The entire Middle East is now up for grabs, and our enemies are fully committed to winning. Moderate forces and aspiring democrats are fighting for their futures and their very lives. The only power that is not fully committed in this struggle is us, and as a result, leaders and people across the region who share our interests and many of our values are losing ground to violent extremists. Our friends and allies in the Middle East are crying out for American leadership, as I heard again last week. We must answer this call, we must lead, we need an alternative strategy that creates space for moderate leaders to marginalize extremists, and for people to resolve their differences peacefully, politically.

An alternative strategy must begin with a credible Syria policy. I want to negotiate an end to this settlement, so do we all, but anyone who thinks that Assad and his allies will ever make peace when they are winning on the

battlefield is delusional. I know that the situation in Syria is hugely complicated and that there's no easy or ideal options, but we have to be realistic; this conflict will grind on, with all of its worsening consequences, until the balance of power shifts against Assad and his allies. And the longer we wait to take action, the more action we will have to take.

No one should think that we have to destroy every defense system or put thousands of boots on the ground to make a difference in Syria; we have limited options. We could use our standoff weapons such as Cruise missiles to target Assad's aircraft and ballistic missile launchers on the ground, we could enable a provisional government to establish itself in a safe zone in Syria that we could help to protect with Patriot missiles, and we could organize a full scale operation to train and equip Syrian opposition forces. After all, Assad is getting weapons, Al-Nusra is getting weapons, the only forces in Syria that are not getting weapons are moderate commanders like those I met last week who said their units desperately need ammunition and weapons that counter Assad's tanks, artillery and air power, not light weapons.

Would any of this immediately end the conflict? Probably not. But could it save innocent lives in Syria? Could it give the moderate opposition a better chance to succeed? And could it help to turn the conflict into a strategic

disaster for Iran and Hezbollah? To me, the answer to all these questions is yes. More decisive action in Syria could create a new leverage to diffuse sectarian tensions and counter Iran's ambition of regional hegemony. In the Gulf, this would mean taking the military threats more credible and apparent as Iran continues its pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability.

And, in Lebanon, this would mean making the strategic defeat of Hezbollah in Syria the centerpiece of a wider campaign to target its finances, cut its supply lines, delegitimize its leaders, and support internal opposition to its rule as an armed force in Lebanese politics. Also, an alternative Middle East strategy must include a greatly enhanced effort to build the capacity of security forces across the region, especially in North Africa. Egypt needs a new police force, Tunisia needs help with border security, Libya is trying to build a new national security forces from scratch, Mali basically needs a whole new army. One bright spot is actually Yemen, which is engaged in a promising restructuring of its armed forces and internal security units and are conducting a national dialogue.

These governments and others like them don't want Al-Qaeda affiliates exploiting their countries any more than we do. The U.S. military can play this role better than any force in the world, and it is in our interest to do so far more than we are currently. More broadly, we must renew our leadership on behalf of

human rights and democracy in the Middle East. This will take different forms in different countries. In Yemen, for example, where a managed transition is proving more successful thus far than many could have expected, we must continue to provide assistance as requested.

In Jordan, Morocco, and the Gulf states, we must shore up the stability of these vital partners while also urging them to continue responding to their people's desires for change, including through greater political reform. And then there is Egypt, where the high hopes of many of us and many Egyptians had back in 2011 are being deeply disappointed. I'm a friend of Egypt and a longstanding supporter of our assistance relationship, but after this week's conviction of 43 NGO workers, Congress must reevaluate our assistance to Egypt.

Our foreign aid budget is shrinking while the demands on it are growing. As a result, Egypt must show that it is a good investment of our scarce resources, that the return on this investment will be a freer, more democratic, more tolerant Egypt. If not, I believe that Congress will spend its money elsewhere. That's just a fact. At the same time, we must make it clear the United States does not align itself with any one ruler or group in Egypt; rather, we stand for the principles and practices of democracy, for the freedoms of civil society, and for the basic rights of all Egyptians.

Which we must not simply exchange a Mubarak policy for a Morsi policy, we need to have, at long last, an Egypt policy. Finally, any strategy to bolster moderates in the Middle East must include an effort to seek peace between Palestinians and Israelis. As always, such an effort must be weighed against its opportunity costs. With so many urgent priorities now demanding high level attention in the region, especially Syria, I hope the President and his new National Security team are carefully considering these tradeoffs.

Each of these steps I have described today is necessary if we are to have a more effective strategy to advance our interests and values in the Middle East. But none of these steps will be sufficient without one additional factor: the sustained, outspoken and determined leadership of the President of the United States. Only the President can explain to the American people how high the stakes are in the Middle East, only the President can change public opinion and rally the American people behind him, only the President can push our government to be bolder and more imaginative and more decisive than it is inclined to be.

Only the President can pull our friends and allies together and shape their individual efforts into decisive, unified international action. Only the President can do these things, and that's what we need from him now more than ever. We need him to lead. That is also what our friends and allies in the Middle

East want from our President; they want him to lead and they want America to lead. That is what I heard last week in Jordan, that's what I heard in Yemen, that's what I heard in Turkey, and that is absolutely what I heard in Syria.

That is what people and leaders tell me again and again as I travel throughout the region. They tell me they want America to lead because they are confident that America can still be decisive in shaping the future of the Middle East. In short, our friends and allies still believe in America, what they want to know is whether we still believe in ourselves. Renewing American leadership in the Middle East should be a Republican goal, it should be a Democratic goal, and if the President makes it his goal, he will have my full support.

Thank you very much. (Applause)

MR. KAGAN: Well thank you so much, Senator, for those eloquent words, and I hope that, personally, I hope they'll be listened to. But let me, I want to open it up to questions, a lot of people out there who have questions, but let me ask a couple myself, first, if you don't mind.

You make a strong case, and it's a convincing case, and yet, it's clear that President Obama simply does not agree. And I guess I would want to ask why do you think that's so, and why do you think it might change simply because he's changing some parts of his national security team?

MR. MCCAIN: I think, first of all, that changing his national security team is something that is evolutionary. I mean, Mr. Donilon stayed there five years, it's not an abnormal thing for presidents to bring in. It wears people out, working for the president. It doesn't wear people out working in the Senate, obviously, we never miss a recess. (Laughter) But, so I think that's normal. I also have some hopes for Samantha Power, I also have some hopes that Ambassador Rice, who I am told was fairly assertive about Libya, would be -- I want to work with them, and I've stated that clearly.

I have been working with the President on immigration reform and several other issues, and I want to continue that. Every president, in their second term, throughout the modern times, have always looked at their legacy, and I think the President of the United States is looking at that. And why? I've puzzled for nights figuring out why it is that the President will not act more decisively in the face of the events that are taking place. I think it started out that he was not going to be Bush, that was starting out in his initial speech, such as the Cairo speech, indicated a brand new approach to relations, particularly in the Middle East. That's why I think he went to Cairo.

And then I think it evolved, sort of, into, well, we don't want to get involved because of the Iraq and Afghanistan experience, that we somehow might

get stuck in that kind of a quagmire, and he had campaigned to end all that. And then, finally, frankly, I, when I watched his speech the other day at the National Defense University, I was stunned by the unreality of it. I mean, his depiction of the world today, it stands in sharp contrast to what I believe is the reality in the world today, some of the challenges that I just outlined.

I don't think the President has ever been really comfortable with national security issues, I think he's been much more comfortable with domestic issues, and his first year or so of his presidency was taken up with Obamacare and other domestic issues. But I have had the opportunity recently to talk directly to the President about this issue, and I just hope that he is rethinking what we are going to do, particularly in light of recent events. This is, my friends, if I didn't make it clear to you, this is turning into a regional conflict. Not a Syrian conflict, a regional conflict that could engulf our friends as well as our adversaries, and could be years in sorting out, even if the United States intervenes heavily, and the United States has to lead.

I didn't even mention the chemical weapons issue. My friends, think of some of these chemical weapons inventory falling into the wrong hands. The IEDs and bombs that have been set off have nails and rocks in them; can you imagine what one of these chemical weapons would do in an urban setting? So I

hope that the President's coming around, I hope that his new national security team is taking a fresh look at all of these issues, and I also hope some of our military leaders are, as well. Because I love and respect our military leaders, but when they don't want to do something, they can find a hundred reasons for us not to do it. And for them to say that we have to neutralize every bit of Assad's air defense, it's just ludicrous, we don't have to.

And second of all, if we can't neutralize it, why the hell are we spending about \$800 billion a year on defense if we can't take out Syria's air defenses? You're being ripped off, my friends, if we can't do that. (Laughter)
Sorry for the long answer.

MR. KAGAN: No, I like a long answer. It leaves one more. Is there a point at which it's too late to act effectively? And I'm sure there might be those who say that we have already passed that point.

MR. MCCAIN: It's interesting you say that, because, as you know, we all know now that, a year ago, the President's national security team recommended arming the rebels. General Clapper, the head of Director of National Intelligence, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, they all recommended arming the rebels, and were overruled somewhere in the White House. Now, that's the first time in history, and

I am a student of history, that I have ever seen where a President's entire national security team's recommendation was overruled. But now, led by our Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, it's too complicated.

Well, if it's too complicated, didn't we make a terrible mistake, then, a year ago? Didn't -- shouldn't someone pay a penalty for not doing the right thing at the right time? And second of all, why is it too complicated? We still know General Idris, we know who these people are, the civilian side of it, the counsel is fractured, we all know that, we admit that, but one of the reasons for that is that they're outside Syria; they're all over the capitals of that part of the world.

We need to give them a place to govern; we need to give them a Benghazi, where they can work with the military and they can organize, and they can make sure that the weapons that are coming in, along with the military, General Idris and his people, that these weapons go to the right people.

MR. KAGAN: Senator, you also commented that our enemies are supporting the other side in this conflict. Does that include Russia?

MR. MCCAIN: Well, we have to keep pushing that reset button. I think it's very clear that Vladimir Putin seems to be moving more and more into an autocratic kind of behavior, and in some ways, a little bit bizarre, I might say. I keep hearing that the Russians are very worried about having, maintaining a port

on the Mediterranean. Why? What difference does that make to anybody? That he was "deceived" by Libya, by signing off on the UN Security Council resolution that -- how was he deceived in Libya? Did he think we were not trying to defeat Gaddafi?

And so we see these various reasons for Russian behavior, and for over two years now, if you believe the pundits who have a direct line to the White House were going to get the Russians to take Bashar Assad. For over two years, that's been our strategy. And, now, of course, a Geneva agreement excuse me, conference and, as I said in my remarks, does anybody believe, that Bashar Assad is going to send people to Geneva to negotiate Bashar Assad's departure when he's winning? I mean, that defies any kind of logic that there is, and if they're going to hold that kind of conference, given the escalating demands on us and the resistance, maybe they ought to have it in Munich. (Laughter)

MR. KAGAN: Okay. Well, let me open it up to questions, and let me ask, please, when I call on you, wait for the microphone, state your name and affiliation, if possible, and then also please ask a question, because there's a lot of people who want to ask questions. So, yes, sir, right back there, yes.

QUESTIONER: Thank you, Mr. Kagan. Senator, nice to listen --

MR. KAGAN: You've already violated the first principle.

QUESTIONER: Yes, my name is Said Erekat (laughter) and I'm a Palestinian journalist. I know you mentioned the need to resolve the Palestinian/Israeli issue at war again, but I'm struck by how marginal it figured in your speech. Do you believe that it should be now be put off the priority until such time when we resolve the issues in Syria, Iraq, and other places? Thank you.

MR. MCCAIN: I believe that a key, a fundamental key, to peace in the Middle East long term is the resolution of the Israeli/Palestinian issue. And I know that there's tension, particularly between Hamas and the Israelis, and there's just been a shake-up with the departure of Mr. Fayad, who all of us respected enormously. But I believe that, when 80,000 people are being massacred in Syria, when we are seeing this spill over into surrounding countries, we're seeing the risk of the spread of these chemical weapons, I have to give a priority to the crisis that is now unfolding in the Middle East.

I also believe that it is probably a better opportunity now to begin this process than it's been in a long time. Bibi Netanyahu was just in power for at least another four or five years, the economy in the West Bank is improving rather significantly, there's an emergence of a more wealthy middle class in the Palestinian areas today. But I also would point out, as we must, from time to time, who do we negotiate with? Do we negotiate with the PLO, or do we negotiate with

Hamas? Do they both sit down at the table with us? And, obviously, we and the Israelis are committed to a two-state solution, and I would encourage that effort in every possible way.

Now, here's a McCain proposal, and that is: there's one man in the world that I think that could really get this issue resolved, and I am three quarters serious about this, and that's William Jefferson Clinton. He came that close at Camp David to achieving an agreement between Yasser Arafat and Ehud Barak, and I think that he has the respect and the knowledge, he could probably be a catalyst on this issue. And he hates when I say that (laughter).

MR. KAGAN: Okay. Over here, yes, sir.

QUESTIONER: Thank you. My name is (inaudible), Assistant Professor at National Defense University in Islamabad, but currently a Senior Fellow at SAIS. In the last few years, I've been involved in fighting extremism. Once it's entrenched in a society or an environment, it's extremely difficult to root it out, and I find that this is an ongoing process in Syria right now. Funding and arming particular groups who you see on the surface, may become something else later on. So what is your feeling about a comprehensive, culturally sensitive, long-term impact-oriented strategy via the policy? How are you going to put that through, as a Republican, to a Democrat government?

MR. MCCAIN: Well, ideally, I agree with you, but I believe that, for example, al-Nusra, who are fighting very effectively, are not open to any kind of indoctrination or movement towards a center that I could possibly detect. And, by the way, my friends, if you're one of General Idris's battalions and you're fighting around Aleppo, and up shows al-Nusra, and they're fighting against the same enemy as you are, there's an old saying about the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

So it is -- it presents complications, and every day that goes by, more and more of these people are flooding in from all over the Arab world. And some of them have fought in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, they're very experienced fighters and they're not afraid to die, but to have the expectation that these people, these extremists would somehow tolerate or be involved in a more moderate movement, I think, is wildly optimistic. I know General Idris, I know these battalion commanders, it's not the first time I have met these; these are people who we can place our trust and confidence in.

But when they don't succeed on the battlefield, and better armed and better equipped, maybe supplied by, say, Qatar, maybe supplied by wealthy Saudis, then, obviously, their influence diminishes. We need the good guys to win, and anybody who says we don't know who they are is not -- is either ignorant or

hasn't gone out to see who they are. But every day that goes by, the worse the situation gets.

MR. KAGAN: The lady in the back there, yes.

MS. BURGESS: Senator, Nadia Burgess with NBC Television, Middle East Broadcasting Center. It's often said that the Syrian opposition is divided because the countries who support them have competing interests, or a conflict in interest. Do you have --

MR. MCCAIN: Could you speak a little closer, I'm sorry.

MS. BURGESS: Sorry. It's often said that the Syrian opposition are divided because of the country that support them have conflicting interests or competing with each other. As you mentioned, you have the Saudis, Americans, Turks, et cetera. Do you agree with this assessment, and is there any way to unify the Syrian opposition?

And, second, do you believe that there could be a transitional government led by somebody from the Syrian side, somebody like Farouk al-Asharaa and not President Assad himself? Thank you.

MR. MCCAIN: Well, first of all, the reason why, in my view, that they had to turn to Qatar and wealthy Saudis or Saudis, and I'm sure a representative of the Qatar government here would say that that's not true, that

they're not giving weapons to the extremist elements, and I certainly have had this dialogue with their government for a long period of time. But the reason why these things happen is because the Americans didn't do it. Wherever there's a vacuum, somebody's going to fill it. If we had been providing the heavy weapons and the capabilities that they needed, then it wouldn't have mattered.

So these countries fill the vacuum. And, again, it's heavy weapons they need; Kalashnikovs and AK-47s don't do very well against tanks, and so it's not so much -- you'll hear this again and again, they're awash in weapons. Well, they're awash in light weapons and they're short of ammunition. But -- so I guess I'm avoiding your question. I think that the civilian side of it, the opposition counsel, has had great difficulties in finding leadership and becoming cohesive. The meeting they had in Istanbul was, to say the least, disorganized. I could use stronger language than that.

But, as they were able in Benghazi to organize and to train and equip and coordinate, they need to be inside Syria. Suppose you're a young fighter inside Syria, and you're risking your life every single day, and you hear that there's -- somebody's portrayed themselves as representing you that's hanging around in Istanbul. That's not a connection, they need to be out there with the people who are fighting, and we need to give them the protection to do so. I think

then you would see leadership rise to the top, as we have seen in almost every kind of military activity of this kind.

But, right now, they are spread all over, and they are disjointed, and they are influenced by some countries that take a more extreme view of what Syria should look like than we do.

MS. BURGESS: (Inaudible) transitional government?

MR. MCCAIN: I think you could set up -- suppose that Bashar Assad is losing and know that he is bound to leave, then I think that that's the only way, as I said, that I think he will leave is if he thinks he can't stay. Then I think we would work very closely with our allies and with them and set up a provisional government. We would have to do that. Now, who would be included in that? I don't know. First of all, I don't think it should be anybody who -- should include anybody who's been involved in these massacres.

But I think we learned a lesson from Iraq, and I think Bob would agree, when we de-Baathify, de-Baathification was one of the biggest of many mistakes we made in Iraq, so I would certainly, I would -- many of the top leaders who are responsible for some of this excluded, but I would certainly have people of the Bashar administration included. General Idris came from fighting, from the

side of Bashar Assad, many of the battalion commanders that I saw were defectors who were officers in the Syrian Army.

MR. KAGAN: I'm going to go to the back over here, and then I'm going to come up front. Yes, sir, in the white shirt.

MR. SCHOEN: Senator McCain --

MR. KAGAN: Microphone.

MR. SCHOEN: Sorry.

MR. KAGAN: And name and affiliation.

MR. SCHOEN: Joshua Schoen, Georgetown University.

MR. MCCAIN: Good school.

MR. SCHOEN: Say that we do get involved, and say that we do support the rebels, how do we stop attrition, how do we stop genocide by reprisal, by a tyranny of the majority? As we've seen in the rest of the Arab world, there are new democracies and there are new laws enacted to put pressure and oppress the minorities in the region. How do we make sure that there's a smooth transition in the region?

MR. MCCAIN: Well, first of all, remember that Syrians are among the most cultured and advanced societies of the Middle East. We would have to get commitments from them that these retaliations wouldn't take place. The worst

kinds of wars are civil wars, which is basically what this is turning into. I would like for them to agree to have United Nations or humanitarian representatives, organizations represented in the post-Assad Syria to try to make them carry out these commitments.

Would there be scores to settle, particularly against Alawites, who were, as we know, enjoyed that privileged position under Assad for all of these years? I think we would have to really, really guard against that. And, again, I say that I would want them to agree to have human rights people on the ground to make sure that it is reported if it takes base. I think it's a risk, I think it is a significant risk. Christians are being targeted in some ways, and there are other atrocities taking place, some of them on the side of the people we are supporting. Overwhelming majority by Assad.

The difference between the two is, there are random acts of violence and cruelty and torture and murder taking place on the side of our guys, and that is deplorable and we want it stopped. Bashar Assad, the training and indoctrination of his troops and the Iranian revolutionary guard and the Hezbollah that are in there is to intimidate the population through murder, rape, torture. And that's the difference between what Bashar Assad is doing and what these people are doing.

So, yes, it would be a problem, wars, civil wars open wounds that are, take a long time in healing. It took the United States of America 100 years to heal from our civil war, so we would have to play as active a role as possible in preventing the kind of atrocities that would take place. But look at the atrocities that are taking place now; Qusayr, 50,000 people, there was about 800 of our people, the rebels, wounded inside that town with no medical help whatsoever. They asked for the Red Cross to come in, and you know what Bashar Assad said? As soon as the fighting is over.

MR. KAGAN: Yes, sir, right here in second row, yes.

QUESTIONER: My name is Dr. Nishad Rodri with (inaudible) League. It was very enlightening and you covered a very broad base of issues in this. My question is that, since you have visited and met so many people in Syria, were those people who are rebels that were fighting willing to give security guarantees to the people, humanity to the Alawites if the man steps down?

And the second part was, the reluctance of the U.S.A. as a world leader and the leadership's reluctance to demonstrate courage, a leader takes courage and takes risks, why we don't think so at the same time all our friends and allies in the Middle East, in the Persian Gulf, they are looking towards America. What kind of message is the U.S.A. sending to them by showing

reluctance, that inaction is better than action, how could they depend on the U.S.A. if, at the right time, the U.S.A. will not act to help?

MR. MCCAIN: I think I understood your question. Wherever there's a vacuum, somebody's going to fill it, and we have seen Qatar heavily involved, many ways beneficial, we've seen Saudi Arabia, we've seen other Gulf countries engaged in this, which has also, to some degree, broadened the conflict, but if the United States is absent, then other nations are going to, and interests are going to play. I wonder if Hezbollah wasn't emboldened to come into this fight, and they're in the thousands, if they weren't confident that the United States is not going to be involved. Would the Russians be sending not only missiles, but now they announced aircraft, if they thought that the United States, that there would be some price to pay for that.

So all I can say is, and I think I understood the question, is that it comes back to American leadership. I know for a fact, and I'm sure you may know, the British want to go in, the French want to go in, they want to provide the safe zone and all the things that I described here. But they can't or won't, either way, without Americans sending, giving them the green light. And, Mr. Cameron, I'm told, secondhand, when Mr. Cameron was here, he made a strong case for

engagement by the United States, Britain and France, and others. Apparently, that argument wasn't persuasive enough.

Did I respond to the question?

MR. KAGAN: You certainly did. I'm going to leave it to one more question

MR. MCCAIN: We do two.

MR. KAGAN: Two more questions (laughter). We'll do ten more questions, however many you want.

MR. MCCAIN: I'll do three or four, really. I'll keep my answers short.

MR. KAGAN: Okay, good. Then this gentleman over here, thank you.

MR. GREIN: Hugh Grein, Stafford's. Senator McCain, as a fellow Vietnam veteran, I want to thank you for your service, and the hardship that you had to go through. But one thing you didn't mention was how we're working as a united front. Congress has got this sequester in, I've listened to other service chiefs say we need to get the sequester over.

Would this have been a good speech to give at the White House, with both leaders of Congress, with all the leaders of Congress, and the

President, and the service chiefs, to say, look, if you want to be the bastion of freedom, we've got to show that we can act together. And it just seems to me that people from the foreign diplomatic circle here look at us and say you're a great country, you have a lot of will, a lot of way, but you're not acting together, you're acting like spoiled little kids, so get off your tush and get to act.

MR. MCCAIN: Well, thank you. In case you missed it, a few weeks ago, there was a poll taken about favorability of all the things in American life, and Congress placed just below, approval or Congress placed just below a colonoscopy. (Laughter) So I think that many Americans share your view. Look, I was going through a national airport just yesterday, I believe it was, and a guy ran up and said, hey, has anybody ever told you you look a lot like Senator John McCain? (Laughter). And I said, yeah. And he said, doesn't it sometimes make you mad as hell? (Laughter)

So, look, let me just give you an example of how outrageous this is. Remember a couple weeks ago, flights were going to be delayed, the FAA was cutting, flights were going to be delayed. My God, flights were going to be delayed. So, meanwhile, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, at that very same time says, if we don't repeal sequestration, half of our units will not be ready for combat by the end of the year. So what did we do? By, God, we gave the FAA all

the money they need to we can fly home on our frequent recesses, and nothing was done about the United States Marine Corps.

We're trying, by the way, to do this comprehensive immigration reform, border security is a prime issue, and, guess what, sequestration is reducing dramatically our ability to police the borders. So all I can say is that I've put most of the blame on Congress, but I would also say that the President of the United States should also speak up, I think, more strongly about the devastating effects of sequestration. I'm all for cuts, but not with a meat axe.

MR. KAGAN: Can I go to -- yes, this lady right here. We'll do one more.

MR. MCCAIN: Okay.

MS. JESSER: Thank you. Iram Jesser, Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association. You mentioned that U.S. has the role of supporting people in the Middle East who fight for their own freedom, and looking to stand up for their own human rights. You know

MR. MCCAIN: I'm saying they should

MS. JESSER: Yeah, they should. And you know about the protest happening in Istanbul currently, and also, like, the policemen have been using unbalanced power, and tear gas, and Agent Orange, which is a dangerous

chemical. And I just wonder what your position is about that, and I wonder if you think President Obama should have said anything, at least, like just a couple of words about it. Thank you.

MR. MCCAIN: I'm not, thank you. And you really raise a very interesting point because, like every other part of the Arab Spring, none of us expected this in Turkey, none of us. Anyone who expected this in Turkey, please raise your hand, I'd like to get to know you better. (Laughter) Thank you, sir, glad to know you.

The situation in Turkey is very interesting, because it's pretty clear that this was a rebellion against Erdogan's push of the Turkish people towards Islam. And many of us here have been to Istanbul, Ankara, major cities, they're as cosmopolitan and nonsectarian as Washington, D.C. So I think this was a rebellion against what Erdogan was trying to push a very modern nation, democracy in the direction which they didn't want to go; the restriction on alcohol, children in Islamic-oriented schools, many of the steps that he's taken.

And, by the way, I'm sure that many of you here know there's more journalists in jail in Turkey than any other country in the Middle East. There's no doubt he has intimidated both print media, as well as other media by this business of suing them and then holding the judgment over their head. So I think it's not so

much a reaction of the kind we saw in other places, but it is a reaction to where they think one individual is pushing them, who has made it clear that he wants to stay in power until -- I believe he used the word 2023.

And I hope he learns from it, and I hope he understands that some of the tactics used by the police are way over the top, and I believe that maybe whether the President should have said anything about it, I can't really say definitely, but I was glad that Secretary Kerry, the Secretary of State, Kerry, did speak up about the situation. Look, I love Turkey, I think when you look at the economy, when you look at the success of that country, it is magnificent, but I also think that Erdogan was, in the view of many of the Turkish people, becoming more like a dictator than a Prime Minister or President.

MR. KAGAN: The last question is going to go to Gary Mitchell. But before I turn to Gary, after the Senator is done, I'm going to ask you all to please stay in your seats while he departs, just because he's got to make it to his next meeting. So after that --

MR. MCCAIN: We have to make it through the traffic out here, it takes 45 minutes to get a block.

MR. KAGAN: Right, the famous Brookings traffic. (Laughter) So after Gary's question, we'll say thank you to Senator McCain, and if you'll all remain seated, we'd be very grateful to you. Gary.

MR. MITCHELL: Senator McCain, thanks. I'm Garrett Mitchell, and I write the Mitchell Report. I want to ask you, you've made, it seems to me you've made three points very persuasively today. The first is that this conflict is regional and beyond that, we haven't even talked about Afghanistan and Pakistan. Second, that this is very much in the national security interest of the country. And, third, that the leadership must come from the President.

The fourth piece, I'd love to hear you just be as specific as you can today is, if we all agree with those three points, that it's important to us, that it's regional and growing, and that the President ought to be the leader and follow the lead; what components of leading, given the regionality and the diversity of the countries involved and the issues in each of those, what are the first three or four things that a president ought to do to take the lead, to persuade the country to do what you suggest?

MR. MCCAIN: I think I've covered what I think ought to be done in Syria. But let me just give you the best example I can give you, and that's Libya. When Gaddafi was thrown out, there was at least an embryonic government that

moved into Tripoli, there was some activities to reduce the influence of these militias, and Joe Lieberman and Lindsey Graham and I wrote a long piece that was in the Wall Street Journal what we needed to do; give them border security help, train their army, treat their wounded they had 30,000 wounded and no way capability or expertise how to treat them to help set up ways to get Gaddafi's money back, it was a long laundry list.

We had a "light" footprint; i.e., we did nothing, and so the situation is descending further and further into disarray. The western part of the country now is, if not ungovernable, certainly in very serious security situation. The Libyan arms cache, Gaddafi's arms caches have flown all over the Middle East, including down to Mali, as you know. So that was the "light" footprint. We need a heavy footprint of assistance to these people, and that does not mean American boots on the ground, but it means you know, it sounds weird or strange or bizarre, but you know what I said to then Secretary Panetta, I said they've got 30,000 wounded, if you send an American hospital ship and it sat there in the Bay of Tripoli and we started treating some of their wounded, that would be the greatest thing we could ever do.

A couple weeks later, they got back to me and said, well, it would take six weeks to get a hospital ship over there. Hell, it took Columbus less than a

month. (Laughter) I mean, we have to help these people, and there's nobody who wants to do it more than Americans. It's one of the greatest of Americans, is we have so many people who will go and help these people in these countries all over the world, and would be willing so many of these people in the Libyan government, at least initially, were ex Pats. Their finance minister was a guy who, oil minister was a guy who was a professor at the University of Washington who quit his job and went to Libya to help.

So I guess what I'm saying is, that we have to be engaged, not militarily, so much, but in ways of assisting these people as they go through this incredibly tough transition. We all know that democracy is the most difficult of all. The best of all, but the most difficult of all. So I can't say we can right every wrong, I'm not saying every revolution will succeed, I'm not saying that we can fix everything, but I do believe that we can be far more heavily engaged in a broad variety of ways, and I would argue that it's in our national security interest to do so.

I would also like to remind you of one thing; our values are our interests and our interests are our values. In Syria, our values are to stop a massacre, our interests are to stop a situation where the whole region erupts into a regional warfare. So when we say, well, we couldn't -- like the President said, well, there's thousands of people being killed in the Congo. I would be glad to go to the

Congo tomorrow if somebody would give me a blueprint of how we could do that. The President, the Secretary -- President Clinton said his greatest regret was not going to Rwanda. That's my regret, too, but I'm not sure exactly how we should have done that.

So there are things that we can ideally do, but we also have the practical aspect of can we really materially affect the situation. What we can't, we draw it fortress America, we cannot come home America. Some of us remember the slogan. And we have to lead, otherwise, somebody else is. Nature and wars abhor vacuums, and we cannot leave that vacuum without people who I think are not acting in America's national interest would take over and succeed.

Look, I still believe in America, I believe in the strength and beauty of America, I believe in the goodness of America. Every place I go, as I just mentioned, I was in Yemen, as well, people come up to me and they still admire America and they still want our help. Sometimes they're very frustrated, but it's not a situation, in my view, that the United States of America can't do what I think would give us a legacy that all of us could be proud of, and I don't believe that it's too late. I thank you for being here, I appreciate the chance to have a national dialogue, I know that people here don't agree with my recipe, I think we do agree that the situation is in chaos.

But I would encourage a national dialogue on this issue. If we do nothing, we should be talking about this in every club and church and gathering place in the United States of America, and I hope you'll engage in that discussion and debate no matter where you stand on it. It's important, and I guarantee that there's still people that are praying that we will come to their assistance. Thank you.

MR. KAGAN: Thank you, Senator McCain. (Applause)

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