

## Shatter the Nations: ISIS and the War for the Caliphate

*Featuring Mike Giglio, Brett McGurk, and Bill Roggio. Moderated by Vivian Salama.  
Introductory Remarks by Jonathan Schanzer*

SCHANZER: Good morning my name is Jonathan Schanzer, Senior Vice President here at Foundation for Defense of Democracies. I'm pleased to welcome you to today's event, marking the release of Mike Giglio's book, *Shatter the Nations: ISIS and the War for the Caliphate*. A warm welcome to those who are tuning in via CSPAN or livestream.

Today's program is one of many we host throughout the year. For more information on our work, or our areas of focus, we encourage you to visit FDD.org. There you can find FDD's latest analysis and subscribe to receive information on our latest research, projects and experts. This event is hosted by FDD's Center on Military and Political Power, which seeks to promote understanding of the military and diplomatic strategies, policies and capabilities necessary to defeat threats to the United States and its allies while advancing American influence. Many of our audience members already know that FDD is a nonpartisan policy institute. We take no foreign government funding, or corporate funding, and we never will.

We're glad to be joined today by a distinguished audience of diplomats, representatives from Congress, the Department of State, the Pentagon, active military and experts from the policy community, and of course, the media. We encourage guests both here and online to join us in today's conversation on Twitter, @FDD.

By way of housekeeping, today's event is on the record. It is being live streamed and recorded, so please silence your cell phones now.

On a personal note, I'd like to first congratulate Mike on his terrific new book. For those of you who have not read it, *Shatter the Nations* is a gripping, firsthand account of the rise and fall of ISIS. Mike's writing is crisp, clear and often jarring. During the course of the book, you'll meet the brave fighters who faced ISIS head on. You'll meet the seedy underworld of the ISIS support network. Read to the end, and you'll find yourself grinding your teeth as Mike recounts his brush with an ISIS suicide car bomber, in the battle to reclaim Iraq. For all of you here today, please grab a copy of the book after today's panel, if you have not already done so.

I'd also like to note that while he does not say so explicitly in the book, Mike confirms much of what we have been saying here at FDD, about the government of Turkey. In this book, you'll read about the illicit oil traders, antiquities middlemen, and human traffickers who all help facilitate ISIS activities from Turkish soil. Mike also confirms what we have long known about the 565 mile border between Turkey and Syria. The Erdogan government deliberately allowed that border to remain porous, as thousands of foreign fighters joined the jihad. In short, the Erdogan government in Turkey did not simply exacerbate the crisis in Syria, in some ways it created it. This of course raises troubling questions about the recent decision by President Donald Trump to stand aside and allow for the Turkish military to invade Northern Syria. Here at FDD, our scholars engage in a robust debate about a range of issues. The majority here, although not all of us, but the majority, believe this was a strategic mistake.

Speaking only for myself, I believe the decision was tantamount to a green light for the Turkish military to engage in a harmful and dangerous operation in Northern Syria. It was also an abandonment of our Kurdish partners, and the decision to turn on them is something that other American allies and partners in the Middle East will not soon forget. Of course, it's fair to argue that the decision to partner with the PKK affiliated YPG was a mistake in the first place. Officials from the Obama administration, and I suspect Brett McGurk, who I want to thank for joining us today, would likely push back on this assertion.

This is a debate that I hope we hear more about today. But in the meantime, with reports of war crimes, ceasefire violations, ISIS prison breaks, Israeli jitters, and Assad regime advances, one gets a sense that new dangers lurk. So in addition to addressing the key points in Mike's book today, today's conversation promises to cover a lot of ground.

Moderating today's event is Vivian Salama. Vivian has worked as a foreign correspondent in more than 60 countries with vast experience in the Middle East. She served as AP's Baghdad Bureau Chief from 2014 to 2016, at the height of ISIS' blitzkrieg across Iraq and Syria. In April, she published a children's book, *The Long Journey Home*, about a Syrian boy whose family was forced to flee when the Civil War erupted. She currently covers the White House for *The Wall Street Journal*. Vivian will now introduce the rest of the panel. Vivian, over to you.

SALAMA: Thank you so much. So it's great to be here, including with all these distinguished gentlemen, two of whom I crossed paths with in the Middle East. Mike and I covered the Arab Spring together, and Brett and I met in Iraq and I had the pleasure of meeting Bill today, so. It's going to be a great conversation, for sure.

And we're here, obviously, celebrating Mike's book. But also, in case you haven't heard, it's a bit of a timely discussion. Syria is in the news today. And so, you don't have a better collection of people to talk about it. And you may have noticed I was staring at my phone during the introduction because, my colleague who's literally sitting in the Cabinet Room right now, just alerted, President Trump says he's willing to keep troops in Syria to protect oil. So, you never know what the news is going to bring, of the day.

And obviously, it's a really fast moving story, a lot of moving parts. And so, we really want to ask these gentlemen to take us from the beginning, get a brief background on how we got to this point, and then we can really dissect what's been happening right now. And I'm sure a lot of you are interested in that.

And so, Mike, we're going to start with you. Again, congrats on the book. I'm very happy for you. Maybe just a brief recap of how all the reporters got to Syria in the first place, what had taken place, in the more recent years of the Civil War, with regard to ISIS? And maybe some of our allies, the various allies, that we have there.

GIGLIO: Yeah, so I actually had a big fight with my editor writing the book, because they were saying, "This is a book about ISIS? Start with ISIS." And I insisted on starting with Egypt and the Arab Spring. Because that really is the background for this. I mean, so is the Iraq

War. But if you remember in 2011, when the Arab Spring protests started in Egypt and in Syria, the Obama administration was winding down the U.S. engagement in Iraq, and there were supposed to be, the protests were supposed to be this new way forward for America to engage with the Middle East. And it was, the protesters were chanting American ideals, they were getting political support from the U.S. government, and they were organizing on the tools of the new American capitalism. So Facebook, Google, Twitter, Androids and iPhones.

And there was this moment, that Vivian and I covered when we actually first met, in 2011 in Egypt, that everything felt, the protesters on the street felt connected with American news viewers here, who were not just watching the protests on social media, on TV, but also engaging with them. Liking the tweets, sharing the Facebook posts, and it was, to me, kind of captured this Obama first term mindset. That we can all just kind of sit at our computers and laptops, and "like" our way to a better world. And obviously, that wasn't the case.

And the reason that we all ended up in Syria, to answer the question, is because that's where the Arab Spring dead-ended. And there were years of, I think, failed U.S. policy, to get to the point where in 2014, Syria was the worst version possible of a Civil War. And you had an extremist group, rising up in the chaos, while from a news perspective and I think from a government focused perspective, we all tried to turn away.

And then what happened was, obviously, I'm sure the people in this room all know, the remnants of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, the old U.S. enemy during the Iraq War, had come across the border into Syria, and had used that chaos to sort of reconstitute and gain strength. And then they had this horrible boomerang effect, where they went back across the Iraqi border in 2014, and took the Iraqi city of Mosul, which was a world changing event.

SALAMA: And so, Brett, you were obviously working for the government at the time. How, what was the response and the sense on the ground here, when all of these events were unfolding? And you saw this round of extremism, spilling over the border of Iraq and Syria?

MCGURK: So I kind of got into this phase of it, in 2013, when I was handling the Iraq file. And was deeply concerned by the increasing numbers of assassinations, murders, suicide bombers. Suicide bombers going from like, and that's Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which became, which then kind of migrated to Syria, became ISIS. Five a month or so, to 10 to 20 to 30 to 40 to 50, a month. And when you have that going on, and that was happening in 2013, it just rips apart any fabric of society, particularly a very fragile one.

I was concerned in 2013. We did not have the intelligence overhead. We did not have the information. I mean, I've testified about this in Congress, in the fall. And all these guys, the suicide bombers, most of them, were foreign jihadis who were coming from all around the world, and coming into Syria. And as Jonathan said, they were coming through Turkey.

I spent a lot of time in Turkey in 2013. Look, I love the country of Turkey. It's a great country. Erdogan is the leader of Turkey, but he's not going to be there forever, and I think Turkey has a brighter future. But let me just tell you about these conversations in 2013.

Why was I in Turkey a lot, in 2013? Because, a number of reasons, issues we were working. One of which was, Iraqi oil revenue, particularly from Iraqi Kurdistan, was all going into Halq Bank. And those of you who read Jonathan's reporting, kind of know, why that might be a concern for U.S. officials. So we used to discuss that quite a bit with the Turks. And we also said, "Look man, all these jihadis are coming into Syria, through your country. What are you going to do about this?"

And the answer in 2013 was, "That's the second war. We're going to get rid of Assad, and then we'll get rid of those guys." And our response was, "It sounds to me like you're raising, it's like raising baby crocodiles in your basement. Eventually you're going to have a lot of very big crocodiles." In any event, this kept on going. And Mike documents it in his book, and his book is awesome. And you should all read it. And it accounts for the point that this was a war. This war against ISIS was a vicious brutal street by street war, and nobody should be mistaken by that.

But January 1st, 2014, Fallujah falls to ISIS. Again, just very alarming. And it wasn't really until the fall of Mosul, and I was in Iraq at the time, and again, it was very, it was just the fog of war. Hard to know what was going on.

I was walking into a meeting with President Obama one night, in which I got an urgent call from an Iraqi security official, and a political official, that Baghdad was falling. And it was actually very hard to tell.

So in any event, this thing in the summer of 2014, is where it was decided we have to have a very concerted effort to push back. And that's when we developed the By, With and Through campaign, which I think we'll discuss. But in any event, that was kind of the sweep of it, just starting at where I came into it.

SALAMA: I remember that time when everyone was worried about Iraq falling because, Baghdad falling, because I was in Baghdad getting calls saying, "Baghdad has fallen," from my editors in New York. And I was like, "Actually, I think we're okay for now." But there was the fear, because they were right there on the edge of the city. And so, it was a very dangerous situation. Bill, remind us about how ISIS drew its strength, how it became this powerful so-called caliphate, from just an extremist group.

ROGGIO: Sure. The Islamic State or ISIS, is the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, just didn't emerge in a vacuum. It was the remnants of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, from obviously, the Iraq War. The U.S. conducted the surge, by 2009 it was driven out of territories in central, northern and western Iraq that it controlled. And it was perceived that Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was also called the Islamic State, making it more confusing, was defeated.

But they weren't. They went underground, they husbanded their forces, they gathered, they organized. Tens of thousands of fighters from that conflict escaped the dragnet. And then you had an Iraqi government that was corrupt, that was letting people out of prisons, things of that nature. So, it was feeding from that.

But I remember watching a video in, I want to say it was late 2011, where I saw Al-Qaeda in Iraq organize a large convoy, and take over the town of Haditha, in Anbar province. It's a town between Ramadi and Fallujah. And I remember saying, "This is extremely disturbing. They are preparing these types of operations." And we saw this, happen, three years later. The Islamic state came out of a dispute between Al-Qaeda, between Al-Qaeda central and anyhow, it was just basically a turf war between Baghdadi, the head of, now, the head of the Islamic State and Julani, who was Al-Qaeda's forces in Syria.

The, Al-Qaeda wanted there to be separate entities. One in Iraq, one in Syria. Baghdadi said, "No, we should be fighting together." And the Islamic States, I kind of look at them as, this might be overly simplistic, but they're the hardliners of the jihadists. To them, it's their way or the highway. The Islamic State, if you don't swear fealty to Baghdadi and the Islamic State, then you're an apostate to them. Whereas, Al-Qaeda, they kept this, "Let's work with other groups. Let's try and work with elements of the Syrian insurgency." And they have, it's a more subversive way. They get their hooks in, and then they wind up converting individuals to their cause.

So, but these, at the end of the day, the Islamic State came from the failure to defeat Al-Qaeda in Iraq. When the U.S. withdrew, by December 2011, the Islamic State or Al-Qaeda in Iraq, was already reorganizing and starting to conduct small scale attacks. By 2012, you had assassinations. You had prison breaks, which really helped the group expand and get its experience cadre back in. And then they started, the Syrian Civil War was just a major boon. They were able to organize, with the remainder of their elements that were inside Syria. Because remember, we actually killed, there was one of the few special forces raids, killed a guy named Abu Khadeejah in, I think this was 2007. U.S. conducted a Special Forces raid in Syria. So Al-Qaeda in Iraq didn't just say, "Hey, let's cross the border." They had an active network there, as well. And with the Syrian Civil War breaking out, that really, that was just the match that lit the fire.

And you couple that with the withdrawal, and the U.S. leaving, abandoning – look, you know, there's a lot of talk today that we abandoned the Kurds, which you know, this isn't the first abandonment. When the U.S. withdrew from Iraq, they abandoned Kurdish allies in the north. They've succumbed to the predations of the Iraqi government and the popular mobilization forces, the Iranian backed militias. We abandoned the Awakenings who became, who suffered under the predations of the Iraqi government. So, but we, we lost this intelligence.

SALAMA: But it was a long, it was a slower –

ROGGIO: Sure.

SALAMA: - withdrawal.

ROGGIO: Yeah. It wasn't policy by tweet, you know, with the Trump administration. The Obama administration certainly had more clever and more deliberate withdrawal. But it was a withdrawal and an abandonment, nonetheless. These are allies that we built up, that, they died

by the, we say the Kurds died, 11,000 Kurds died. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis volunteered to fight the Islamic, or Al-Qaeda, in Iraq, and died during these fights.

SALAMA: I want the others to address that point, as well. But before we get into that, maybe Mike, you could talk a little bit about the other parties. We keep on hearing about the Kurds as being our allies on the ground, right now. But obviously, there are a lot of fighting forces that were allied to us in this fight, in both Iraq and Syria. If you can just maybe give us a little bit of a walkthrough of that.

GIGLIO: Yeah. As Jon mentioned in his introduction, one half of the book is really focused on ISIS, and how it worked, and why people joined it and who they were. And how it was able to fund and support itself. But the other part of the book is based on years of doing military embeds with the different forces that ended up coming together as the ground force for the U.S. effort against ISIS.

And so we had the Kurds in Syria. It's important to remember that, they also fight with Arab battalions, as part of this umbrella force called the SDF in Syria. So you know, Turkey has problems specifically with the Kurds, but they, that was a multiethnic force, in the end.

And then in Iraq, we had the Kurdish Peshmerga. I was really alarmed, actually. A tweet that Trump sent, I think last week, showed that he didn't understand the difference between the Peshmerga in northern Iraq and the Kurds in Syria. And it's, I mean, to not understand that nuance. If you're a regular news consumer, fine. But if you're the Commander in Chief, and you're directing the policy, I think that is extremely alarming because it is, the difference is actually vast.

SALAMA: So the tweet that, I assume the tweet that you're talking about was when he made a reference to Iraq going after the Kurds in Syria. Basically, conflating a number of different people, a number of different groups –

GIGLIO: Right.

SALAMA: - and also a number of different incidents.

GIGLIO: But you know, and what was so impressive about, I thought, the end stages of the war against ISIS was, how many different forces had come together. So you had the Kurds in northern Iraq, the Peshmerga. And then you also had the Iraqi military. And in particular, the protagonists of the book really are, Iraqi special operations forces and their elite battalion that was the tip of the spear into Mosul, and elsewhere.

And these are guys that had actually been fighting with the Americans, since 2005. They're the troops that do the raids with U.S. special operations forces, and Special Forces. Or, do the work of rolling up ISIS networks. And so some of the guys that I was in the Humvees with in Mosul had been, it was then 2016, '17, had been fighting alongside the Americans since 2005. So, 12 years, of almost nonstop war.

And I remember, just because I think there's a sense now, like, "It was always going to be a disaster." I mean, it's something that I always kind of feel emanating out of D.C. The Obama administration used this line of reasoning to argue that, they could not have done better in Syria. It was always going to be a mess. And I think people look at the problems with the partnership with the Kurds, in Syria and Turkey, and just sort of say, "It was all going to be a mess, anyway."

I really don't think that's the case. I remember, just like a little anecdote to show how unique it was, what did come together. I was with the Iraqi Special Forces in a convoy, to get to the battle for Mosul, and we passed through a Peshmerga checkpoint. And I got chills down my neck because, to imagine that these two sides, which had been enemies in the past, were somehow cooperating. And they were, the Iraqi troops I was with were trying, they were using very bad Kurdish to greet their Kurdish checkpoint officers. And sort of like, this very warm greeting like, "Welcome to our territory to fight ISIS," was actually, it was actually really, a special moment. And think it's, we should understand that, to grasp the loss of the policy now.

SALAMA: I want Brett to kind of walk us through, and addressing Bill's point about the withdrawal in 2011, versus what we've seen today. Can you take us back to 2011, and how that withdrawal took place? Versus maybe, today, you can kind of get us started on the present? How would you compare, is there a comparison? And if yes or no, can you explain?

MCGURK: ISIS metastasized in Syria, in the cauldron of the Syrian Civil War. And you had people like Yusuf Qardal, he's speaking to 60 million Muslims from, on *Al Jazeera*, once a week saying, "You have a religious duty to pour into Syria." And I think, where Bill and I would agree is, the United States needs to be very careful, Presidents need to be very careful, before they set national security objectives.

And when you say, in 2011, "Assad must go,". That changes everyone's calculation. And it created like a fever in the region, and the amount of foreign jihadis and fighters pouring into Syria. And the amount of weapons, and the amount of money and everything else, led to a lot of this. And I just don't think we can discount that. When that policy was set, the death toll in Syria was less than 2000. Which was tragic, but nothing like what we've seen since. I do not think you can compare, in any way, the Syria withdrawal in 2011 to what we're seeing now.

SALAMA: Okay.

MCGURK: It's just completely different. I was a private citizen. I was brought back late in the summer, to try to salvage an extension of the SOFA. I think we could have done an exchange of notes, which I supported at the time. No major Iraqi political faction would stand up to support our continued presence at the time, and we had a plan for a fairly robust post-withdrawal Iraq policy, which I don't think fully panned out.

But in any event, just getting to where we are now, because I think it's important to put on the table with the time, is how we got involved with the Syrian Kurds. I think Mike documents this, in his book. If anyone here has been involved in raising an army, and raising coalitions to go fight a brutal, nasty war, it's really hard work. And what we wanted to do, Iraq

was one thing. Iraq was a little easier. It was extremely difficult, but we're working with an army, we're working with a government, and we had extensive relationships.

So what we wanted to do in Syria was, take elements of the Syrian opposition, and work with Turkey and others, to build a force that would fight ISIS. And we invested hundreds of millions of dollars, and Mike Nagata was leading this effort, and you would go sit with folks and I sat with them. I've been to Ghazi and Tep and the training centers, and you would hear, "I have 5,000 men and we're ready to fight." Like, "Great, 5,000, get them to our base on this date." And it would turn out, there'd be like 20. This happened over and over again. Or, the forces that we wanted to work with, were so riddled with extremists that our military repeatedly said, "There's no way we can work with these people."

This happened, repeatedly. We delayed the counter ISIS campaign, probably, for over a year. The Raqqa battle, the Mombage battle, because we tried every, I mean, I've been reading a lot about all these roads, and I've traveled, we traveled all these roads. They were roads to nowhere.

So, the way we met the Syrian Kurds was in the battle of Kobani. The entire border to Turkey was controlled by ISIS. If you look at a map, in those days, it's all black. And a little teeny dot, in Kobani. And Kobani is surrounded by, like, thousands of ISIS fighters are about to take the town. If you guys, all remember this, in the fall of 2014. "It's going to fall." Every assessment we had, "It's going to fall." If that town fell, we have no, nothing, no traction in Syria. And I think we would still have a caliphate today.

It was our relationships with the Iraqi Kurds who called us up, and one of them called me up, and called some of our military people up, and said, "Hey, we know some of the fighters who are holding out in Kobani. There's not many of them left. They're surrounded. They're about to get overrun. But we're in touch with them. Would you like to be in touch with them?" So yeah, you're damn right, because we want to try to defeat ISIS. The fighters in Kobani told us, they need an airdrop of some weapons, and they needed some air support. And they still didn't think they could hold out.

But we organized this, through northern Iraq, we did the airdrop of weapons, which had to go all the way to President Obama. And now, what's most interesting about this is, General Allen and I kind of organized the Kobani effort, in Turkey. Because at the time, the broader PKK Turkey conflict was in a, what the Turks called a solution process. It was in a process of talks, and the Turks kind of knew the YPG. Leaders of the YPG, leaders over the political umbrella, the PYD, were in Akre, regularly. I think Mike was in Turkey, in this time.

And we supplied the Kobani battle, through Turkey. So there's a lot of history, here. And even after the Kobani battle lasted four to five months, it was a turning point against ISIS. The death toll for ISIS, I don't want to get into, but it was devastating in that battle. I went into Kobani, sometime after the battle. But even then we said, "Okay, you guys stay in Kobani. We're going to work, try to work with the Syrian opposition." And it just didn't work.

SALAMA: How did you all distinguish between the Kurdish groups? Because you have the Turks saying, "These guys are all bad news. They don't really – “

MCGURK: Well, they didn't say that in the beginning. That's just, this is the fact of the matter.

SALAMA: Yeah

MCGURK: There was an election in Turkey in 2015, in which the largely Kurdish, but it's an umbrella party, the HDP, did better than Erdogan expected and he canceled those elections. And the PKK Turkey Wars flared up again, in the summer of 2015. That's when this got very complicated. Much of this has to do with Erdogan's domestic politics. And what we did with Turkey was we will do everything as a NATO ally to protect your border. We will do everything with you to protect your border. We can do joint operations. We can do all sorts of things and protect your border. Let me just give one more anecdote because after the battle of Kobane, there's a town just to the east, which is called Tell Abiad, which the Turks are now attacking. These are towns nobody has heard of. This town was the main supply route for ISIS. It's on a highway that goes right to Raqqa. Flatbed trucks, fighters, weapons, munitions, the border was wide open and Mike documents this. He was there. That border crossing had to be shut if we were going to defeat ISIS. We went to Turkey a number of times.

Myself, General Allen, President Obama at Erdogan, multiple levels of the U.S. Government. You guys have to take care of this border crossing. Month after month after month and nothing was done. Erdogan said, "Well, we actually, we can't." I mean, I remember, "You have the Mexican border, you can't fully control it. We just can't control this border." So we built a coalition of Syrian Arabs and Kurds to take the border crossing of Tilapia, and it was a significant stepping stone to defeating the Islamic Caliphate as soon as what became the SDF took Tell Abiad the Turk sealed the border with a wall. So there's a lot of history here that I think has to be gotten right. We would not have defeated ISIS had we not taken these steps. And even after that we told these guys stay there, we're going to work with the FSA and try to go that route. And simply there was no traction. There was nothing there to work with.

SALAMA: Guys jump in. I see Mike wants to say something. So –

GIGLIO: I just, you know, you asked the distinction between the Kurds.

SALAMA: Right.

GIGLIO: The, the Kurds in Syria are diverse, but the Kurdish political party and militia that controls the areas that the U.S. was working in Syria are a branch of the PKK in Turkey. The PKK in Turkey is a separatist group that's labeled a terrorist organization by the United States government and by Turkey. And they've had an on and off insurgency in Southeastern Turkey since the 1980s, which is rooted in the fact that the Kurds in Turkey, like in Syria, like in Iraq, like in Iran, have been historically repressed. So that's the root of all this that the U.S. has to deal with when they start working in the region. I actually met the YPG, the Kurdish militants, in

Syria in late 2013. This is before anybody was fighting ISIS except them. I got a call – The civil war is fading from the headlines in the U.S., in Syria, and the Arab Spring is dead.

We had just had the Rabaa massacre in Cairo and the counterrevolution and Asaad had just launched his first known chemical weapons attack and Obama had refused to enforce the red line he had laid out. So in this sort of period, the Kurds started fighting an extremist group that would eventually call itself ISIS. So they were already fighting ISIS by the time the U.S. got interested. This is before Mosul. But when I went out to meet them, it was clear that they are both a PKK franchise and something distinct. So every time you go into a YPG headquarters, you see a larger than life size photo of Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the PKK, who's in island prison off the coast of Turkey. I asked once one of the founding members of the YPG. I told them every time I go to Washington, I get the question, "What is the relation between the YPG and the PKK?"

What should I tell the next senator who asked me that? And he said, "Well, for example, I spent 15 years on Qandil Mountain in Iraq," which is the, where the PKK leadership is based, "and when the war in Syria started, I came to Syria and I started the YPG." Like simple thing for him. But at the same time the YPG was bringing – During that same trip, I met rank and file members of the YPG and some of them were just farmers who literally have been like enlisted a month or two previously. Had never held a weapon before. You had this kind of difficult relationship with Turkey from the beginning, but also the fact that it wasn't exactly the PKK either, and that's the contradiction in the policy that that was tough to iron out.

And just to kind of add to Brett's point about Turkey, I think so much of what I'm seeing now in the debate about what's happening in Trump's move is that this conflict between the Turks and the YPG, because of these PKK connections was inevitable. And it is really important to remember that until the 2015 election, June 2015 – I mean I lived in Istanbul for five years. This election is obscure here. It was a turning point for me, for all the Turks that I know. It is the moment that Turkey began it's really quick slide to autocracy. And what happened was that Erdogan and the AKP government had been in talks with the PKK.

There was an opening with the Kurdish population in Turkey and they were, as Brett mentioned, hosting YPG leadership to discuss maybe they could be some sort of alliance or understanding in Syria, even. The Kurdish led political party in Turkey, won more than Erdogan expected in that election, and they denied him an absolute majority, and he saw this in his way of seeing the world as some sort of offense or grave insult. And also from a political calculus, he understood that if they continue to get that share votes in elections that he's going to be in big trouble, because he does not command a majority of the population in Turkey. He's never gotten, I don't think in parliamentary elections, more than 50% of the vote or not in recent years anyway.

And so that was one of the launch pads for Turkey. All of a sudden restarting the war in Southeastern Turkey with the PKK and then these relationships with the YPG just deteriorating. So I just think we should keep in mind that so much of this is rooted in Turkey's own slide to dictatorship, and that there was a point where Erdogan was willing to work with these groups and there could have been, I think with more U.S. effort from the top level, a way for Turkey to work with them again. I mean – the Erdogan government shot down a Russian fighter jet, I think

in 2015 or '16, now they're seen as allies. They do have the ability to come to terms with groups that they've been opposed to before.

ROGGIO: And that last point, that's what I think we didn't calculate. We look at 2015 and say – well prior to 2000, "Well the Turks are working with them or they're talking to them now." There was no settlement. So there was really no preparation that this could change on a dime. We have to remember that the PKK, its own radical Marxist group. A friend of mine basically compares them to Malice. They press women and children into military service. We are not talking about the Iraqi Kurds here, the KTP and PUK, the Kurds that are our real allies. We're talking about a different – And I'd also add one thing, not every German soldier was a Nazi yet they fought for the German government.

So we have to keep that – Individual soldiers and their stories when they're fighting for a group that's pushing an ideology, we have to keep that in context as well.

SALAMA: Do you think our alliance with these groups, I mean, Mike please jump in, but do think that our alliance somehow upset the chemistry of – Because you're saying that Turkey obviously views the PKK – They see them as an existential threat to their country. So –

ROGGIO: I mean, they had –

SALAMA: - did it somehow disrupt the chemistry of the region?

ROGGIO: Yeah, I think so. And I think that, again, that we had to make that calculation that nothing was settled, so they could always turn. And at some point, I do think that Turkey started looking at the U.S. alliance with the YPG slash PKK as a threat to it.

I mean we've seen relations between the U.S. and Turkey deteriorate over the last several years and it's become more of a rivalry than in NATO partnership at this point. And I think that Erdogan and his cadre are – Definitely view the U.S. arming and support and political recognition of the YPG as a distinct threat to its national interests.

SALAMA: Why don't you both comment, because I want to get to the present too, but you both have –

GIGLIO: I just had a quick point to make. You made the Nazi comparison, to say anyone fighting for the YPG is basically fighting for the PKK cause. I would just point out that the – I really want to clear – while it is a franchise of the PKK in Syria, they do have different aims and so someone fighting for the YPG in Syria is fighting to – Was initially to get ISIS out of their territory and now he's trying to find some level of autonomy.

That was the mission after that. They're not exactly fighting the PKK's war in Turkey, although there is some crosspollination obviously between the groups as I mentioned.

ROGGIO: And to respond to that. Yeah. Absolutely. I mean, and I think one of our mistakes was is that we made no effort or none that was visible to get the YPG to denounce

Akalan to reject the Markus ideology, to become palatable to the Turkish government. I think there are, like you said, there's individuals that aren't just – They're not, obviously, all of its fighters just aren't rabid PKK followers. But when its leadership is and when they push them in that direction, you also have to remember when someone joins a military, we saw this with Al-Qaeda in Iraq was very adept at doing this. The Taliban is adept. Once you get people in your ranks, they work hard at the indoctrination. So that farmer who comes in today may just be fighting for freedom and autonomy and to get rid of the Islamic state. But they're also sitting there listening to the sermons, or whatever you want to call it, to the indoctrination by the PKK handlers as well.

MCGURK: So this force this year grew to 60,000 Syrians. That doesn't just happen. If these are just a bunch of radical Maoist people, that wouldn't just happen. We've had multiple U.S. personnel rotate through Syria. They all come out with the same story. And even the distinction was drawn by a senior Turkish official who started this because they're Syrian. They're Syrian. When the major Turkey PKK conflict was going on in Southeast Syria, the YPG kept fighting ISIS going south. They weren't crossing the border and for over four years. So the facts really matter here. We've had no cross border attacks. We've had no evidence at all of any weapons provided to these guys making their way into Syria. In fact, we didn't really provide them any weapons until the Trump administration came in – And let me just one thing. When we had a transition to the Trump administration. When the Trump administration came in – we actually a very professional transition. I met with Mike Flynn before the inauguration.

We laid everything out. We were about 30 kilometers north of Raqqa. A big question was, "How are we going to do Raqqa?" And we paused and President Obama passed that decision over to Trump, because there were three ways to do, or four ways to do it. You could let the Russians do it. We could do it on our own, which is going to be very costly. We could arm the YPG a decision that had not been made yet. Or we could develop a plan with Turkey, which had been developed in the Obama administration, which would have required tens of thousands of American troops and a hodgepodge of opposition groups and Turkish military. And so we looked at that whole thing, and we paused for almost four and a half months and did a massive strategic review. And we sent our best military planners to Turkey to plan the operation with the Turks. And literally every stone was unturned.

At one point a very senior U.S. military official went to a parade ground. We were going to see the Turkish opposition force that was going to work with us to take Raqqa and nobody was there, because the cleric that these guys answered to had determined the night before, don't work with the Americans. And our military people did not want to embed with many of the groups that Turkey wanted us to work with. So in May the question went to President Trump, and I was with Mattis in Oslo. "Oh we got to take Raqqa." And we had to take Raqqa, because the threats coming out of Syria at that time against us were like super blinking red light. And the options were Mr. President, you can let the Russians take it. We can arm the YPG and have the SDF do it, which would require very few additional U.S. forces or we have a plan that –

SALAMA: Potentially irritate Turkey?

MCGURK: Yes. Obviously some tension with Turkey, or we have a plan developed with Turkey, which will require about 15,000 American troops, maybe more. And the President made that decision in about two seconds. So again, this has been looked at repeatedly, and in terms of diversifying the force, diversifying the political structures, everything else, I think an awful lot of that was tried. The resources were very meager, particularly under President Trump. We put a full-time ambassador on the ground and we did everything with Turkey to make sure their border was protected.

SALAMA: So that's a perfect setup for kind of getting to the present. Obviously, President Trump campaigned on the fact that he was going to withdraw U.S. troops, not just from Syria, but all the wars. He says he doesn't like endless wars. Those of you just tuning into Syria news may not realize that it's a withdrawal 2.0 at this point, because he tried in December. That's when Defense Secretary Mattis resigned. Brett followed him out, because they did not agree with the decision that was walked back pretty quickly. And now we're doing it again. And so I want to hear from all of you about just the events of the last two weeks. How has this played out? And where do you see this going? We only have five minutes, so I'm hoping that we just go around before we take questions, of course. I'm sure all of you can also, jump in because we're going to be talking about this a lot I'm sure in the Q&A. So if each of you can maybe give us a two-minute answer on how you see this playing out.

Bill do you want to start?

ROGGIO: Yeah, that's a great question. I wish I had the answer to that.

SALAMA: I wish we had more time.

ROGGIO: I mean we're dealing with a president who does policy by Twitter and he's very mercurial. He seems to make decisions on a whim or a phone call with a foreign leader. Now I'm hearing they might keep some U.S. forces in Al-Tanf. They're going to launch operations from Iraq, but that all could change tomorrow. He could pull troops out of Iraq within the next 66 months. I can't predict where U.S. policy in Iraq and in Syria is going to go forward or Afghanistan or any other place. I mean it's a very tumultuous time for foreign policy. I can't imagine what it's like for someone like you working in the White House or working as a reporter at the White House. I do think that Trump is – He campaigned on withdrawing troops from U.S. troops from Afghanistan and from Syria?

And now he's taken on the mantra of end the endless wars, which was years ago far leftist or it was a statement made by Obama administration officials. So we're looking – I think he's true to that. I think he wants to withdraw. I think he's doing it ineptly. He's encountering a lot of opposition within his own administration. They don't want to carry out the policies that he's trying to lay forward, but he is the President of the United States, and he has the ultimate say in what's going to happen. So I suspect we're going to see – I think this is just the beginning.

SALAMA: Mike. How do you see this playing out?

GIGLIO: I would just point out, I don't think anybody...

SALAMA: Is his mic working?

GIGLIO: Can you guys hear me? No?

SALAMA: Yeah. Why don't you –

GIGLIO: Bring out my Long Island Italian and just yell at you guys. I don't think anybody thought that U.S. troops should remain indefinitely in Syria. Okay. But I do think there was a sense that they need to remain long enough to stabilize parts of Iraq and Syria where ISIS had been strong. I reported about a year ago, and it's continued that ISIS is launching insurgent-style attacks across even Northern Iraq right now. They're assassinating local leaders. The same kind of stuff that Brett mentioned earlier, that preface the ISIS rise in the first place in 2014. It's the same situation in Syria. The New York Times had a report this summer that said there are still 18,000 ISIS fighters across here in Iraq.

They were very at home as an underground insurgency. So the U.S. presence in Syria was designed to roll up ISIS networks to the extent possible, and most importantly to train local forces and reconstitute them after the losses of 10,000 they say in the war against ISIS to be able to do that job themselves in the long-term. As I understand it, U.S. special operations forces and Green Berets were in an effort with YPG counter terrorism units to train them to do this on their own one day. So just pulling the plug on all of that before it has the chance to succeed I think I think is the big mistake here.

Not planning at all for the withdrawal to the point where you see U.S. troops retreating in Turkish back forces reportedly by the New York Times firing on them as a retreat. Which I had to read that three times to make sure I was reading it right – It's just the picture of chaos. And so rather than this, sort of, near term, the near to midterm plan of stabilizing these areas and these forces so that ISIS does not resurge, we're seeing actually a really chaotic worst case scenario, withdrawal and chaos.

SALAMA: Brett.

MCGURK: But I've been pretty public about this. Late last year we had a forced posture that was not just arbitrary, it was specifically designed to make sure we had the perimeter controlled of this area with intelligence networks. It was pretty stable, pretty secure. We used to go in there all the time. When you announced to the world you're going to leave. That changes everybody's calculation. Putin knows you want out, Erdogan knows you want out, everybody knows you want out, and you cut the force by 50%. It limits what we can do. And when you basically give a green light, and I'm sorry I can't read that Sunday night statement any which way. And I think if you go through the history, that's exactly what happened. We pulled off the border and you just do a net assessment. Who are in the ranks of the Turkish-backed opposition forces? We know these guys and we knew this would be very bad.

And the whole pressure now on the Northeast in the SDF, which are Arabs, Kurds and a whole mix is coming under tremendous pressure. We've already given up all these positions on the perimeter and I just, I frankly find it troubling when President Trump – I didn't see this if he

said that we're going to stay for the oil. You just don't talk like that. A president shouldn't talk like that. I'm sorry. And I worked this issue with Secretary Tillerson, who knows something about oil and it's really not possible for us to exploit those oil resources unless we want to be oil smugglers. And that's not something United States of America I think is into. So I'm not sure what he has in mind. I think, again, I've seen this movie before, it's like the second version of the movie. It's worse than the first. We're not going to keep a small presence somewhere, but we've already abandoned most of our positions.

We've given them to the Russians, we're bombing them as we leave and the population – this is a key thing – so different than the Iraq war. This population – It's not just the Kurds is the Arabs across all of Northeast Syria. It was the most permissive post-war environment I have ever seen, and our Special Forces and military guys who've seen post-war environment all over the world said that repeatedly. I've never seen a more permissive environment than this. City after city, town after town, huge cities, Tabqah, Manbij, Raqqa. Thousands of people all supported our presence. That's why we're able to work in that environment and keep a very light footprint, and now we're leaving and tomatoes are being thrown at our vehicles with an American flag on it. So I think it is a shameful, I think it's going to get worse. And finally, I know I'm over time, but the op that I wrote after I resigned, I said, "We have to accept some very hard truths here."

Number one, Trump wants out of Syria. If we don't accept that and figure out the geometry immediately, we are going to find ourselves in the worst position. Second, the Turkish backed-opposition forces and there is a lot of patriotic Syrians in that opposition that I know. But in terms of fighting forces and the ranks in which the Turks want to use, they are not partners in the United States of America. I think you can now see that on TV. Third, the SDF has to remain intact, otherwise it all unravels and opens the vacuum in which ISIS will reconstitute. So I think we're now seeing that. I know Epser and everybody is scrambling to try to figure something out. I have great respect for the diplomats and military officials trying to figure out this maelstrom, but it is a concerning and I think is going to get worse.

SALAMA: Lots of food for thought. I have a million more questions, but I will share that love and invite you all to ask your questions if you'd just raise your hands. We have people going around with the mics and – okay. Sir. I think they're – Oh, they're going around in the back. Not sure.

PETTI: Hi.

SALAMA: Hi. Can you introduce yourself and then ask your question?

PETTI: I'm Matthew Petty, a reporter at the National Interest. Last week at SETA, which is this think tank that's kind of associated with Turkey's ruling party. Mike Duran was talking about how the U.S. used to support Turkey against the PKK. How U.S., Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Turkey are kind of a natural alliance, and saying that now we're returning to the natural pattern of things. Now it does seem that's very different now from the Cold War, but would any of you want to elaborate or respond to his claims?

MCGURK: Yeah, so I debated Mike on this in Intelligence Squared in New York. You can watch it. Mike's an old Bush White House colleague of mine. I spent a lot of time in the Middle East the last decade and the idea of an Israel, Turkey, Saudi alliance I think is very farfetched. If you talk to the Israelis about Erdogan, if you talk to the Saudis about Erdogan, that would be a very, that's like a real square peg round hole problem. I just don't think that's realistic. I think we'll leave it there if you guys want to add –

GIGLIO: Concur.

SALAMA: Okay. Next question. Yes ma'am.

LOPEZ: Hi, I am Claire Lopez with the Center for Security Policy. We've all heard President Erdogan talking, declaring over the last several years, his intent to reconquer lands of the Ottoman Empire. Where would you all expect to see him turn next?

SALAMA: Do any of you think that Erdogan has his sights set anywhere else besides Northeastern Syria?

MCGURK: I don't want to hog the stage, but look what he's doing in the Eastern Mediterranean. Look at the maps of Syria that he showed to the UN in September and those are the maps he showed for some time. In the Mosul Battle, he insisted on being part of the Mosul Battle. It would have upended the entire battle. Mike was on the ground, knows how complicated this military operation was. We haven't seen anything like it really since the Vietnam War or World War II. We had to put U.S. Forces on a road to make sure Turkey would not come in and upend the battle. But he put a military base in, Bashiqa just north of Mosul, because his national security zone, in his mind, goes from Aleppo to Mosul. And so this is not just about the YPG. I think we have to have our eyes wide open here, and I'm not to dismiss their concerns. Again, we've got to help protect their border and everything else, but this is not just about the YPG in Syria.

GIGLIO: I would just add – When he says reconquer, I would look at that more, where can he influence? So where can he have proxies, where can he have a say without having to say – I don't think you're going to see a Putin-style annexation of territory or anything like that. I think it's more where can you expand, as Brett put it, his sphere of influence in these countries.

SALAMA: Okay.

LAWLER: Hi, Dave Lawler from *Axios*. This is a question for Brett. Having worked with President Trump on this issue, on the ISIS file. I'm wondering whether beyond defeat the caliphate and get out Trump had any other priorities. Was oil something that was raised? Was he worried about the future of Syria who was going to control territory? Did you worry about upsetting Erdogan? What else did you worry about beyond those two things that he talks about a lot? Thanks.

MCGURK: It's a great question and I used to obviously debate this when I was in the administration, because we have a very maximal Syria policy. We announced last summer, late

last summer we going to stay in Syria until Iran is out of Syria. That's a long time. We're going to stay in Syria until the Geneva process concludes. That took a really long time and we're going to stay in Syria until the enduring defeat of ISIS, which I think is a very critical, vital interest. I've never heard Donald Trump say anything like that. In fact, he basically says the Russians, everyone else can do whatever they want. And when you have declared U.S. objectives that are never articulated by the president, you have, again, an ends ways means mismatch. The ends and means being the objective and then your resources. And your resources, your means are not just your military resources, your soldiers.

It is the political will of the American people and the intent of the president. And if the president isn't fully bought into a policy, particularly comes to war and peace for the Americans in harm's way. When you have a crisis, he's not going to really have anyone's back. And so that's now happened twice on Syria in the last year. And I think it's a very serious problem. So I have never heard him articulate maximal Syria objectives. He talked about defeating the ISIS caliphate. He takes credit for it. But beyond that, I really don't think he has much of a significant concern. The oil thing is a complex matter. And again, I worked on this with Tillerson. I think he discussed it with the President about the problems that arise if we think we can exploit those resources.

SALAMA: Anyone else?

ROGOVIN: Jarrow Rogovin, Los Angeles FDD supporter. While the oil in Syria has to be kept from ISIS using it to finance itself. The optics of keeping U.S. troops to guard it in the circumstances of abandonment does incite cynicism. Brett seems to have described the sad irony of the death of the beginning of an American troop birthed New Arab Spring. Two questions. How much should Erdoğan's well known race hatred of the Kurds inform the reliability of his statements of intention? And second, please comment on that abandoning the Kurdish YPG pushes them into reconsolidation with the PKK, losing the opportunity for alignment with the U.S. to influence the political change of the YPG.

SALAMA: Okay. So yeah, so I guess is the YPG under pressure that it needs that these groups need to merge, I guess? And are they coming under further pressure? What's the future with them and Erdoğan? Is there any hope of things settling down?

ROGGIO: I think that the YPG likes things just fine as is. They get the plausible deniability while being a faction of the PKK, is not directly listed as part of the PKK. Because again that would put them under sanctions, because the PKK is listed as a foreign terrorist organization. And that would prohibit any support from the United States. So I wouldn't see them conducting a merger with the PKK. And I'll leave the first question to my colleagues.

SALAMA: Just in terms of the pressure that the Kurds in Northeastern Syria are coming under Erdoğan, is there any hope of any kind of settlement between them?

GIGLIO: I mean, great questions. I would just note, I think the real scenario right now that we're watching is, will the YPG go to the side, not emerging with the PKK but of Assad and by extension, Russia and Iran? And then what happens when you have this force that has worked

so closely with U.S. military, including our most sensitive intelligence special operations, all of a sudden having to cooperate with the regime and its Russian and Iranian allies, and maybe even being at their mercy? I think that's a really interesting question to ask right now as well. And also I do think if that were to happen, so if the Assad government is to retake control of these areas, what you would certainly see is senior YPG members who are PKK historically maybe returning back to Turkey or to Iraq, because I think that they just from a survival standpoint may fear that there'll be the subject of crackdowns otherwise.

SALAMA: Is an Assad alliance a legitimate alliance for the Kurds?

ROGGIO: Yeah. The –

SALAMA: I mean, that's what they've done.

ROGGIO: The YPG in Hasakah, and the town of Hasakah, the City of Hasakah. The reason that the Syrian government is able to hold out there is because they work with the YPG there. So there's already established alliances.

GIGGLIO: They've had an understanding and a détente since the beginning of the civil war. And so there are channels. And it's interesting to note that we're all, from an analysis perspective, kind of sitting here and saying, "Well, that actually might be the best case scenario now given the chaos," is that they do get folded back into the Syrian government. Because that seems to have the most potential to spare these areas from Turkish bombardment. But with that then comes the return of the state, which as we know where the Syrian government has returned elsewhere in Syria, we've seen the same sort of tactics that started the Arab Spring in the first place there. Which is a repression, mass arrests, torture, harassment by security forces, and people who have been in these places throughout the war and also any refugees who have come home.

MCGURK: Just real quick. Great question. It's in the hands of Vladimir Putin. Because you just take the town of Kobane. About 50,000 people there. If the Turks are going to Kobane, we're going to have an epic humanitarian catastrophe. We are now out of those areas. We've made clear we're going to have nothing to do with the safe zone. The so-called safe zone. And Erdoğan is meeting Putin tomorrow. And so this is where it gets very complicated, because now that we've apparently announced that we're going to hold onto oil fields, I think the Russians might very well say to the Kurds, "We're not going to stop the Turks from coming to Kobane unless the Americans leave." So I just know how the Russians play this. I did a channel with Russia for some time. And I think this can be pretty nasty. But Kobane, if the Turks are going to go to Kobane, we're going to see a real nightmare. And it's in the hands of the Russians, unfortunately. We are not really at the table anymore.

SALAMA: We have time for a couple more questions.

MEIER: Hi there. Lauren Meyer with *Washington Times*. Brett, you mentioned several times that this situation is going to get much worse. Can you elaborate on that prediction a bit more? And for the panel, what is the more imminent threat to Israel that this situation poses?

MCGURK: Well, it's been two weeks and we have about 200,000 displaced people. You have ISIS escaping from prison. I think the ability of the United States to hold the SDF intact, which is critical to mitigating the risk of an ISIS resurgence, is draining by the day. And I just mentioned Kobane and these other areas, which will be a deal between Turkey and Russia that we don't have any insights into. And the pressure will also come on Iraq. Let me just say this, I was just in the Middle-East, I think Iraq is going to come under tremendous pressure. We have protest coming up again in a week. The Iranians are facing another nuclear deadline. I mean, this can spiral into a broader regional conflict. Because the Iranians, while under tremendous pressure, and that's good. I also think they feel an edge on the United States right now as the world sees Americans basically ushered out of Syria. So I think, look for Iran to try to poke a little bit. That's expected in the region. And then how we respond will be an open question. So –

SALAMA: We're staying in Al-Tanf. Does that ease the concerns of Israel?

MCGURK: I don't think Al-Tanf makes a big difference. And there's a road there. And the Iranians go around it. So we got to be realistic about the situation, I think.

RAVIV: Dan Raviv of *i24 News*. Especially for you, Mr. McGurk, having served both President Obama and President Trump on this subject, if the U.S. got involved in Syria, largely because ISIS was a danger here in America, inspiring terrorism, maybe plotting terrorism. Do you think there's still awareness of that? That ISIS rising again endangers us here?

MCGURK: It's a great question. I think we have short-term memories. And so the fact that ISIS's caliphate defeated, I think we forget about what was happening. That's why everybody should read Mike's book. Mike's scenes of the number of foreign terrorist fighters afloat into this area, but also the scenes in Sinjar and the Yazidis, and the enslavement of women, and the massacre of men by the thousands. What this organization was doing is just totally beyond the pale. And something that American interest and values, I think obligated us to respond to. So it's a great question. And I think the threats at this stage, there's a very high risk that they'll re-emerge.

GIGLIO: I would just add to that, while we're considering the politics here, we should remember that Trump during his election campaign fear mongered about ISIS and refugees, and Muslims. And really played off the fears of terrorist attacks as part of his political campaign. And it played some role in him getting elected. So the idea that Trump now is declaring that ISIS is no longer a threat, contrary to the opinion of, I think most experts. I think we should just see that in the context of what he was saying in 2015 and 2016, and how he ended up coming to office in the first place.

SALAMA: I think we have time for one - we're a little over actually, but one last question right here from actually my colleague, Michael Gordon. Hi, Michael.

GORDON: Hi, Vivian. For Brett, and I'll keep it concise. You're clearly skeptical of the idea of developing and exporting the oil under the Syrian Kurdish control at this point. And President Trump has talked about bringing in an American company to do this. And presumably the concept is to export it to the KRG, because there's nowhere else it can go. You said you

looked at this with Secretary Tillerson. What are the legal impediments and challenges to doing this? What are the technical obstacles in doing this? Why do you think this is not a feasible approach?

MCGURK: So again, I was working this with Tillerson. I'll let him speak to it again. He knows something about this subject. I think his phrase was, I don't want to quote him but, "That's not how oil works." And the oil is owned – like it or not, is owned by the Syrian state. That doesn't mean the SDF can't help exploit it and make some revenue off of it, but that's smuggling. We did look at the only way to possibly do this legally would be an escrow arrangement through the Russians that would kind of loop in the Syrian government, in which you would put the resources in some sort of escrow for ultimate development once the civil war concluded.

That was possible. The Russians weren't really open to that. And I think they would be even less so now. But I again, maybe their new lawyers ... But it was just illegal for an American company to go and seize, and exploit these assets. So again, this is the problem of not having a national security process. If you have a process before Presidents say things, you would have some deliberation. We don't want that oil to get in the hands of terrorists and other actors. But to say an American company is going to go in and exploit it that raises very serious legal implications. And I would just add, Michael, you've been to Syria a number of times. I went in with you. We've already given up almost the entire perimeter of Northeast Syria. We're not going to hold up or hole up in Fort Apache with a couple 100 Americans.

Let's not exaggerate that that gives us any influence over the course of events in Syria. That influence has evaporated from the moment Trump said, "Leave in December. To cutting the force in half. And now to cutting the force by another," whatever it is. So this is all just, I said earlier on, on a television show, this is not deliberate policy. These are spasms. And I don't think they have seriously considered the implications of this. And as we are leaving Syria and giving up all this space, and giving up all this territory to announce that we're just going to stay in an oil field raises all sorts of implications. And I think people in the region will read it. So again, don't want these resources to get in the hands of terrorists and others. But maybe Trump should have thought about this before he basically made a decision that unraveled the tapestry that had been working pretty well starting last year.

SALAMA: I'm actually informed that we have a little bit more time. So there are more questions to take. Yes?

SHIRWANI: My question – Sorry.

SALAMA: Hi.

SHIRWANI: My name is –

SALAMA: Introduce yourself.

SHIRWANI: My name is Dasko Shirwani – I'm sorry?

SALAMA: What's your name?

SHIRWANI: My name is Dasko Shirwani. And my question for Mr. Brett. In 2017 you campaigned every way against the KRG to hold a referendum. And then you indirectly ally with Qassem Soleimani to recapture Kirkuk. And you denied it until Pompeo come out and said, "Yeah, we now – Qaassem Soleimani was in Kirkuk." So what made you change right now to Donald Trump, President Donald Trump? And one more thing, you know what's bothered me since then? The night before October 16, 2017. You said you're going to watch the Iraqi tank to roll in Kirkuk and eating popcorn. And that was bad. You see it?

MCGURK: I said that? I never said such a thing. I'm sorry. Well, let me thank you very much for your question. And you're talking about the referendum in October of 2017. So as someone who has worked with the Kurds for almost a couple of decades now. And –

SALAMA: To be clear, the referendum in Iraq.

MCGURK: Yeah.

SALAMA: Yes. Yeah.

MCGURK: In Iraq. And very much understand the Kurdish struggle in all the different Kurdish parties. In the lead up to that referendum, first it was U.S. policy, a considered policy that the referendum at that time would be a bad idea. And let me just explain as it is important. All of our information was that if the Kurdistan region went forward to that referendum, the consequences would be quite serious. The reaction from Turkey, the reaction from Iran, the reaction from the Arabs and the reaction from the Iraqi government. And our ability to manage all of that in the maelstrom in the aftermath would be very limited.

And finally, as President Trump has just said, so I don't have to – I'm not disclosing anything. He was quite clear he's not going to do anything about it. So in the conversations I had with many Kurdish officials at the time, and I think they would confirm this, while we recognize the grievances and the aspirations. If you go forward with the referendum, the potential blow back is going to be so severe. And the United States government under President Trump is not going to come in to save the day. That was the concern.

And if anything, I think history and what we're seeing right now, I think demonstrated that that was right. Look, back in those days – This is the thing about President Trump. He's like an empty vessel that everybody puts their hopes and aspirations in. And they end up being very disappointed. But there was a view back then that Trump will come in and save the day no matter what happens. And that was a misplaced hope. So I think if you talked to the Kurdish officials during that very difficult time, and I happened to have that very difficult file at that time. I was representing U.S. policy. I was also very honest about the risks and consequences and that the United States of America would be highly unlikely under President Trump to come save the day.

ROGGIO: If I may – Again, that's the United States it routinely abandons its allies. And I would argue that we abandoned the Iraqi Kurds during the withdrawal. And look, the *New York Times* reported that President Trump had zero interest in keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Or I'm sorry, in Iraq. And back in 2011 with that withdraw. There was very little effort. And that was the point where we abandoned them, because we lost our influence inside of Iraq. We lost the influence with the Iraqi government. We couldn't mitigate those issues. And then you had the rise of ISIS. Then you had the rise of the Iraqi populate mobilization forces who coincidentally went in to Kirkuk and served as the spearhead to suppress the Kurdish forces there. So again, these problems just didn't start when – and I don't want to defend President Trump's decision. He is very rash in how he makes them. And ultimately they have very bad results. But we're looking at a decade of bad policy here. This didn't just occur in effect.

SALAMA: Bill, did you think that any of that also had to do with who was running Iraq at the time? I mean, you had Maliki who was running the country at the time. And he – There was no love lost.

ROGGIO: No, there wasn't, but there was very little political push to actually come to some type of agreement to keep a small U.S. force. Which ironically, the Obama Administration wound up putting back into Iraq with the Islamic State. That's exactly what they wanted to keep in there. Several – That's what the U.S. military wanted to keep in there was there was several 1000, with around eight to 10,000 troops to be able to combat the Islamic State, to train the Iraqi forces, to provide surveillance, intelligence, things of that nature.

SALAMA: I think we have time for – I keep on saying this, you guys are not going to believe me anymore. We had a little bit of time.

ROGGIO: "One more. One more."

GUTMAN: All right. Yes. Roy Gutman for Mike. First, congratulations on the book, which is terrific. Secondly, can you discuss Turkey's role in ISIS's rise of obviously they turned a blind eye to volunteers coming in. But did they knowingly allow Jihadists to go into Turkey, into a Syria in your mind. You mentioned the antiquities, you mentioned the oil. Did the Turks also allow arms to go in from Turkey? Did they supply arms? There were all those accusations are out there. Thank you.

GIGLIO: Yeah. Thanks, Roy. Actually this also gives me a chance to address something John said in his opening remarks, that Turkey deliberately helped ISIS. I don't know that I would ever use that word, because I don't know that you can say it clearly. I think there's two points to this. There's before Mosul and after. So before Mosul, as Brett explained, it really was open season for people to come from Europe and all over the world, use the Turkish border, and enter Syria. And it sounds like Turkish officials were frank with American officials about, "Yes, we're letting this happen. Because first, the fight is against Assad. Then it's against these extremists."

After 2014 when ISIS took Mosul, they also kidnapped a bunch of Turkish diplomatic staff in the city. Then Turkey realized ISIS is a problem, not just for the rest of the world but for Turkey too. But by that point it was almost too late. They had ISIS cells all over Turkey by then.

And you had the same criminal organizations and networks that were smuggling fighters, and also oil and artifacts, were just very deeply ingrained by that point. And actually always had been even before the civil war. It's just that the way that Turkey approached the war, left those networks could become almost unstoppable at one point.

I would just add, the way I – I think the easiest way to say for sure what you can charge Turkey with is gross negligence. They had the fight with Assad as their priority. Then the fight with the Kurds became the priority. ISIS has always been way down their priorities list and remains. So if when Erdoğan last week or the week before is saying, "We are going to Syria to destroy terrorism." He's talking about the Kurds and the SDF. He's not talking about ISIS. And the conflation of that terrorism threat I think is really a way to show the way Turkish policy has been lacking. And so we either by will or by ability, they have never successfully cracked down on the ISIS networks across the border that allowed transit of the fighters, and also the black market economy that sort of fueled ISIS to thrive. I haven't been to the Turkish-Syrian border in two years, so you have to take it with a grain of salt. But from what I understand, those networks I imagine in some form they still exist, and will continue to be a problem in this new instability,

SALAMA: And Mike, what you say is also possibly a big reason for President Trump's miscommunications with Erdoğan, right? Because he keeps on saying, "I'm going to go in and take care of ISIS." President Trump tweets out, "Erdoğan promises to take care of ISIS."

GIGLIO: Right.

SALAMA: And like you say, it's not necessarily ISIS he's talking about.

GIGLIO: I wonder if it's a miscommunication though. Because Trump seemed to be parroting Turkish talking points at one point last week where he said that the PKK is a greater threat. I think he specifically said it. And I mean, please check my memory. But I think it was something along those lines.

SALAMA: Yep.

GIGLIO: And so I think there is an extent to which there is just confusion in the White House. It's judging by the statements. I'm not recording on the White House internal deliberations, but just from what I see publicly. And then I think there's also the extent of him just being happy to kind of hand it over to Erdoğan, and accept Erdoğan's frames, which are problematic and also not challenged internally really by an independent media in Turkey.

SALAMA: I was actually in the Oval Office when he said that. He said, "ISIS can learn from the PKK." It was exactly what he said. I think we can take one more question. I don't know where the mic went. We have about two minutes left for real, this time. I actually have a gentleman in the front who's been very kind, helped me out. Deb, do you want to screen – Young lady has not asked the question yet, maybe.

REICHMANN: Hi, I'm Deb Reichmann with *Associated Press*. I have three questions, so you can just answer whatever one you want. Okay? First one is the NATO and the S400, are we

anywhere – Anything going on with that, and what's the future of their role in NATO, Turkey? And Syria, we haven't really talked much about Bashar al-Assad, what's his direction going to be coming up? And then on Trump, do you think that Trump got anything out of this other than just being able to go to the voters and say, "Hey, I'm pulling troops out," even though he hasn't? Is there anything specific that you think he got from Erdoğan? And is there anything that Trump can do now to make things better?

SALAMA: So four questions, Deb. Thanks. You have one minute and 30 seconds answer four of Deb's questions. Yeah, it is the lightening round at this point.

ROGGIO: I'll take this.

SALAMA: Take whichever ones you want.

ROGGIO: I'll just take the one with Assad. I mean, he's certainly – The Russian and Iranian bail out of Assad was pretty brilliant. I think one thing we learned in that too is that you don't have to fight a counter insurgency just by being a nice guy. The Russians have proven in the caucus, and they proved it in Syria that being brutal can also be effective. I'm not advocating that by any means. But that's what we've seen. And I think so, Assad is reconstituting his forces. I expect the Russians and the Iranians, and the Iraqi militias that have fought inside along under the Salmani, Kasim Salmani's guidance inside Syria. I think we're going to start seeing them retake areas up in the north and the Northeast as well. And this goes back to a policy issue as well. Brett mentioned, that the goal of it originally was to oust Assad. Well, that's not happening now. And he's back in ascendancy. And if that was our political goal, we should have seen it through. If not, we had to expect an outcome such as this.

SALAMA: Mike and Brett, lightning round. Do you want to address Assad or what Trump's –

GIGLIO: I would just say quickly –

SALAMA: - angle is here.

GIGLIO: - I think the definite end game here is Assad retakes control of the country.

ROGGIO: Yeah.

GIGLIO: And with the help of his allies. I don't think there's any other outcome that's possible in Syria right now.

MCGURK: Yeah. I wrote a long piece in Foreign Affairs you can read when after I left, we should narrow our goals in Syria to two. The resurgence of ISIS. I think that's now much harder. And potential threats to Israel. We can do a lot to help with the Israelis. Other than that, our ability to affect the course of events in Syria particularly now, are extremely limited. And trying to do more, I think we're going to dig the hole even deeper, I'm afraid.

SALAMA: A grim point to end on. But a really, really great discussion. Thank you all for coming. Just so you know, Mike is going to stick around to sign copies of his book for those of you who purchased them. And thanks for joining us, everyone.