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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. O'HANLON: Well, good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for being here to discuss Syria.

Through no fault of her own, and because of the last-minute arrangements here, Fiona Hill is still on her way down. So, we'll have her come in in just a second, but she doesn't need to hear herself or my other colleagues introduced, so I'll begin.

I'm Michael O'Hanlon, Senior Fellow here at Brookings, and delighted to be joined by all of you today -- but, also, by a distinguished lineup of my colleagues to discuss the important issue about what we should do about Syria -- and, specifically, the response or any possible response to the August 21st tragedy, during which chemical weapons appear to have been used by President Assad's forces against population centers in parts of Damascus -- but, of course, more generally, the conflict, you know, in a broader sense will also be fair game for our initial discussion, and then for your questions.

What I'd like to do after just saying a brief word of welcome and introduction about each of my colleagues is to begin with a question or two for each, largely designed to illuminate or to bring out areas of their respective expertise -- but, also, to get some different viewpoints on the table. And then we will maybe speak a little amongst ourselves, and then go to you at about the halfway point.

I'm joined today by Bruce Riedel, who, I'm sure, most of you know. Bruce was a 30-year veteran of the intelligence community and the U.S.

government before joining Brookings about a half-dozen years ago. He's an expert on counterterrorism. He's an expert on South Asia, as well as much of the Middle East, and his latest book is *Avoiding Armageddon*, but he's also -- which is about the U.S.-India-Pakistan history and relationship over the years. But he's also done a great deal of work, of course, on counterterrorism and, certainly, on al Qaeda -- and that's one of the issues here today.

Next to him is Michael Doran, who spent a number of years at the National Security Council during the George W. Bush administration -- writing a book now on historical background in the Middle East and President Eisenhower, specifically, but has written a great deal about Syria, and has had this as one of his big areas of expertise and focus now for a decade or longer. And those of you who follow Twitter and follow op-ed pages in general will certainly have seen a great deal of his work.

Next to him is Jeremy Shapiro, who's now back at Brookings as a Visiting Scholar, after having spent a number of years in the U.S. government -- and, specifically, the Obama administration -- working, among other things, on this very issue. Of course, he, like others, is speaking today only for himself, but, nonetheless, we'll benefit from the experience and the insights that he gained there. And he's also the coauthor, with Phil Gordon, of one of the best -- if not the best book on NATO's role and sort of the Atlantic Alliance's role in the Iraq War -- so very familiar, among other aspects of this question, with the international debate that's ongoing on the question.

And Suzanne Maloney is one of our nation's best Iran experts --

but, certainly, the best expert on Iran's economy and the sanctions history that is now becoming so important in regard to that country on a separate issue -- but maybe not so separate.

And I guess one of our questions today -- and for the nation -- is, to what extent is the Iran nuclear issue closely intertwined with the Syria chemical issue -- because President Obama's issued redlines about both. And, of course, Iran is also a major protagonist in the conflict in Syria.

And now, as if on cue, is Fiona Hill, who runs our U.S.-Europe Center. And again, Fiona, thank you for being here, and appreciate your combining many things in a busy afternoon.

Fiona has written, among other things, perhaps the best and most compelling book on Vladimir Putin, who is a key player in this whole drama, as well -- and perhaps a person the President's spending some time with today, in one fashion or another, and whose role in the conflict will continue to be important.

So, without further ado -- now let me please begin with Bruce, and I'd like you, if you could, Bruce, just to recap where we stand, and what we know about what happened on August 21st, and just how airtight the case really is -- that we know that President Assad's forces used chemicals in a deliberate way against Syrian insurgent-related population centers.

MR. RIEDEL: Sure. I think the good news for the administration on this account, on the intelligence issue, is that the case they have is pretty compelling.

I'd start with a caveat: None of us -- at least, none of us that I know of -- have actually seen the secret intelligence upon which they're making their case. We've seen the summaries that they've put out -- the summaries that the British and French have also put out.

And those summaries, I think, make a pretty compelling case that, indeed, there was a use of chemical weapons on the 21st of August. I think there's a lot of additional social media evidence that's out there -- Facebook, videos, and others. And I think -- and I hope -- that the U.N. inspectors will soon confirm that there was the use of the nerve agent sarin.

The trickier question, of course, is, who ordered it done? The U.S. case makes what I think is the most important and compelling argument. They traced the attack, and they seem to have intelligence that traces the attack, to be involved with the Centre d'etudes y reserche scientifique, which is a Syrian scientific research institute, known by its acronym, CIRS. CIRS created the Syrian chemical weapons program, back in the 1980s.

I know that because my analysts uncovered it back in the 1980s. We were the first people to uncover the Syrian chemical weapons program -- and CIRS was at the basis of it.

CIRS doesn't actually fire the weapons, but they create the weapons, they bring them to the battlefield, and they make sure that the weapons are properly put together, so that you get -- oh boy; I'm sorry to use the phrase -- the biggest bang for your buck when you actually use them.

CIRS's involvement is also important in another way: CIRS

reports directly to the Office of the President in Syria, and it is protected by Syrian air force intelligence. That, I think, pretty clearly establishes that the Syrian government, at a pretty high level, ordered this attack. We can't say Bashar Assad personally did it, but governments are responsible for the actions of individuals which fall underneath them.

In this case, from what we have so far, it looks like a pretty compelling case. Compare that to Iraq, which was not assessing an event -- and who was responsible after the fact -- but the capability of an enemy in the future.

The intelligence there was, as has been often said, politicized and sexed-up. Any member of Congress who actually took the time in 2002 to read the classified national intelligence estimate would have discovered that it was full of dissents and full of arguments that the majority case was just plain wrong. Anyone who read it would have discovered, for example, that the nuclear laboratories believed that the argument Iraq was building nuclear weapons was hogwash.

And when the nuclear labs say that the intelligence community is hogwash, who should you listen to? I'd listen to the people who actually make nuclear weapons.

We have no reason to believe that there is any kind of consent like that inside in the U.S. government over this case.

Last point -- back in 2002 and 2003, there was widespread international difference over -- the French, the Germans, and the U.N. said, basically, the American intelligence estimate was wrong. In this case, we have

pretty much a consensus, with the exception, of course, of Fiona's government, the Russian government, which says that the chemical weapons were not used by the Syrian government; they were used by the rebels.

The one fault I would make of the administration's case -- I think they were silly to get into the business of doing body counts. I thought the intelligence community got out of body counts in Vietnam, after we had determined that we had killed every member of the Vietcong at least six times.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. I will come back to you at the end of the lineup, and discussing al Nusra and other al Qaeda affiliates -- and to what extent any American action might affect their prospects -- and even inadvertently assist them.

But first, I'd like to go to Michael. And, Michael, you're a well-known advocate for action in Syria. I really want to ask you a two-part question. I'll put both the questions on the table. You can choose how you respond -- sequentially or together.

But what's the case for acting in direct response to the August 21st apparent chemicals weapons usage, in the way that President Obama has outlined -- a very specific, limited, single-purpose, discrete action or question?

And then, what's the case, more generally, for changing American policy to a more muscular approach towards the Syrian War?

And the obvious, you know, broader issue here is, can you really support a limited strike, as the President proposes, without revising all of American Syria policy?

MR. DORAN: Thanks, Mike; that's great. That's exactly right.

Among the advocates for action, there are really two separate frames of reference. There's the President's frame of reference, and then -- I'll call it, for lack of a better term -- the McCain frame of references.

I personally am more in the McCain camp than in the President's, but the President would say, as he did yesterday, that, not just he but the international community -- Congress -- has set a redline about the use of these kinds of weapons. We can't sit back and allow them to be used without taking some kind of action. If we don't, then they will surely be used again. Secretary Kerry said yesterday in the House Foreign Affairs Committee meeting that there's 100% chance that if we don't do something, they will be used again.

The McCain frame of reference is a bit skeptical about this. It's concerned, A, that a kind of one-and-done attack will not necessarily deter Assad. It might get into his head for a while, but then he may retaliate -- and if he retaliates, what are we going to do? How are we going to ensure that two days of attacks will really have the kind of deterrent effect that we say it's going to have?

And so McCain is calling for -- basically saying this: "Look, this is a civil war. This is not going to end until one side in the civil war wins. We need to decide which side we're on, and support that side to win." So, he's arguing for much greater support for the Free Syrian army.

He's saying, "Look, the last time Assad was shown to have used chemical weapons back in April, you came out and said that you were going to

arm the Free Syrian army. Those arms haven't really showed up yet. So, in order for me to support this, I want to see a much greater commitment to changing the balance of power on the ground, on the battlefield."

And that's put the President in a sort of uncomfortable position. So, his rhetoric has shifted a bit, you notice. Now he's talking about degrade the capability of the Assad government. That's a nod to McCain, in order to bring him onboard. But, at the same time, he's still talking about limited strikes, and that's to keep the Democratic supporters -- the narrower frame of reference -- concerned about chemical weapons onboard.

So, when talking to McCain, the emphasis is on degrade. When talking to the Democrats, the emphasis is on limited. And it leaves us with a big question -- in my mind -- which is, what is our overall strategy towards Syria, and how does this fit into it?

I'll just add one more point -- my own personal opinion. I think we absolutely have to do this, because I think our credibility is on the line -- our credibility across the board, not just about chemical weapons. But in general, there's a feeling throughout the region that the United States is receding from the region, leaving its allies alone, exposed on the battlefield, and I think that's very dangerous for us, in many ways. We can talk about it more in the Q&A.

But for that reason, I think it's very important to act. At the same time, the President does have to answer this larger question about how it fits into some kind of broader strategy.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

And, Jeremy, I'm just going to, very quickly, ask you to respond -- because I know that, in a very collegial way, you're a skeptic of a lot of the arguments you just heard from Michael. And I'd just invite you to -- and, more generally, from a lot of the American debate at large. I'd like to invite you to say whether you think we should respond specifically, and, also, whether you think we should revise our Syria policy more generally -- and, please, over to you.

MR. SHAPIRO: Thanks. Well, I think there's, you know, an important point of agreement between Mike and I, and I should emphasize that strongly, because it's so rare.

I think that when he says that it's very difficult to sustain this limited, calibrated intervention in American politics, I think he has a very important point. There is, to my mind, a slippery slope here that -- and I think we saw this just yesterday in the Senate resolution, where McCain was able to get in a further goal about changing the balance of power on the ground, into the Senate resolution. And that, I think, expresses it's actually very difficult to hold the line at this sort of halfway measure that the President has proposed.

And so we're on a sort of slow-motion walk down a slippery slope - - and we actually, in my view, have been for quite some time. And every decision that we make -- first, it's to say that Assad must go; then it's to give recognition to the opposition; then it's to give nonlethal assistance; then it's to draw the redline; then it's to draw -- then it's to provide lethal assistance.

And now, this question of a strike -- all these sort of steps toward intervention -- the last one entails the next one. And each time, we hear this

argument that now greater credibility is on the line.

And so what I think that means -- and I think that Mike agrees with this -- that this is a very consequential decision. This is an important step down the slippery slope, and it's unlikely to be the last. That's probably the extent of our agreement.

I think that, when I look at the specific case that the administration has made for why we should strike now, I have some problems with it. And I think that there are two elements to it that I think are -- that the administration has made most strongly -- and I think are critical to assess.

The first is this question of credibility that Mike brought up. Jon Stewart referred to this as seventh-grade diplomacy, but it is a very popular notion out there, and I guess we should talk about it. But I think it's quite questionable. It's the idea that gave us the Vietnam War, and I think we should interrogate it a little bit more carefully.

When I look at U.S. practice over the last 20 years of the use of force -- which is my project here at Brookings, so I look at it every day -- I don't see a reputation of a country that is unwilling to use force. I don't see a reputation of a country that is timid as a political culture.

To the contrary -- I see a country that has used force for issues great and small, all over the world, and which actually has the reputation in most of the world as a -- and, by the way, we've done this under administrations that are Democratic and Republican, and we've done it under the Obama administration. And this is a country which has the reputation, particularly after

the Iraq War, of using force recklessly and incompetently.

And that's actually the reputation in the broader world, beyond the Middle East -- and particularly when you talk to, say, the Chinese. This is how they see our Middle Eastern adventures. They see them as a country which is wasting its power and wasting its resources on issues which are actually peripheral to the central issues in international politics. And that, I think, is eroding greatly our credibility in the wider world.

I would note, just as a historical point, that empires don't typically fall because they are timid in their use of military power. That is not the story of empires. The story of empires is that they fall because they are reckless and overuse their military power -- and I think we should take that into account.

The second issue is the one of chemical weapons which has been raised, and the idea that enforcing the norm against chemical weapons, in this case, is critical to their spread and future use, both in Syria and beyond.

To my point of view, this is a misunderstanding of what has prevented chemical weapons use over the last 100 years. It's not been the question of enforcement. There has never been an enforcement of the chemical weapons norm. And, of course, as we know, Saddam Hussein used these weapons widely during the Iran-Iraq War, and even against civilians in Kurdistan, to great effect.

No, I think that the reason that chemical weapons haven't been used very much in the last 100 years is because there is a lack of utility in the use of chemical weapons. They're not actually that useful. It's possible that the

Assad regime is finding this out right now. I don't think we've talked much about it, but Guta -- the place that was attacked -- did not fall to the Syrian army. In fact, it's still in rebel hands.

So, from my point of view, looking at these two issues, the redline that the President drew last year was a mistake, and I think it's important not to double down on that mistake. Don't do something stupid just because you did something stupid before.

And I think that, again, Mike has a point -- that if you're going to get more deeply involved in the Syrian problem, you need a broader strategy; you need a broader plan. And, specifically, you need a plan to stabilize Syria.

When I was in the government, I saw a lot of plans to topple the Assad regime, but not many plans to stabilize Syria. This is what I came to call, following *Seinfeld*, the "yadda, yadda, yadda doctrine." We will topple Assad, yadda, yadda, yadda. There will be stability and democracy in Syria.

And I think, as Elaine put it on *Seinfeld* so well, we yadda, yadda, yadda-ed the most important part -- and that is how to bring stability. We've never figured out how to do that in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, and I think there's little confidence in the U.S. government or beyond that we could do it in Syria.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Just one clarifying point -- because you were very good to pivot off Mike's argument, but -- you're not necessarily worried that the attack, per se, will fail, in the sense of accidentally releasing or dispersing a lot of agent, or not necessarily leading to a retaliation or an

escalation by Assad -- although I assume you do worry a little about the latter.

But it sounds like you're most worried that we Americans won't be content with even a tactically successful strike, and it will just wind up being one step towards a quagmire -- a much bigger involvement that you are so adamantly opposed to that you'd rather not see us take even those small steps, irrespective of what the immediate provocation may be. Is that right?

MR. SHAPIRO: Yeah, broadly. I mean, I think it's difficult to imagine the attack failing on its own terms, since it's not supposed to accomplish anything.

We can certainly send cruise missiles in, and we can certainly destroy some chemical weapons delivery systems. I do assume that the military is careful enough not to disperse chemical weapons and to, you know, kill everybody in the Middle East, which is something that we looked at.

So, I think that they can do that. But, of course, that doesn't actually -- and it's not even intended to accomplish anything in the Syrian civil war. So, it simply begs the question -- while getting us more deeply involved.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

And this naturally leads into the questions I have for Suzanne. And I have three, but I'm going to actually pose them one by one, because one question is, is there a link between the redline in Syria and the redline in Iran? I'm going to come back to that. That's the one I want to start with.

But I also want to ask, are we either improving or worsening our prospects for a nuclear deal with Iran if we now go ahead and attack Assad?

You know, we've got a new President in Tehran, and he seems to be potentially more amenable to at least feeling out a different relationship with the United States. Are we going to jeopardize that?

And then, finally, I want to ask about Hezbollah.

Now let me do each of those in order, and first ask, is there, in your mind, a linkage? Are the Iranians going to interpret American passivity or inaction as an invitation for them to go for the nuclear weapon that they've presumably wanted for a long time, but held back on actually going the last 10 years?

MS. MALONEY: Well, to the extent that the Iranians interpret American passivity in the face of a chemical weapons attack as a rationale for their own weapons development program -- that horse left the barn a couple of decades ago.

The Iranian view of precedents and international norms where it regards the use of chemical weapons was really crystalized during the 1980s, and the use by Saddam Hussein, and the disregard of the international community -- and even, as recent revelations, that a project that Bruce has been involved with -- have demonstrated that, you know, to some extent, perfect awareness by the part of the Reagan administration and other Western governments of what was happening in Iraq and the use of chemical agents against Iranian soldiers and Iraqi civilians.

This is the worldview that has been set for the Iranians. From that experience, they believe that the American invocation of international law, of

norms on nonproliferation, is entirely manipulable -- that it is not, in fact, a fixed idea of what international law is, but, in fact, a utilitarian invocation of these principles in order to further their aims.

And the way they see American aims in Syria is an effort to destabilize the region, to acquire a greater hold on the resources of the region, and to quell those rising powers, such as Iran, which might be challenging to the United States.

This is the sort of rhetoric we heard out of Ayatollah Khamenei today, when he talked about the chemical weapons attack as a pretext. I don't believe the argument he was making was that the attack never happened. In fact, that has been the subject of some debate on the Iranian side. We've seen these different interpretations.

And, in fact, I would argue something of a pivot by the Iranian leadership, away from the Russian argument that this is simply a use by rebels or some other force toward an acknowledgement -- you know, somewhat cagey, and disavowed, and walked back, and then walked forward by former President Rafsanjani and others that, in fact, this was a use of chemical weapons by the government.

But for the Iranians, our action -- or lack thereof in Syria -- is not going to, I think, further compel them toward a nuclear weapons acquisition objective. Their entire worldview is framed by this period of the 1980s.

I want to touch upon, I guess -- I don't know if you were going to come back to your question, but I wanted to actually touch upon your second

question -- which was the kind of relationship between the nuclear negotiations and our actions -- or decisions -- where it concerns Syria.

This is a really delicate situation for the Iranians. You have this new President who was elected, very clearly, by the people, and allowed to be elected by the establishment, with a very explicit mandate to get some sort of progress on the nuclear issue, in order to rehabilitate Iran's relationship with the world, in order to reengage with the international economy, and, you know, at a base, in order to avoid some sort of upheaval at home, because the economy and the conditions within Iran have deteriorated so greatly over the course of the past several years.

So, this is the last thing that the Iranians wanted to be confronted with. They didn't touch the issue of Syria during their own presidential campaign, which took place over the course of late May and early June. Syria was almost off the table entirely. They were focused entirely on the nuclear issue.

And I imagine that President Rouhani and those around him would have preferred that they would have had an opportunity to begin to make some progress. We've seen a lot of signaling. We've seen interlocutors, including the Sultan of Oman and a former U.S. official, who happened to be associated now with the United Nations, visiting Tehran over the course of the past several weeks. And, clearly, there are signals being passed back and forth between the two governments.

Unfortunately, the Iranians don't have the luxury of avoiding the Syrian question. And this really does require Rouhani to marshal his own

political capital at home, in order to control the hardliners, who are clearly invested in what is both a strategic and an ideological commitment to Iran's longest-standing ally in the Arab world. And it requires him to find subtle ways to signal to the international community that even on Syria, even on this very sensitive question, Iran, in fact, can act in pragmatic ways.

It's been a somewhat messy process, interestingly. That pivot and that signaling has happened over social media -- perhaps more than anywhere else -- where the President has been tweeting, and the Foreign Minister has been on Facebook.

But I think it is a pivot that is meaningful, and the fact that we're seeing a restraint even in the rhetoric of the Supreme Leader -- we're not seeing the sort of commitment, a rush to the defense of Assad, that one might have expected -- I think is an indication that the Iranians are going to try to play this carefully.

The precedent that I have compared this to -- and I think the best-case scenario for the United States would be -- in Iran, it behaves a little bit in the same fashion that former President Rafsanjani did toward the international coalition effort to evict Saddam from Kuwait in 1990 and 1991 -- very different set of circumstances, because, of course, the relationship with Saddam was very problematic, but it was an episode that, for the Iranians, was very contentious at home. There were a lot of radicals who, in fact, wanted to see Iran go to the barricades -- on behalf of Saddam, of all people.

And Rafsanjani, at an early point in his presidency -- because, in

fact, his mission and his mandate was to fix the economy -- had to reign in his own radicals, in order to sort of step back from that conflict and project a kind of neutrality.

Rouhani has a much tougher challenge ahead of him to do that, but I think that's exactly what he's trying to do.

MR. O'HANLON: So, then the last question -- it sounds like Iran's unlikely to "unleash Hezbollah," or otherwise try to make a major retaliatory blow against American allies in the event of a U.S. strike, because they don't want to bog down their own relationship with Washington at this juncture with a lot of extra stuff.

Is that a fair interpretation, or do you think there is a good chance that, either on its own or with Iranian quieter instigation, perhaps, that Hezbollah might escalate and maybe even attack Israel in response to any U.S. cruise missile attack?

MS. MALONEY: I think making predictions, with respect to Iran and Hezbollah, is actually a pretty tricky proposition. I tend to believe that what we're seeing now is an effort to embrace a more pragmatic position -- even on something like Syria.

But, obviously, the relationship with Hezbollah is a complicated one. They are closely aligned, tremendously supportive of Hezbollah. They've created and nurtured Hezbollah at its outset. They don't control Hezbollah. They don't pull the strings. It's an autonomous organization, with its own interests that have, in the past, on a number of occasions -- particularly where it regards Syria

-- have, in fact, differed from those of Iran.

So, I don't think we can predict precisely what Hezbollah is going to do based on Rouhani's own preferences, which appear to be endorsed by the Supreme Leader, to try to get a deal on the nuclear issue.

And I do think it is certainly within the realm of possibility that the Iranian hardliners who are quite invested in Bashar and in the relationship with Damascus will look for ways to respond and retaliate against the United States. This is going to be, I think, an important indication of where the balance of power lies within Iran.

MR. O'HANLON: By the way, I should have mentioned that Suzanne now has a very, very good blog on Iran, in which this kind of issue -- and, also, of course, Iran's own new leadership and the nuclear negotiations, if they develop, will continue to be covered. And could you please remind everyone of the exact address while we're on topic?

MS. MALONEY: www.iranatsaban.com.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

Fiona, Mr. Putin -- there are a lot of things that I could imagine you might want to say -- especially at a moment when he's hosting our own President, right this very minute.

But beyond that -- I guess -- let me put the question to you this way, and you can go wherever you wish with it: It looks to me like Putin is actually accomplishing his goals, because I assume he cares less about Bashar al Assad and Assad's prospects for winning the war -- he cares, it looks to me, a

little more like bogging down the United States. And if he has yet another opportunity to do that, to slow down our global hegemony, as he perceives it, that's a good day.

And that's probably, therefore, such as this debate is playing out now -- with the rest of the world wavering, with the U.S. Congress not sure where to go, Mr. Obama sort of out on a limb, no particular likelihood of Assad being overthrown regardless -- but it looks to me like this is sort of just what Putin would have ordered. Am I wrong? Am I too cynical? How would you interpret his real interests in this crisis?

MS. HILL: Well, I think if Mr. Putin wasn't hosting Obama and everybody else at the G20 right now, and he was listening to this, he would be even more convinced that he'd been making the right choice all along, for months on end, to just stand firm on no intervention in Syria.

And the thing that he's most interested in is not keeping Assad, per se -- you're absolutely right on that -- and he's actually said that recently, in a number of interviews. You know, he's been out and about all over the place recently, expressing his thoughts that he'd previously kept somewhat behind wraps.

And he's made it very clear that it's not about Assad; that's not the end game in Syria. What is the end game is making sure that we're not going to see yet another massive mess on the map. Now we would argue, we're already there.

But Putin thinks -- and if he was listening to this, he'd think even

more -- that we could make it a whole lot worse than it already is.

And he is facing, in the next year, the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan -- and, ironically, he would like us still to be there. This is actually one area where Putin actually was quite relieved that the U.S. was in - - admitted he didn't want us to come out all crammed in victory; he liked the idea that we were bogged down. He thought we might be bogged down there in some kind of way in which we would stay -- not that we would be heading out like the Soviet Red Army headed out a couple of decades previously.

Now he looks at Syria, and he thinks a U.S. intervention -- and, just like Jeremy, he doesn't probably spend every day thinking about U.S. interventions, but he spends a lot of time looking at them over the last 20 years -- and before, when he was in the KGB, studying, you know, what the U.S. is up to.

He doesn't, also, think that the U.S. interventions have ever come up with anything that's beneficial to Russia, let alone to the United States.

So, his one goal in all of the activity that we've seen in Syria has been preventing or restraining the U.S. from intervention -- because he doesn't know where the end game is going to go, and he would much rather have Bashar al Assad, with all of his problems, in place, and keeping some semblance of control -- and the complete chaos that Putin thinks that he's seen in Iraq, and Afghanistan, and in Libya.

So, Putin is on the same page as many of the members of Congress, asking, is this going to be Bengasi? Is this where we're going to head?

And until he gets some kind of response from the President -- I mean, again, you know, he's probably following very closely what the President is saying to the U.S. Congress, what the President has been saying at Stockholm. He wants the answers, as well. He wants to know, what is going to be in Syria at the end of the day? What am I and everybody else going to deal with?

And on that front, the Russians' Middle East policy is pretty much misunderstood at the moment. This is not the Cold War. In fact, if you look at the series of alliances that Russia now has in the Middle East, they're pretty weird. It's not just hanging out with the mullahs in Iran; it's Israel. Israel is a big partner for Russia. That's completely different from the Cold War era.

So, an Iranian or Hezbollah-inspired attack by Iran on Israel would be a disaster for Russian policy. He would like to see that averted. He is very keen on keeping the current status quo as much as he possibly can in the Middle East. He's been extraordinarily alarmed by the sudden shifts in the Middle East profile of who's in charge.

He's probably very relieved that the military are back -- although, you know, for how long, in the case of Egypt. He didn't like the Arab Spring. He didn't like any of the implications that that had -- not just for the Middle East, but whether it might spur more extremist groups to turn their attentions from their current centers of operations, in places like Syria or elsewhere, and start thinking about attacks on Russia.

Ever since Putin ended, in some fashion, the war in Chechnya, he's been extraordinarily relieved that all of the extremists have gone somewhere

else, and he does not want them coming back -- especially when he's got that nice Winter Olympics just poised in the New Year of 2014. They're ready to showcase Sochi and all the billions he's literally expended there to make these go well.

So, there's all kinds of things that Putin doesn't like about this. It's not the old Cold War view; it's not the old Middle East for Russia and anyone else, and he's just as nervous as the rest of us about, what is the U.S. going to do, and what the implications of it are going to be.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Just got a couple more questions for me, and then we're going to go to you.

Bruce, I wanted to now ask about al Nusra and, also, other al Qaeda affiliates in Syria. And there's been a concern, obviously, over the last two years, two and a half years, that the course of the war has allowed them to grow stronger within the insurgency. So, that's point one.

But there's also a concern now that if we, you know -- so maybe our inaction allowed that to happen, but now there's also the possibility that our action, our strike, may further strengthen al Nusra. How do you size up these prospects?

MR. RIEDEL: Well, I think if we step back for a minute and look at the development of the Syrian civil war -- this started out as a genuine movement -- largely nonviolent, largely peaceful -- for political change in Syria.

Two and a half years later, it's not that anymore; it's a sectarian war -- a very ugly sectarian war. If he's looked at the news today, there's horrific

new violations of human rights -- this time, by the Syrian rebels.

What began as an Arab Spring turned into a sectarian war, which largely pits the Alawite minority -- roughly 15 percent of the population -- and the Christian minority -- another 10 to 15 percent -- against the Sunni majority -- leaving out the Kurds, who are a third player in all of this, who basically already set up their own little entity in Northeastern Syria.

So, this sectarian conflict between the Alawite-Christian front and the Sunni has become increasingly violent and dangerous.

The Sunni front -- the opposition -- the resistance, as we call it -- is incredibly fractured. According to the Defense Intelligence Agency this summer, they could identify 1,200 separate parts of the Sunni opposition movement. Even if that's off by 50 percent and there's only 600 parts, this is a very, very dysfunctional movement.

Al Qaeda came to this very late. There was no al Qaeda at the beginning, but now al Qaeda has come on very strongly, using its base nearby in Iraq. And we now have two quite significant al Qaeda franchises operating in Syria.

One is the al Nusra front, which is -- it says it is Syrian origin, but it acknowledges it got a lot of assistance from al Qaeda in Iraq -- which claims to be directly under the control of Ayman Zawahiri in Pakistan.

The second is the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham -- al Sham meaning "Greater Syria"; some people translate it as "Levant," which is al Qaeda in the Iraq -- and which says, "No, we're in charge; we're running this operation

from here on in. We have the authority from Osama bin Laden to be here."

Anyone who tells you that the various al Qaeda functions are 30, 40, 50 percent of the resistance, your alarm bell should go off. How do they know that? Just like anyone who tells you there are 5,000 al Qaeda fighters in Syria -- your alarm bell should go off. How do they know things like that? It's doubtful that al Qaeda knows how many people it has in Syria today. Don't engage in body counts or in oversimplifications.

The fundamental reality, though, is, two significant al Qaeda groups have now moved into Iraq, and have become among the most robust and growing parts of the resistance to the Bashar Assad government.

Now if we tilt the playing field in Syria against the Assad regime, inevitably, that helps al Qaeda. There is no way we cannot help al Qaeda the more we "degrade" the Syrian regime and its military capabilities.

We can probably offset that tilt in favor of al Qaeda to a certain degree -- and I've written about some ways we can mitigate the impact -- but we should have no illusions that, at the end of the day, the more we weaken -- or, as the economist says, "hit them hard" -- Bashar Assad, we're going to end up having a bigger al Qaeda problem in the future.

Now if you have a strategy that says, okay, we're willing to take that risk upfront now, because we're pretty confident we know how we're going to get to the end, that's one thing. If, as Jeremy suggests, you have a "yadda, yadda, yadda" strategy for how to go from A to C, then you really need to spend a lot more time thinking about B, and how we can avoid inadvertently helping al

Qaeda get a stronger base in the Middle East at this time.

One last point about al Qaeda today -- al Qaeda is at a crossroads. Al Qaeda was threatened by the Arab Spring when it began. The whole philosophy of al Qaeda -- that the only solution to the problem of repression, to the problem of American influence in the Middle East, was violent *jihad* was challenged by the Arab Spring. It wasn't *jihad* that toppled Hosni Mubarak; it was Twitter, it was Facebook.

Two and a half years later, al Qaeda is in the position of saying, "We told you so. It wouldn't work. Twitter -- great, fine -- but Mubarak's back. It's a counterrevolution. We told you *jihad* is the only answer."

What this President does about the problem of al Qaeda -- not just in Syria, but in the entire region right now -- will determine the vector and importance of al Qaeda for the next decade. We are at a crucial crossing point -- not just with regards to Syria, but with al Qaeda and the broader Middle East -- the Arab world and Islamic world, as a whole.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you -- although you may have riled Michael Doran up, because you just said something critical about Twitter. Until then, you were playing fair.

But I just have one last question -- actually, it's a two-parter -- one part for Michael, and one part for Jeremy -- then we'll go to you. And it's on the role of Congress. I just want to sort of hone in on what might be, for each of you, the more difficult scenario.

So, for Michael, let's say that both houses of Congress, in their

own separate ways, vote down the idea of authorizing a strike -- should Mr. Obama strike anyway?

And for Jeremy, if they both vote yes, what does the President do with that newfound permission? Does he just pocket it until a rainy day, when he might decide -- you know, and maybe even at some future date -- if the offense were great enough -- maybe you would even support a strike at that time, but otherwise, do nothing -- or has he essentially committed himself by asking for this permission?

Over to you two, and then to you.

MR. DORAN: Thanks. Let me just start by saying something that's really obvious -- but I think we should think about it for a second. I actually agreed with almost everything Jeremy said; it's just the conclusions that I draw from the same analysis.

And the thing I want to say that it's really obvious is, here we've got a President who, for two years, showed not just a reluctance -- he basically informed the American public, more or less -- if he didn't, then members of his administration did -- that intervention in Syria is pure folly. Nobody can seriously argue that President Obama has been looking for a pretext to get involved here.

Add another factor -- public opinion is overwhelmingly opposed to this. I mean, I think that's also obvious.

So, a third factor -- the military doesn't want to do it. I mean, I have never seen body language less supportive of a military action than what I saw in the Chairman in the hearings, right?

So, the President doesn't want it, public opinion doesn't want it, the military doesn't want it. And here we are, talking about a proposal to intervene in Syria, put forth by the President.

To me, this is an incredible statement that the President, up until this point, has not defined American interests correctly in Syria. And that's been my point all along, is that interests are objective things out there in the world. It's the meeting point between objective things out there in the world and the way you conceive of them.

And there's a point at which your conception of the world sort of determines interests, and there's a point at which objective things determine interests. But if the two of them get too far out of whack, then you're going to have some really horrible cognitive dissonance -- or you're going to find yourself in an uncomfortable position where, if you get a no-vote in Congress, it's a real political defeat for you at home.

Forget about foreign policy for a second; he's going to be severely weakened at home if he gets that no-vote.

So, therefore, I think there has to be a redefinition of what our interests are, has to be a paradigm shift and recognize that we're here for a reason. This slippage that you described is not something that happened because people weren't trying to slip that way -- they weren't careful -- they were, all along, trying to hold the line, and they defined it incorrectly so that they couldn't hold the line.

And I'm sorry I'm going on a little bit -- one more point here. Our

allies in the region -- Turks, Saudis, and Maraudis, Kuwaitis -- they have all come -- Jordanians, Israelis -- they have all come to Washington and said to President Obama, "You've got to do something."

The Turks are now -- it's an amazing thing -- by the way, not just the Sunni Muslim powers, but, also, the European powers -- the French, the British. They've said, "You've got to do something."

Over the last two years -- first, it was quiet behind the scenes, then it was visits to the White House, combined with leaks to the press in an unprecedented way. Now we have the Turkish politicians saying out loud, "We want an intervention." I've never seen anything like this in at least 20 years of following the Middle East.

The President could have, two years ago, taken those elements, created a coalition, built up the Free Syrian Army, and then, when this moment came, he would have had elements that he could put out front, and we wouldn't be looking at a unilateral American action.

He didn't want to do that, because he thought, "Uh-oh -- slippery slope. If I start building the coalition, the next thing you know, I'll be in there with boots on the ground."

What he's got is just the opposite. He's got the opposite. Now comes time when he realizes we do have interests in the Middle East, we do have interests in Syria, we've got to take action -- and he looks around, he wants to say, "Come on, boys." There's nobody there, because he didn't build the coalition.

We've got to build the coalition now, and that's why we have to act. And that's why he has to act, whether he gets the authorization or he doesn't -- because the goal of acting is not simply to have a military effect on the ground; it's to transmit our intentions and our willingness to put skin in the game to all of our allies, so that we can start coordinating them.

Part of our problem in Syria is not just what our enemies are doing, but, also, what our allies are doing. The Turks want to topple Assad -- so what are they doing? They're turning a blind eye to all the foreign *ihadists* that are coming through. I'm not saying they're supporting al Qaeda; they're just going like this, and letting their border open.

Supposedly, we have a strategy, a global strategy, to combat al Qaeda. And one of our closest partners in the Middle East -- also a NATO ally -- is supporting al Qaeda in Syria. That's a huge strategic failure, which we have to think about.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

Jeremy -- assuming there is a yes vote from both houses --

MR. SHAPIRO: Yeah.

MR. O'HANLON: -- assuming you would advocate the President not to strike anyway.

MR. SHAPIRO: I would, but I think that, you know, he's not bluffing on this. And he did change his opinion of the wisdom of a strike as a result of the August 21st attack. And I think that from the standpoint of the U.S. government, the chemical weapons issue has always been very different.

And that's why, I think, you see this change in the President's view on the wisdom of intervention -- albeit a very limited intervention -- in the last few weeks.

It was always the case that -- and I think it extends back into the Clinton and Bush administration -- that there is an incredible institutional focus on weapons of mass destruction. And chemical weapons are considered part of them.

And we had a completely different process for chemical weapons within the U.S. government on Syria, and they -- the U.S. government has always taken that interest a lot more seriously. And so the development -- and has thought of it as separate.

And so the chemical weapons development within the Syrian civil war is something that -- the President wasn't kidding when he drew this redline a year ago. In my view, he shouldn't have done it, but he wasn't kidding.

And that's because of the way that the U.S. government sees chemical weapons. And I think that that's what explains some of the change in opinion. I don't think that's the right way of seeing it. So, I think he will act if Congress gives him permission.

I think that we have to note another aspect of, I think, the reason that the policy has developed in this way that's very unsatisfying to both Mike and I -- is that the President has always been seeking to sort of balance audiences on this question. The administration has always been seeking to balance audiences on this question.

I think an anonymous administration official said last week that they were looking for a response that was sort of just muscular enough not to be mocked. And that was sort of how they did it all the way through. It was, you know, every time something happened, the United States had to have a response -- because we're the United States, and we need to have a response. The Chinese didn't feel a need for a response, but we did.

And so we were always sort of looking for the minimum that could be done to satisfy the desire in the political culture for a response, but that wouldn't get us anymore involved.

And that's, I think, in part how we've gotten to this place where both the noninterventionist and the interventionist are sort of pissed off.

MR. O'HANLON: Okay. Well, thank you.

We're going to go to you. I'm going to take three questions at a time. I would prefer, if you don't mind, that you mention the person you'd most like to answer. Now if it's a question where you don't feel you can do that, we'll accept your question anyhow, but -- then we're going to just go down the line after I've got three questions.

Please wait for a mic, and please identify yourself when you get the microphone.

We'll begin up here with Gary and Harlan, and then we'll go to the woman five rows back. That'll be our first group.

MR. MITCHELL: Thanks very much. I'm Garrett Mitchell, and I write the Mitchell Report. And I want to -- I think probably the person I would

pose this to is to Michael, in his role as moderator.

It's been clear that we have differing perspectives about what we should do in Syria. There is one thing, it seems to me, the panel is in complete agreement on -- and that is, the President has not been able to state the case for America's strategic interest in Syria. And I would make the observation that neither has the panel.

So, I want to ask whether the panel could give us what they consider a working definition of America's strategic interest in Syria -- and that assumes that there is one.

We know that Obama had a similar problem with Afghanistan. He was never really able to articulate what America's strategic interest was in Afghanistan. I don't think of him as an unintelligent man, so it raises the question for me whether these terms that we love to use in Washington, like "America's strategic interest," is a lot of hooey.

So, narrowly put, the question is, is there such a thing as an American strategic interest? And if so, could we take a swing at it today?

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

MR. ULLMAN: I'm Harlan Ullman.

I disagree with Gary. I thought the panel did exceedingly well in discussing a lot of amorphous things, and I want to associate my views with you about Russia, which we don't appreciate in Washington.

I have a three-part question that stems from Marty Dempsey's testimony the other day. When Marty said specifically, "Yes, we can degrade

and deter," could the entire panel tell me what it takes to deter Assad? What do you mean by "degrading"? How do you quantify a qualitative term? And what do you think, if attacked, the Syrians will do next?

MR. O'HANLON: Okay, thank you. And then six rows back, on the aisle.

MS. PAUL: Thank you. Hi. My name is Diane Paul, and I've worked for the past 20 years on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. And I think that's really what we're all talking about here today.

And one of the questions that hasn't been asked is, do the Syrian people want this intervention? And it appears to me, on both sides, that there's a lot of question about what's going to happen, and a lot of -- a tremendous amount of fear. We're already seeing a lot of movement.

We've given up on the U.N. Security Council. They've dramatically failed, in terms of following their many resolutions on the protection of civilians.

There is a third path, though, if you will, where the Americans could still take leadership, but perhaps back off from what I think is going to be perhaps a big mistake -- and may not make things better for civilians at all in Syria.

The third path would be to consider taking this to the General Assembly, and to utilize the Resolution 377, "Uniting for Peace," which has rarely been used, but is a way to, if you will, run an end run around the Security Council, and make certain demands, such as referral to the ICC for both Assad

and others, including rebel commanders who violated international law, and to demand a ceasefire, to stop atrocities, to investigate atrocities, and to create safe areas -- perhaps an Arab League-U.N. proposal that has been turned down in the Security Council in the past -- with the French and the U.S. taking on the role of a no-fly zone.

This would give some time. There'd be a lot of planning required. It would allow the President to retain credibility, I think -- to say, "Yes, we're going to take some leadership on this," step back, take a little bit of time, and think about what's best for all the Syrian people -- including the minorities -- the Alawites, the Christians, the druids, et cetera -- and, in the meantime, to help build a little bit -- just one more thing; I'm sorry I'm going on so long -- but to build support for the ability of the local councils to govern -- because I read recently that it's the *jihadists* who are providing food; it's the *jihadists* who are providing medicines.

They're the ones taking leadership with the local people -- whereas the local councils that are affiliated with the opposition are doing absolutely nothing in terms of taking on responsibility for their people in these ways.

So, safe areas, humanitarian corridors, these kind of ideas -- this is a tall order. It's very expensive. I recognize that, but this is expensive, anyway --

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

MS. PAUL: -- no matter how you look at it. Thank you.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. So, I'll begin, and then we'll work down towards anybody who wants to respond to one of the three -- and maybe we'll start the other way next time.

I should say, by the way, on the broader question of humanitarian issues in Syria, Brookings is holding an event on September 18th at 10:00, led by Elizabeth Ferris, who runs our Internally Displaced Persons Projects. As you all, I'm sure, saw, the estimated refugee flow out of Syria has now topped two million, and the internally displaced number is somewhere in the range, I think, of three million -- getting to some of the issues that you're raising.

But let me just respond to Gary. Others may want to correct me or handle other questions. I think that, for a long time, we've basically said, to the extent that a problem inside of Syria can stay inside of Syria, it doesn't reach President Obama's threshold for saying that there is a core strategic interest.

Over the years, Mr. Assad's caused us a lot of trouble in his support for Hezbollah, but it's been a level of trouble that's been generally tolerated -- by Israel, as well as the United States -- to the point where it wasn't more than, what, three years ago that both Secretary Clinton and Senator Kerry, at that time, were hoping that Bashar al Assad could be a reformist, and they could work with him.

And so -- that doesn't necessarily get to the issue of Syria's inherent importance, but in terms of where it was seen three years ago, that wasn't necessarily a popular or, you know, prescient thing to say. But, nonetheless, it suggested -- at that time, we thought Syria could be managed and

kept in a box. Obviously, with the refugee flows, with the presence of al Nusra, the potential for al Qaeda to establish new sanctuaries, and the broader implications for all the neighbors, I think the Syrian civil war is now correctly seen as something that doesn't stay within its borders.

And, as I've heard my colleague, Ken Pollack -- who's celebrating Rosh Hashanah today, and, therefore, not on the panel -- but, otherwise, would have a lot to add -- I've heard him say that it really is the regional implications that have to be focused on, and they've become a big deal.

So, by itself -- in and of itself -- within its borders, you could argue that Syria, perhaps, was something we could have ignored, and we did ignore for many years. Michael Doran was basically, I think, predicting that we were going to be headed for trouble, and that this thing was not going to stay within its borders. I think that's where the real problem arises, and where the U.S. strategic interests really are engaged.

But others on that same question -- or the other questions -- we'll just work down the row.

MR. RIEDEL: I'll just add a bit to that.

Since the Assad Dynasty took power in Syria -- and that, really, is what we're dealing with -- a dynasty -- in 1970, we've had a hostile relationship with Syria. Every President from Nixon until now has maintained sanctions on Syria.

Now we've lived with that -- and, as Mike rightly said, it's a problem -- it's a manageable problem -- but location, location, location. Syria's

spillover spills over into key parts -- things that do matter to us -- Israel, Jordan, Turkey.

My own view -- Israel and Turkey are pretty capable of taking care of themselves, especially the Israelis -- the Jordanians, much less capable of doing so.

That's why I think the one thing the President has done over the last two years -- which I think everyone would agree with -- is, he's tried to strengthen Jordan so that it can handle the spillover from Syria, but it's now becoming almost a flood -- very, very hard to deal with. It's the spillover, as Mike and Ken have said.

Degrade and deter -- nobody thinks it's a good idea to bomb chemical weapons -- because when you do that, you disperse chemical weapons. So, that's not a good solution.

Boots on the ground to get them -- Secretary Kerry briefly hinted at that yesterday, and if he hadn't walked it back in an instance, we wouldn't have this panel. They would have voted no right then and there, and thrown him out.

So, we're not going to go in and get them. And if we want to go in and get them, it is a very, very complex and dangerous task.

Degrade the ability to deliver them -- that's a more doable task. Mike, as a military analyst, probably could say more about it, but it's a pretty hard task. The Syrians have figured out a lot of ways to deliver these Syrian chemical weapons. And the way they delivered it in Damascus this August was a way that we hadn't really seen. Syria had that capability before.

So, this is an opponent who is developing new capabilities, making it harder to degrade.

Deter -- I think we can deter. The Israelis have a lot of experience with the Assad Dynasty, and they've had a lot of experience over the years giving it a whack, and making sure they don't get one back -- most importantly, 2007, when they took out the North Korean nuclear reactor in Syria, and the Syrians basically said nothing. They said nothing, literally. We can draw from that.

The danger is this: If Assad feels the end is in sight, and the Alawite-Christian community senses the end's in sight, they will do anything -- because they're desperate.

Most Alawites and many, many Christians in Syria believe, if they lose the civil war, it's not a question of being relegated to second-class citizens; it's a question of mass slaughter.

And until that impression changes inside Syria, I think, at the end of the day, the Assad regime, if it has to, will use any weapon it has, once it sees that dark hour coming -- and any strategy that wants to tilt the battlefield needs to think about that.

MR. DORAN: On the degrade-and-deter question, let me just add to what Bruce said -- that the best guy to answer that is Ken Pollack, who's not here. But he has written a paper on related issues, on a military analysis of the whole conflict. And I would strongly urge anybody who's interested to go see his paper, which is on our website.

Garrett, on your question about interests, a few points -- let me

just make one observation that I don't think has sunk into a lot of people -- again, extremely obvious, if you think about it.

We've got 120,000 people killed, and we have 2,000,000 refugees. The vast majority of those people were killed by the regime. The regime's been carrying out horrific attacks against civilians from the beginning -- dropping TNT on breadlines, using a fixed-wing aircraft, using artillery.

And, also, if you haven't seen them, go on YouTube and, if you can stomach it, look at some of the torture videos that are out there. Why do I say this? Not because I want you to go see torture videos, but because this is what the entire Sunni Islamic world is looking at, day in, day out -- unbelievable horrific slaughter, and we're not doing anything about it.

And I just want to point out to you that we may feel that we're not culpable in any way; the assumption in the Sunni Islamic world is that we are culpable. The assumption is, we actually want the Shi'ites to win, and we want the slaughter to go on.

And that's a perception that we need to think about when we formulate our policy -- because the ring of misery around Syria now is so unbelievable, it's going to be a problem no matter what happens in Syria. This is going to be with us for years, and there's going to be a lot of blowback.

But as far as strategic interests are concerned, this war is no longer a civil war. This is a fight in the region for the regional order.

To put it in the simplest terms, it's Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah against Saudi Arabia and its allies. But, as Bruce pointed out, conflict on the

ground, obviously, is more complex than that. We've got the Kurdish component. We have al Qaeda and so on.

So, al Qaeda, Iran, Russia -- they all understand this is a fight for the regional order. They're all trying to shape the regional order so that it works to the advantages of their friends and them.

The United States is sitting on the sidelines as a spectator, basically. We need to do exactly what they do, and that is shape the regional order so that it works to our advantage. All the spillover that Bruce mentioned -- that's the whole regional order question.

This is what we're faced with right now is -- we're going to have a Middle East for the next 20 or 30 years -- what's it going to look like? What do we want it to look like? How do we best structure this thing so that it serves our interests -- which include, by the way, our interests, as I was saying before -- making sure that we don't have to carry out as many unilateral military operations as we will have to carry out if we don't put structures in place on the ground that can look after our interests.

And if we want to run through what the interests are that are -- other than this whole regional order question -- that are at stake in Syria -- there is proliferations in weapons and use of weapons in mass destruction, countering al Qaeda, countering Iran, our humanitarian concern -- just stopping the slaughter -- and, simply, alliance maintenance. I would say all of those.

MR. SHAPIRO: Thanks. Where to begin?

I think that the strategic interests in Syria are basically as Mike

said. It's fundamentally about regional stability. We sort of divided it up into three.

First was the regional stability bit that he talked about -- all the spillover problems.

Second was the weapons of mass destruction -- principally, the chemical weapons, which is an internal issue in Syria.

And third, another internal issue is the extremism issue.

And those were seen as the three core strategic interests. Two of them were actually internal, and one is external.

But I agree with you that the President has -- and this panel -- have had trouble articulating those strategic interests. And I think it's interesting to think of why.

The reason the panel has had trouble is obvious; we're not that talented. But the President gets paid a lot more money, and he should be able to do it. And why hasn't he?

I think that the reason that he's had a problem is because within our political culture, if, as President, you articulate a strategic interest, you're expected to accomplish it. You're expected to satisfy it. And he doesn't have a way of doing that. He doesn't know how to solve the Syrian problem. So, he's reluctant to define it in as stark terms as I just did, lest he take on that responsibility, and be judged against it.

And this is, I think, a core problem with American policy in a sort of age of relative decline -- which is that we have within our political culture a sense

that we are omnipotent. But we have within our presidencies a sense of limits. And that is very difficult to explain to the American public. So, we are where we are.

In terms of -- to sort of respond to some of Mike's points -- I think the horrific violence that we're seeing in Syria -- and particularly that's been visited upon the Sunnis -- I think, does have the effect that he's talking about. And the Sunnis in Syria definitely blame the United States, among other people. The Alawites in Syria also blame the United States.

And, I think, in the case of intervention, they would -- in the case that we did actually everything they asked for, they would still blame the United States for something else, assumedly. There's certainly no greater crime you can commit against a people than to liberate them -- and they will never forgive you for that.

And I think that when you intervene, you inevitably get wrapped up in domestic struggles that you don't fully understand, and you inevitably become an object of domestic politics in ways that are very difficult to control. I think we've seen that very strongly in Iraq. We've seen that very strongly in Egypt recently, where the only thing that the Egyptian political spectrum seems to agree on is that it's all America's fault.

And so I think that the difference that we have now is that we are not as involved; we can step back. I think if we were to get involved, we wouldn't relieve that sense of blame; we would simply reinforce it, and spread it.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

Suzanne?

MS. MALONEY: I'll just jump in briefly, because I'm not sure that the question really gets at what's missing in the debate.

I think that you hear here, as well as in the debate on the Hill and elsewhere in Washington, a number of compelling arguments about what our strategic interests are or are not, and they've been articulated by my colleagues here, so I won't go over them again.

I think the problem is, as Jeremy perhaps put it best, the "yadda, yadda, yadda" problem. We don't have the strategy. Whether or not we have the interests, you can debate, but we don't have a strategy. The President has not articulated a strategy, and, frankly, neither have those proponents of more aggressive action -- the McCain framework that Michael referred to. No one has articulated a strategy which is likely to advance our interests.

This idea that simply getting into it is going to shape the regional order -- these are buzzwords. That doesn't tell you how you get the end state in Syria, which, in fact, leads to the outcome that we prefer -- a stable country, ideally with some democratic institutions, at least in the offing, in the next century, which is not a threat to its own people or its neighbors.

I don't see a way forward, and I continue to sort of have ringing in my head the words that were said to me by an Iranian senior official when I visited Tehran shortly before the American intervention in Iraq -- and he told me, "This is going to go very badly -- not because we're going to make it go very badly," although they certainly played a part in that, "but because we've seen this

movie before. We've been there before."

They're looking at Syria with very much the same eyes. It's wonderful for many of our allies to want us to jump in, and use our resources -- which they may compensate us for -- or not -- in order to advance their own individual self-interested agendas.

It's another thing for the President to be able to chart a path forward which, in fact, leads to the outcome that we want -- that doesn't leave us with a big "yadda, yadda, yadda" problem and with a sinkhole in the Middle East, in a place that is already a beacon for extremism, that is already having the spillover effect, and that is already strengthening many of our adversaries around the region.

MS. HILL: Well, I'd like to raise our cultural visions here from *Seinfeld* to *Lawrence of Arabia*, because I was thinking, "Yes, I've seen this movie before. It had Peter O'Toole strutting around, looking, you know, rather dashing in his robes."

This is where we have been before. We've been watching this movie for a long time. This is T. Lawrence in the days of British aristocrats sitting around -- not with glasses of water, but gin-and-tonics, trying to figure out what the hell to do with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

And the last time that we saw millions of people dispersed in the Syrian desert, they were Armenians and other citizens of what had been the Ottoman Empire -- in exactly the same way, with a lot fewer tents and a very high casualty rate.

And in 1915, we have the genocide of the Armenians, as a result of all the fallout of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the end of World War I.

And this hasn't been lost on people in the region. It's not been lost on Vladimir Putin. If we actually go through his interview that he gave recently, he starts talking about the collapse of the Russian empire. We're 100 years out now from all of those consequential events that's also got sparked off in kind of chaos in the Balkans, and it spread across the whole of the region -- the ultimate spillover.

And we're still trying to figure out that regional order. And, unfortunately, it's not quite as nice and neat as Mike is able to make it on different occasions, because we have no idea how this particular round of it is going to play out. The sectarian lines are incredibly complex.

As I said before, Putin has a strange set of alliances in the region, with Iran, Israel, and Assad Syria. And it's because they're not, in his view, proselytizing Sunni regimes who want to stir up trouble in the Russian North Caucasus and elsewhere in Russia itself. And he doesn't want to be on the part of the sectarian conflict, either. He doesn't want to take the side of the Shi'ites -- hence, why he's looking to Israel and others, too.

Putin would like to see everything back, as it was before -- not because of the Cold War imprimatur, but the nice, secular, neat, nasty strongmen who were going out, clubbing heads, and keeping everybody behind closed doors.

So, this is the mess that we're in now, and the problem is that nobody knows how we're going to sort it all out.

And, you know, as we look back, in 1914, maybe we should actually have a screening of *Lawrence of Arabia* here (inaudible) to Jeremy, to have a nice commentary on it. It would give us all a little bit of a break, but it would show us the dilemmas of the things that we're dealing with today.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

Let's go to another round of questions. We'll begin here, in the second row, and then we'll work back.

MR. MASSY: Yes, thanks very much -- Kevin Massy, with Statoil.

We've talked a lot about the justification and the strategic frame in the context of the American attack -- or prospective attack. My question is about the aftermath.

Bruce mentioned the lack of a Syrian response to the attack on the nuclear reactor. What is the most likely response from Syria and Hezbollah? Are we to expect that Assad will just sit and take a strategic limited attack, or are we to expect a response through an attack on Israel, further destabilization of Iraq, a response to U.S. allies in the region, and what does that kind of probability curve look like? What is most likely, and then what are the kind of next most likely implications of a U.S. strike?

MR. O'HANLON: Good. And let's take two more. We'll go to the two gentlemen that are across from each other, about halfway back -- in the blue tie, and then in --

MR. LAFRANCHI: Thank you -- Howard LaFranchi with *the Christian Science Monitor*.

My question is for Suzanne. You described for us how you see Iran's perspective on Syria. I wondered if you could also go a little bit into what role you see Iran playing -- and perhaps concerns about the nuclear program playing in the President's decision, as he said that he feels he should take action in Syria -- but, also, his decision to go to Congress.

MR. O'HANLON: And then --

MR. MEYER: Ken Meyer, Court World Docs.

I heard a report that a few days ago, we sent 600 rebel fighters, who we trained in our camps at Jordan, back into Syria -- and not only were they not welcomed by the more Islamist rebel elements already in Syria, but they were routed by the Syrian army.

Does anyone have any information on that? And if not, perhaps, at least, you could talk about what we're up to in Jordan these days.

MR. O'HANLON: Okay. So, why don't we start with Fiona, on any of those questions, if you wish -- or you can pass, if you prefer.

MS. HILL: Well, I think most of these are much more specific, too. We should have started at this end again.

MR. O'HANLON: That's okay. We'll get to them.

MS. HILL: So I shall pass to Suzanne.

MR. O'HANLON: Suzanne?

MS. MALONEY: I'll try to speak again to this issue of the role of

Iran in sort of motivating a more forceful response to these attacks than we've seen from the administration in the past.

Clearly, it's been articulated by Secretary Kerry, by a number of others, that this strike will have an important demonstration effect for the Iranians, to demonstrate American resolve, to reinforce the norm of nonproliferation.

I believe that that is sincere to the President. I also believe that it has a utilitarian role in terms of persuading Congress to produce the outcome that the administration would like to see on this vote.

Iran is an easy win when it comes to getting votes on the Hill, and so it certainly makes sense for the administration to continue to refer back to that issue.

You know, clearly, the administration and the Congress have had a sort of contentious relationship on Iran over the course of the past six years. The administration has repeatedly opposed sanctions that have been considered and overwhelmingly passed by the Hill. And then, of course, the administration has come back and thanked the Hill for, in fact, passing those sanctions, and, in fact, helping to persuade the Iranians, perhaps, to come in a more serious way to the negotiating table.

I do believe it is almost inevitable -- if the President were to seek authority for more forceful action against the Iranian nuclear program, he would have no difficulty in getting it. So, I don't worry about any precedents set by the debate that we're seeing today on Syria, in terms of Iranian resolve.

I think that, clearly, they recognize how serious this set of issues is. They don't want to be on the wrong side of a shooting war with Washington at this particular moment. And that's why you see a sort of awkward and unusual attempt to at least shift their public rhetoric on Syria in a modest way, if not, in fact, begin to pivot away from Assad himself.

MR. O'HANLON: Jeremy -- either of the two questions remaining -- or anything to follow up on.

MR. SHAPIRO: Sure. I guess I'll try to handle the most likely response of Syria and Hezbollah to an attack. It's, frankly, difficult.

The thing that I learned in two years of trying to deal with the Syrian regime and trying to understand them is that I have no idea what the Syrian regime is thinking. And I think that that broadly speaks for most of us. And I don't know why they used chemical weapons in this particular instance, because I don't think it was a very smart move, for obvious reasons, and I'm wondering, even, just the degree to which it might have been an accident. So, it's difficult to predict.

Having said that, I'll then make a prediction. I think that it's very unlikely, as Bruce said, that we will see either Syrian or Hezbollah escalation outside of Syria in response to this attack. And I think the reason for that is because they have enough problems; they have enough enemies within Syria to occupy their time, and they're not really looking to expand this war either to Israel, or to the United States, or even to Turkey. And I think they've shown a consistent pattern of that.

I think they do have some escalation options within Syria. In particular, they can drive more refugees. They can commit more humanitarian atrocities in order to expose the hypocrisy of the West, in attacking on the basis of chemical attacks. And they can conceivably challenge the United States by using more chemical weapons in more confusing ways.

And so I think that there's a lot of -- and they also, by the way, have many, many alternatives to turn to, beyond chemical weapons, in terms of conventional weapons, for killing people. They haven't really used all of their arsenal, and they still have places to go.

So, I do think that there's some possibility that the action will make the Syrian civil war bloodier. There's a lot of research that shows that, typically, when there is an outside intervention in a civil war like this, it becomes bloodier, because one side feels the need to step up its game, and because other external supporters feel the need to prop up their side.

So, that would be my prediction.

MR. O'HANLON: Michael?

MR. DORAN: Well, who is it -- that Jon Stewart said about the seventh-grade diplomacy -- what was the phrase?

MR. O'HANLON: He said that operating on the basis of credibility is seventh-grade diplomacy.

MR. DORAN: Okay, good. Yeah, that's the level I'm on. And I have --

MR. O'HANLON: I had heard ninth grade for you.

MR. DORAN: No, no, no. No, no, no. You actually don't even have to get to seventh grade, because that is basically international relations and politics in the Middle East.

I do know exactly what Assad is thinking, and I can explain it to you right now -- because it's a mistake that educated people make. They think it's more difficult than it is. It is not that hard. The hard thing is figuring out what's actually going on on the ground, who's doing what to whom, and so on. Once you know that, it's very simple -- because they want to win, right? They want to win. They want their friends to win, they want to win, and they want us to lose -- and it's as simple as that. It's not hard.

The tools that they have at their disposal to win -- their thugs, right -- so to use another popular culture reference, all you have to do is watch *the Sopranos*, and then you understand how they're thinking.

Why did they use chemical weapons at Guta? For two reasons.

Number one, they suck. That's a military term, right? You look -- they cannot -- their regular military cannot take and hold territory. It can't. It's shocking, the extent to which they suck as a military.

So, for a year, they have been trying to take this place, and they can't. The YouTube videos are beautiful, by the way, of showing Syrian tanks being blown up in this particular neighborhood by the FSA -- because it's got big boulevards with high-rise buildings around it, and the tanks are just sitting ducks.

They tried, and tried, and tried. They can't do it. It's incredibly strategic territory, because it's the gateway into Damascus, on the one hand, and

it's very close to the airfield where the Iranian support comes in.

So, if they hold onto it, they're threatening the -- this is the battle for Damascus, is what this is, and they have failed the Syrians, and failed in conventional terms. And so they went to unconventional to just clear.

When our military talks about clearing in Afghanistan, and Iraq, and so forth, we mean clearing a population center of fighters protecting the population and so on.

When Assad says clear, he means clear -- just clear the whole population out; it's as simple as that.

Why did he do it while the U.N. inspectors were there? And this is the key to understanding what's going to happen the next day. He did it while the U.N. inspectors were there because he's sending -- he's a thug.

He's sending a very clear message to all the Syrians who might think of one day taking up arms against him: "You do that, I'll wipe you out. I'll wipe your family out. And don't you, for a second, think that the United States, the international community, the U.N., or anybody else is going to help you. I'm going to show you how tough I am. Even while these U.N. inspectors are here, I'm going to gas you." And that was the message.

So, what he'll do to send that same message after we attack -- if it's a one-off attack -- is, he'll go slam the population. He will brutalize his own population, as he has been doing.

They might do some other things externally and so on -- like they have done terror attacks in Turkey, to deter the Turks. They were probably

responsible in some way or another for those rockets that went into Israel and so on. That's to make us fear that there may be some wider World War III or whatever. But, basically, the message is going to be domestically.

And just one last thing -- the Iranians are the same thing. The Iranians -- they created Hezbollah. They're backing Assad. They want Assad to win. They don't want to be too supportive of a guy who's using chemical weapons, because there's all this Sunni hatred out there, so they play -- publicly, they play it this way and that way. On the ground, they're supporting.

And there's one thing -- there's one conversation that never takes place, and I think we should all think about it. The Ayatollah Khamenei sits down with Qasem Soleimani, the head of the Quds Force, the head of the IRGC, and Qasem Soleimani says, "Ayatollah, we can't solve Syria. Look at us. We're a second, third-rate power. The United States is a superpower. It can't solve -- we can't do it. The use of force, it's counterproductive. If we use force in Syria, it's just going to make it all worse, so I think we should just forget about it."

That never happens. That conversation never happens. They sit down, and they say, "How do we strengthen our boy? How do we strengthen our boy against them? How do we cause maximum pain to the Americans?" And that's the way they do it, and that's the way we have to do business, as well.

We don't have to solve Syria. We don't have to. Our interests are, protect our friends, build up our friends, punish our enemies, create a framework that allows other people to get on the ground to do stuff, so that we don't have to do it. That's international politics. We don't have to solve it. We

just have to make our side stronger, and cause them pain.

MR. SHAPIRO: Who is our side?

MR. DORAN: Our side is the Saudis --

MR. SHAPIRO: The Turks.

MR. DORAN: Our side -- oh, that's a great question. The way to figure out who your side is is, who do you want to have the most pain? And that's Iran. We want to make Iran suffer, and we want to make Assad suffer. And then we go down the line, and we say, "Who can we wind up to do that, that isn't going to cause us pain?"

And by the time -- when we get down to some of the al Qaeda elements -- and not all of them, by the way -- then we say, "You're on the other side."

But there's a lot of people out there we can work with.

MR. O'HANLON: Bruce?

MR. RIEDEL: As Jeremy said, where to start?

Let me start with the question that was asked before -- protection of civilians -- which, I'm afraid, we've ignored -- because there is a genuine humanitarian issue here.

You asked, what do the Syrian people want? What the Syrian people want is an end to the civil war. They want to stop being slaughtered. I don't think that they really care whether they're dead from chemicals or conventional weapons. And I think part of the debate in this city has become kind of lost from reality, in that sense.

The best thing is an end to the war. Is a cruise missile strike, as we understand it, being developed by this administration -- which we're told famously there are five destroyers in the Eastern Mediterranean which will fire 250 cruise missiles -- likely to get us there? I don't think anyone on this panel has said that they think that that's likely to get us there.

Is it likely that the Syrian conflict will be worse in six months after that? I think there's a consensus on this panel that the Syrian conflict will be worse in six months. There are no really, really good options here.

Let me turn to the question of allies. I mentioned earlier that, since 1970, the United States has had a hostile relationship with Syria. There's actually two occasions when that was different.

One was in 1990 -- when the Saudis asked us to be the best friend of the Syrians, to fight Saddam Hussein. And for those of you who will remember, the Syrian flag actually came down Pennsylvania Avenue as part of the victory parade. That didn't turn out so well.

The other people who asked us to make whoopee with the Assad regime was the Israeli government -- successive Israeli governments -- governments led by Shimon Peres and Bibi Netanyahu, who said, "We want to make peace with the Assad government. We think the Assad government would be easier to make peace with than the Syrians."

Why do I mention these two points? I wouldn't spend a whole lot of time listening to what the Saudis or the Israelis have to say about this conflict. Their advice on this issue has been taken in the past, and it hasn't proven to be

very good.

Our new friend in the Middle East, the new dictator of Egypt, General Sisi, says, "Don't do it. Stay out. You put your oar in this, you will create a hornet's nest. Don't make it worse."

I don't think I'd take his advice, either. There's no particular reason to believe he's going to be any better at predicting the future of the Middle East than his predecessors.

But my point is, I don't think our allies' advice should be the determining factor in what we do here; it should be our interests. And our interests, as I think you have rightly said, we need to hear from the President, before the Congress votes, on national television, in a national speech, defining what our national interests are, and what is our strategy to get us there -- not a bunch of stuff about a redline, but a strategy for the accomplishment of our national interests, as he defines it, in Syria.

And, frankly, I think the reason why we've had a hard problem up here articulating all that is, we haven't heard it yet from the man who the American people want to hear it from the most.

MR. RIEDEL: Very true.

MR. O'HANLON: I think we will stop there. Thank you all for coming. Thank you, everybody.

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