

MAY: Well, welcome. I want to thank you for joining us today.

I'm Cliff May. I'm FDD's Founder and President. We're really pleased to have you here today joining us for this event co-hosted with the Center for a New American Security to mark the release of Michael Gordon's excellent new book, "Degrade and Destroy: The Inside Story of the War Against the Islamic State, from Barack Obama to Donald Trump."

Because Michael has had exceptional access to top U.S. officials and military commanders, and because of his extraordinary firsthand reporting from the battlefield, he's produced a must-read book on this historic conflict. We were very proud to have Michael with us in-house at FDD for a period while he was working on the book. I'm going to say he also spent the time at CNAS doing the same.

We're all happy to see it on the shelves today. It's available for purchase in all major booksellers, online I'm sure, and for those of you here in person in the back of the room at the conclusion of today's events.

Michael Gordon currently serves as the national security correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*. In addition to his latest book, he is the co-author with the late General Bernard Trainor – wonderful man – of three definitive histories of the United States wars in Iraq.

Full disclosure: I've known Michael for a rather long time. I won't tell you how long because he looks so young and may not want to admit his age. But this clue: We were in the same bullpen at *The New York Times* in the previous century. He was an astonishingly good reporter. I can tell you stories. And by the way, reassuring to note that he's still an astonishingly good reporter today, so some things don't change.

To dive into this conflict with us in the lessons learned, we are very glad to have with us Lieutenant General Sean MacFarland, U.S. Army, retired. General MacFarland served as a three-star commander of the coalition against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. During his command, from 2015 to 2016, coalition forces recaptured nearly half of the enemy's territory and set the conditions for the enemy's final defeat. And we'll talk about that a little more today.

We're equally honored to have Michèle Flournoy, who served as undersecretary of defense for policy in the Obama administration from 2009 to 2012. She's the co-founder and chair of the CNAS Board of Directors. She's also co-founder and managing partner of WestExec Advisors.

Today's conversation will be moderated by my colleague Bradley Bowman. Brad serves as senior director at FDD's Center on Military and Political Power, which focuses on defense policy and strategy. He served for years as a Senate national security adviser, and before that as an active-duty U.S. Army officer, Black Hawk pilot, and assistant professor at West Point.

Before I hand the floor over to Brad, just a couple of quick words about FDD for anybody that may not be familiar with us.

For more than 20 years, beginning just following the attacks of 9/11, FDD has operated as a nonpartisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. Our experts are a source of timely research, analysis, and policy options. We take no foreign government money and never have and never will.

For more information on our work, we encourage you to visit our website, just FDD.org, FDD.org. You can follow us on Twitter @FDD.

So, thank you again for joining us for this important and timely conversation.

Brad, I'm pleased to turn this over to you.

BOWMAN: Great. Thank you so much, Cliff.

And thanks to everyone for joining us here in the room, which is exciting, I haven't seen this in a while. And thanks for everyone tuning in online. I also want to congratulate you, Michael, on your extraordinary book. And I'm really looking forward to this conversation. Secretary Flournoy and General MacFarland, what a distinguished panel and I'm so glad you could join us today. So, thank you.

My general plan for the next hour or so is for us to have a conversation for about 40 minutes or so, but I'm sincerely eager to get to questions from the audience because we have such a distinguished audience with us, sincerely. So that's the plan. So with that, let's jump right in.

The book is here. You see it displayed in front of us. So let me start, Michael, if I may, with the most obvious question. This is your fourth book on wars in Iraq, if I'm not mistaken. Why did you decide to write it? And tell us a bit about all the research that went into it if you wouldn't mind.

GORDON: Well, thanks, Brad, for having me here.

And I also just looking around the audience, I see that what's really interesting about this event is there a lot of people who are real – played pivotal roles in this successful, it has to be said, campaign against the Islamic State. The United States' track record in military conflicts has been mixed. I think, by reasonable measures, you'd have to count this one as a success.

Well, as you know, I've covered all these complex– and I was in seven of them in various parts of the world on the ground as a correspondent–and there's just so much one can do as a newspaper reporter. I always– every time I was in the middle of these tumultuous and massive events in a war, you get a very close bird's-eye view of what's happening. Sometimes you're in the middle of these combat operations, but I always wanted to know what was really going on, which was hard to know, at the time.

What were the choices? What was the strategy? What was the road not followed? What was really happening in Washington?

And in the three previous books, which I did with General Trainor, you know, our goal then was not to be the first out of the gate or to write the first book, but to try to take the time to put something together that withstood the test of time. Maybe it wouldn't be the only book on the conflict, but it would be one of the books that people would have to read.

And that's the approach I took here. Certainly, it wasn't the first out of the gates since it took me six years. But– and I–what I tried to do is what I've done in the past, which is do a lot of shoe-leather reporting in Washington at the highest

level that I could get to, and in this case, in multiple administrations, but also on-the-ground experience in the Middle East, the battles in Mosul and Sinjar, and experience in Syria, and fuse it together.

And one of the things that still is striking to me today is there is no Pentagon history of this conflict. It just hasn't been done.

So, this is something that is a reincorporation of the history of the air. There are pieces of it on the Army side, but no one in the U.S. government has been able to do this. So I think it's important to get the record established as best they could while getting is good.

BOWMAN: That's great. Thank you.

And one of the things that struck me about the book in reading is that you really went from policy, grand strategy to strategy, to operations and tactics kind of seamlessly. Can you speak for just a moment about the embedding that you discussed in the book a little bit, you know, the combatants that you embedded with at key moments during the war?

GORDON: So, one of the striking features of this war, unlike the previous operations, you know – [Operation] Iraqi Freedom and invasion and occupation of Iraq – is there was extensive embedding in those conflicts, which I took great advantage of and stayed with units for long periods of time in all parts of Iraq.

There was no embedding in this war. The military didn't do it and the Obama administration didn't do it.

And it has to be said that today, the Biden administration doesn't do it in terms of our forces in Poland that were mobilized there to deter Russian aggression and reinforce NATO. I know because I asked, and the units agreed but the higher levels of the Biden administration– it was not approved.

But there were opportunities to get close to the action because this was a war where we worked with a vast array of partners. Although the partners will tell you, they didn't have any particular requirements about security. They knew your security and so I was able to go with the Peshmerga, and Mosul, and Sinjar. I was able to go with the Iraqi Counter Terrorism service in West Mosul, and I was able to interview General Mazloum [Abdi] in Syria.

And also, on positive side on the military, while there was no formal embedding process, I was able to do what they call a "battlefield circulation" where you move around the battlefield, with General Townsend and people like Colonel Pat Work, who was a key person in the battle of West Mosul.

So, I had that kind of access, but the embedding was with the partner forces.

BOWMAN: Thank you.

You mentioned policy. Secretary Flournoy, you obviously, as Cliff said, served as undersecretary of defense for policy in the Obama administration from 2009 to 2012. And you know the administration's then decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011 is an important antecedent, I'd say, to the events that Michael described in his book.

Before I ask Michael to walk us through some of those key milestones and decisions from 2014 to 2019, I'm wondering if you might be willing to provide your insights into the thinking and policy debates within the administration surrounding the 2011 Iraq withdrawal decision.

FLOURNOY: Let me start by saying, first of all, congratulations, Michael, and how important I think books like this are. Because as Americans, we too often are in a hurry to get conflicts in the rearview mirror, and not to actually pause and try to learn lessons from them so that we capture what works, and we learn from what doesn't work, and we do better next time – or even avoiding the next time, if possible. And thanks to FDD for hosting us with CNAS.

So, I was definitely present in the decision-making around President Obama's ultimate choice to withdraw from Iraq. You know, when we came into office, we, obviously, inherited two wars: Afghanistan and Iraq. I think the Obama administration after its initial review was really kind of following the same approach that the Bush administration had had, which was a very deliberate phased transition or a drawdown based on conditions as Iraqi forces were able to exert control and have the capacity and capability in a given province. There would be a transition of that province, U.S. forces or coalition forces would be repositioned, and gradually we would be drawing down.

And that's – that was started in the Bush administration and continued in the early years of the Obama administration. And we came to a point where there was really a question of, do you draw down completely and withdraw? Or do you maintain indefinitely some kind of residual force?

At the time, both the civilian side and the military side of the Pentagon was pretty unified in arguing for residual force. At that point, we were taking very few casualties, thankfully. But we didn't feel like our presence in the advise and assist role was strengthening the Iraqi backbone, was helping to dampen-down tensions between the different ethnic elements of the force in Iraq – not ethnic or religious with Sunni, Shia, Kurdish. And we still had a pretty important glue role of, you know, gluing it all together and keeping it going.

Very fulsome discussion of the pros, the cons, the risks. And the people committed their views to paper, we had repeated situation room discussions, and debates about every aspect. And at the end of the day, the President made his decision, and he wanted to end one of the wars he inherited. He felt that, given the threat at the time, and the assessment of the Iraqi forces, that they would be able to hold it together with a security assistance mission.

What I think he didn't anticipate was the extent to which Maliki, the prime minister at the time, would be so insecure with the withdrawal of U.S. forces that he would go make a hard turn back towards sectarianism and persecution of the Sunni population, which then created the space for what had been AQI, al-Qaeda in Iraq, to reemerge as ISIS, with now the safe haven in Syria, as well.

So, I think things very quickly started moving in a bad direction. You know, to Obama's credit, I would say, although I disagreed with his initial decision, obviously, and I made that really clear at the time. He did do the right thing. And he recognized the threat and went back in, but I think at some great cost. And I am still of the mind that he might have deterred that rejuvenation of ISIS had we remained.

BOWMAN: Thank you for that. With that context in mind, Michael, I want to come to you before I bring General MacFarland into the conversation. Following the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 2011, can you walk us through if you wouldn't mind the key milestones and decisions associated with really three things: the rise of ISIS, the decision to send U.S. forces back to Iraq, and ultimately the battle to defeat the ISIS caliphate?

GORDON: Well, I'll do that.

BOWMAN: All in like three minutes or less.

GORDON: Very concisely, because I think General MacFarland played a very important role – along with some of them here in the audience – in building the structure that was needed to defeat ISIS. But I agree with Michèle, that the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq created a situation in which Maliki – who by the way is making a bit of a comeback in Iraq now – sectarian tendencies were unleashed, which created a ground within that country for ISIS to gain a greater foothold.

And also, the absence of American forces really led to the deterioration of the Iraqi Security Forces without that mentoring and presence. It also deprived Washington of the situational awareness it needed of what was happening. And the reason Mosul came as a great shock to the White House, but less of a shock to the U.S. special operations community, was because they saw ISIS coming. Was not so much that – not only that ISIS had greater capability than was anticipated, but the Iraqi security forces were so hollow.

And if we had stayed there, we would have been aware of that, and we would have been able to address that. In terms of the key milestones, once President Obama made the decision to go back in, it wasn't such a simple thing, because this was an entirely different kind of war. They – the partners are going to do the fighting. We – were going to do the mentoring and provide the air.

So, they had to figure out a scheme to employ advisors that took about two plus years to get right. Because it took that long for advisors to be fully deployed on the battlefield accompanying Iraqi forces. They had to create a command structure for both Iraq and Syria, and some sort of unified headquarters as what General MacFarland did.

They had to evolve the air strategy from just going after targets on the front lines to going after deep targets, that took some doing and pushing by the commanders in the field to make happen. They had to work out a system for deconflicting operations with the Russians after they came into Syria, which basically worked although with some tensions and so, there are a lot of really big pieces that had to be put into place to make this work. And it took a few years for all of that to happen. It finally reached its fruition before the end of the Obama administration, but it didn't come easy.

BOWMAN: Thank you. General coming to you, if I may, as Michael recounts in his book, pages 153 and 54 or 154 for anyone taking notes. You assumed command at Camp Arifjan on September 22, 2015. On that day, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter said quote, as Michael reports, "Rather than three generals responsible for different aspects of the campaign, as had been the case, I've empowered Lieutenant General MacFarland as the single commander of counter ISIL activities in both Iraq and Syria," unquote.

Carter said, quote, "His efforts will be critical in the coming months." That was quite an understatement I would say. I'd love to hear you respond in any way you'd like, to what Michael, just detailed, especially anything that occurred after you assumed command.

MACFARLAND: Sure. Thanks, Brad. Well, first of all, you know, I was honored by the confidence that Secretary Carter had in me, and I hope I justified it. But the main job at hand was to create this command-and-control structure that encompassed both Iraq and Syria and that required us pulling together some of the special operations tribes as they call themselves under one command, although they didn't all completely come under that one command, but the coordination was enhanced significantly with some of the JSOC teams.

But we brought that together, building up the headquarters presented its own challenges, as Michael recounts a bit in his book. You know, the fire marshal at Camp Arifjan wouldn't let them move into their building because it didn't have enough sprinkler heads. So, we had to put them in tents in the summer heat of Kuwait, in a motor pool next to my headquarters and backed up reefer [refrigerated] vans to push enough cold air into those things. But you know, how many sprinkler heads are in tents by the way? But anyway, we pulled that together.

And that was important because the command and control in two countries had to be balanced against the fact that we had two different sets of authorities really for use of force – one in Syria, and one in Iraq. We had forces distributed in Turkey, Jordan, Kuwait, and Qatar, and, of course in Iraq. We had 29 troop contributing nations out of the coalition of, I think, almost 60 countries. We had carrier strike groups operating and there was a lot of activity going on.

And then, the other thing to keep in mind is we're under in Iraq, Title 22 authority. We have chief of mission, a fully operating embassy, and balancing all those equities. In Syria, we had really two wars happening, not just one, we were fighting ISIS, that was my war. But we also had the civil war going on against the Assad regime.

So, and then the Russians showed up, as Michael said, about a week after I did. So, getting that command-and-control structure together allowed – enabled us to have more of a unity of effort, because ISIS was not constrained by the Sykes-Picot Line. You know, they view themselves as one single caliphate, they had the advantage of interior lines, and we were on the periphery around them. And so, getting unity of effort, unity of command, was essential to making progress. And then once we had that, we were able to round out a campaign plan, with very – three very clear lines of effort.

With – one of which was the priority, which was defeating ISIS. The second most important was building partner capacity, both in Iraq and in Syria. And then there was leveraging coalition effects as best we could, because of those 29 contributing nations, they all came with their red cards, caveats, and so forth. And if you looked at air and ground operations in Iraq, and air and ground operations in Syria, and plot that as a Venn diagram, at the intersection of those circles, you would probably only find one flag at first, you know, and one that we would all recognize, just to the right here.

So, you know, we tried to bring more of those into the center of that Venn diagram or closer to the center. So, all of that had to happen, and only could happen with one commander in charge. We had to develop the plan. Once we kind of figured out what our lines of effort were, what's first, what's next, and identify the decision points that would lead us to those things – those transitions. And then what – and then organize ourselves collectively, in terms of operations and intelligence collection, to facilitate each of those decisions and move the campaign along.

And once we had that in hand, then we had to kind of communicate that out to all the stakeholders, both here in United States and around various capitals. Those I think were the most important initial things that we had to kind of get up and going.

BOWMAN: Michael describes the name that we gave this particular strategy was the “by-with-and-through.” I'd be interested from your perspective, as the person that was leading this, what were the advantages and challenges associated with a by-with-and-through strategy in implicit and now explicit contrast with what we didn't have in Afghanistan or in Iraq, pre-2011?

MACFARLAND: So, one of the big problems was not problems, but challenges is, was that by-with-and-through, you know, it wasn't just one indigenous partner force on the ground. There were many [partners] in Iraq and Syria, some of which, you know, did not get along with one another and some of which we didn't get along [with]. And you know this old saw of "a friend of my enemy of my enemy is my friend" was not always operative.

And so, we had to find ways to balance out the mutually hostile forces against the threat by either assuring one or incentivizing one or the other, or both. And we also had to keep in mind that a lot of these indigenous forces were not principally opposed to ISIS, especially in Syria. They were mainly opposed to the Assad regime, and we were trying to get them to take their eye off the wolf closest to their sled and say, "No, could you fight ISIS for us too?" Like, well, ISIS doesn't like Assad either, "Why should we fight those guys?"

"Well, because we're asking you to." So – and of course, nobody does anything, you know, out of pure altruism. So, you know, we provided incentives for them to train and equip funds, other types of support, and one of the most important was air support. You know, we provided them with the ability to conduct operations of interest to them, in return for conducting interests -- operations of interest to the fight against ISIS.

So, security force assistance was, you know, a bit of a learning process, getting to know whose equities were in play and how they balanced out against one another. Then we had the challenge of fact that a lot of these forces on the ground – well, first of all, in Syria, we had nobody on the ground initially to engage with them. And in Iraq, we had people on the ground, but the people who were on the ground with, were trained and equipped for a counter insurgency battle. And that was not what we were fighting.

ISIS was a proto-state, it had hybrid forces in the field bordering on conventional capabilities and we had to retrain, and reequip a lot of those forces, to enable them to fight effectively. And then we also had to go through this process that Michael alluded to, of getting ourselves properly aligned for the fight with the right authorities, you know, the rules of engagement and so forth, to meet the situation on the ground.

BOWMAN: Thank you. And, Michael, your book includes a lot of very interesting exclusives and back stories. One of them relates to the Syrian Democratic Forces. I'm wondering if you could tell us how we first came to work with the Syrian Democratic Forces. There's an interesting story there and I'd like to hear you tell it.

GORDON: So, one of the – as General MacFarland said – one of the striking features about this conflict is we didn't have one partner, we had multiple partners. And in Iraq, that was the Iraqi Security Forces, which is also not one partner. It's the Counter Terrorism Services, the Iraqi army, it's the federal police all reporting to different ministries. The Kurdish Peshmerga, made up of different political entities there. But there wasn't a U.S. – obvious U.S. partner for us – for Syria. And that's where ISIS had its capital, in Raqqa.

And who was going to do that? And one thing that I – was striking to me, and I was surprised to learn it, but in the course of this research was just how early this alliance began. And what actually happened was in August of 2014, really the day after Mosul Dam was taken back. Then-Colonel Chris Donahue, later of last-man-out fame for Kabul, now the 3-star commander of the 18th Airborne Corps, he was then the Delta Force commander in northern Iraq, which was – whose presence was not acknowledged openly by the U.S. government.

And he had a meeting in Sulaymaniyah, that was brokered by the Kurdish authorities there. We're not on good terms with the Kurdish authorities in Erbil, but that's a separate story and he met with General Mazloum, who was then

representing the YPG kind of militia. He basically came up with a concept that could be the partner force that would stop volunteers from joining the ISIS caliphate coming down to Turkey basically.

And they would stop them in Iraq, and they would stop them in Syria. There is a basic understanding between Donahue and Mazloum reached then and wasn't yet approved in Washington. There were other suitors for General Mazloum earlier in the day, he had a meeting with Qasem Soleimani, to try to strike his own deal with the Syrian Kurds.

But Mazloum went with the Americans, and it took some time before this relationship gained traction due to the quality and actually the absence of other solutions, which the administration attempted for a while. But that became the mainstay of the U.S. effort in Syria. And it was absolutely essential, although it did take some time to arm and equip them.

BOWMAN: Based on your reporting, what is the best estimate you've seen in terms of how many casualties the Syrian Democratic Forces sustained in going after the caliphate?

GORDON: So, I tried to pin that down, and it was not so easy. I think I wrote in the book in excess of 5,000. But I think they claim substantially more. One thing that was striking about this is I think there were 20 U.S. KIA in combat, as well in combat in Operation Inherent Resolve. There were thousands of Iraqi Security Force soldiers and policemen who died.

There were probably 5,000 or more SDF, Syrian Democratic Forces as they branded themselves who got killed. There were somewhere probably on the order of 1,600 to 8,000 civilians who died in this complex. So, a high price was paid by the partner forces in executing this victory. And as a consequence of that, the U.S. casualties were so low.

BOWMAN: General MacFarland, I mean – I guess that from an American perspective, that's one of the advantages, by-with-and-through strategies that we have motivated partners with shared interests who were enduring massive sacrifice. Is it fair to say that if we didn't have partners like that those would have been American casualties? Or we could still be confronting the caliphate?

MACFARLAND: Yeah, it would have been one of those other two outcomes, neither is good. Either, we would have suffered more casualties, or we would have had accepted a far less favorable outcome with possibly a caliphate still operating in some shape or form, and potentially a destabilized Iraq. And almost as bad as what we see in Syria. I don't know. I mean, it's hard to say. Fortunately, we don't have to deal with that spectrum.

FLOURNOY: I mean, the by-with-and-through approach has now become sort of a standard for how we can think about sustained terrorism operations around the world. And in this case, it was quite remarkably successful, particularly given the multiplicity of actors who didn't always see things from the same vantage point. But I think in other places where it's ongoing, it's facing some real challenges.

And so, one of the things that I'm interested in is understanding and not to take over your job, but to ask the question: Under what conditions does it work well? And when does it not work so well? Because I'm looking at Somalia today, Yemen today, they are having some real challenges with that approach. It worked – it has worked in those places, in earlier times, much better than it is working today. So, sort of really getting out of your experience, what makes it work?

And what makes it not work? What are the key conditions of separate success from investment success?

MACFARLAND: Well, I can't speak to why it isn't working in some other places.

FLOURNOY: Yes.

MACFARLAND: But I can tell you that one of the reasons that worked in Iraq and Syria, is because we had, we were able to gain the trust, the political and military levels of the Iraqi government, the Kurdish governments, and, you know, with a lot of the YPG, SDF civilian leadership it is a little bit murkier. They appear to be buying in to what we were doing there as well. And then we were able to back it up with sufficient resources.

We were able to deliver what we promised. I have to tell you that, you know, I come back to my headquarters with my list of things to do several pages long and a throbbing headache, because I knew it'd be difficult to provide all the things that were being asked of us. But I had a lot of support, up and down the chain of command all the way up to the Secretary of Defense. You know, and certainly the National Security Council as well. When I asked for things, you know, they were provided. You know, not always like, the minute I asked for them, you know, Michael points out a little bit of the friction in war that occurs.

But, you know, I didn't have to worry about balancing the political, against the military equities in the States. My boss did that for me. And I got what I needed when I needed it. Maybe not as soon as I asked for it, but I think in the long run, in time. But those were – that's why I think it worked, you know, and it wasn't just me. I'm sorry, but, you know, I had the great support of the U.S. ambassador there, Ambassador Steve Jones in Iraq, who provided me with all kinds of access to all kinds of players that I would not have had to including Hadi Al-Amiri of the Badr organization.

And people – interlocutors had allowed me indirectly, to communicate with Qasem Soleimani, even two degrees or three degrees of separation, but messages were being passively exchanged that way. That, you know – so we were able to work with all the different parties and balance their equities that way. And again, it was the U.S. embassy team, you know, support that helped, even, you know, reaching across into Syria and Turkey, you know, the Offices of Brett McGurk, and people like that are critical, absolutely critical.

GORDON: So, I think there were a couple – I had to put some thought into why it worked in this conflict, and it did work in the end. And I came up with a few things. One, in this conflict, there was accompanying authorities and took until really December 2016, to fully flesh that out, but under General MacFarland, for the first time, initially, Washington did not allow the advisors to go onto the battlefield with the Iraqi forces except for SOF elements.

So, they were advising from within the wire, lot of importuning, from the generals to Washington. And eventually, they allowed this to happen. I think it happened for the first time in the summer of 2016, that advisors accompanied an Iraqi battalion crossing the Tigris. But that took a lot of pressure from Baghdad saying, "Hey, we got to send the advisors out to the field, to go with the forces, you can't do this remotely." So that was essential. I think another thing is the partners had to be reasonably credible in their own society, by the standards that prevailed in their cultures, you know.

And I think and that was, I think, largely the case, even if they were unorthodox partners, like the one ambassador over sitting here worked with the SDF. Or they – they had that kind of credibility. Second of all, there was an enormous amount of resources applied to this in terms of air and reconnaissance, which shouldn't be minimized. And there was an

advantage here also, that the U.S. had in which in this conflict, the U.S. did not allow the enemy a sanctuary. ISIS did not have the sanctuary in Syria.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban, and their allies, had a sanctuary in Pakistan, and that problem was never solved. And but that was a liability that didn't exist in this particular complex. So, I think that this model has potential applicability to the future, although all cases are different. And I would even argue that a modified version of it – greatly modified is kind of what we're doing in Ukraine to a certain extent. Yes, we don't have advisors on the ground.

We're not doing the airstrikes. But it was the 10th Special Forces Group that trained the Ukrainian forces. We supply intelligence, ammunitions, and arms. You could argue that it's an abridged you know, a modified, scaled back version of by-with-and-through that's being carried out today in Ukraine, of necessity, because the adversary there is a nuclear-armed power.

MACFARLAND: I agree with everything Michael just said. I'd like to apply a couple of small caveats. One is it is possible to do too much in security force assistance. And we've tried to find that sweet spot in terms of how much support you're providing, because, you know, we're – everything I did was against ISIS. I had to keep Russia and Iran in mind, you know? And try to balance, you know, what I was doing against ISIS and not create another problem for us, you know, along the way.

The other thing is, it is possible, at least in Iraq, and my one of my concerns was that – if we do too much, the Iraqis will fall back in old habits, and step aside, and let us take the lead. You know, and that was not the model we were trying to follow there. So, there was a bit of a balance there to be struck. And we kind of eased our way into the correct level of advise and assist of accompanying.

One of the great things about accompanying was that, for one thing, you know, the Iraqi Security Forces would not go to Mosul, unless we promised them that we would accompany them. Because their initial fighting was all around Baghdad, from Baiji to Ramadi. Going to Mosul was like a moonshot, in 1961, right after a rocket blown up on the pad. You know, they're like, "No no, no one wants to go to the moon."

They think – that was a big move for them. It was 100 kilometers basically, and they would have to reassemble and retrain their armor units and anything like that since they invaded Kuwait. So, it took time to get all that put together with them. And getting embedded with them was going to be important for that. Same with the Iraqi counterterrorism service guys up in Camp Speicher. You know, we had to kind of put the band together that we were going to take up there to a – and they wanted to know that, well, if they're Americans embedded with us, you're not just going to leave us out there in the middle of the desert, surrounded by howling ISIS forces to be massacred, that won't happen if the Americans are with us.

So that was a sine qua non for that operation. It was also sine qua non for the KRG for President Barzani, I will not allow Iraqi security forces north of the green line unless there are Americans embedded with them.

Why? Because the last time the Iraqi army rolled up towards Erbil, it was not to shake hands and work together, it was a very different situation. So, I want to make sure that there are no shenanigans. So and – so we've provided assurance to both partners by being there. And we got away with not being embedded in Ramadi because we're relatively close to Ramadi with our support camps in Taqaddum and Al-Assad, but it would not be that case around Mosul.

And that's why our initial embeds were at Camp Speicher who were readying the 9th Armored Division and the 2nd ISOC Brigade for that 100-kilometer assault.

BOWMAN: Thank you. I'm eager to bring the audience into the conversation. Great, I see hands. If you wouldn't mind waiting for the microphone to come to you and then identify yourself. Then we'll go from there. Let's – gentleman right here in the middle.

SHANKER: Thanks so much. I'm Thom Shanker with the Project for Media National Security at George Washington University. Michael, congratulations. I saw the panelists – my question is about intelligence and warning. In our region of the world where our record is not very good. Michael, the opening pages, you put the Obama interview with *The New Yorker*, where he says, "ISIS is the JV." Clearly that – wrong statement inside – given the conditions.

Was there no intelligence on the rise of ISIS reaching the Commander in Chief? Was it inadequate? Was there great intelligence that he wasn't paying attention to? How could this have happened with the President saying, "not a problem?" Thank you.

GORDON: My own view on that is that the White House was so dedicated to its strategy of bringing a so-called "responsible end" to the conflict in Iraq that it ignored numerous warning signs that began in August 2013 when Hoshiyar Zebari, the Iraqi foreign minister, went to the Pentagon and had a meeting with Marty Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and asked for help. That continued when Colonel Chris Donahue and Mike Nagata, the SOCCENT commander went to Iraq in February 2014, and reported that the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service couldn't handle this new threat – ISIS. That continued when the Iraqi Ambassador sent a memo to Jake Sullivan.

Then the adviser to Vice President Biden in May of 2014, saying they needed American airstrikes, he needed to help. I have that letter included in the book it's quoted in there. And – but I think the mindset at the Pentagon at the time, as Michèle said was, they were really hoping that they wouldn't have to engage there. And they were also contending with – to be fair to them – a lot of other crises in Afghanistan, Egypt was in turmoil, and Assad used chemical weapons.

So, there was a lot of other things happening in the Middle East that I think diverted the White House from paying attention to this particular plot.

BOWMAN: Michael, if I may, let me follow up with you, if I may, on that. The subtitle is "from Barack Obama to Donald Trump." What were the similarities and differences that you saw between the two administrations, how they viewed and prosecuted the war?

GORDON: So, I – during the presidential campaign, then-candidate Trump made a number of statements that when should he become president, he was going to bomb the heck out of ISIS. He didn't use the word heck. And the – and take the gloves off, so to speak, and change the strategy. But in point of fact, President Trump did not change the strategy. And he did not change the rules of engagement according to commanders I have talked to. Basically, what the – what he did was he reduced a level of White House oversight.

Critics would say micromanagement that slowed the pace of decisions. For example, at the end of the Obama administration, they had a restriction that there could only be three helicopters in Syria at any one time for 72 hours. That's sort of the kind of constraints the White House put on things. Under H.R. McMaster, President Trump's national

security adviser, that was all washed away. But the ironic result was, what President Trump did was he prosecuted the Obama administration's strategy.

But initially, a little more efficiently than Obama himself, with the important caveat that he injected a lot of turbulence into the strategy by later on taking forces out of Syria back into Syria and out of Syria and back into Syria, towards the end, which created a lot of challenges for military commanders.

BOWMAN: Thank you. Let's go back to the audience. Please. Other questions? A question right here.

LAMOTHE: Thank you everyone for your time. I'm Dan Lamothe with *Washington Post*.

I wanted to ask a question about I guess sort of spasms in foreign policy. And I think we saw one to some degree with the rapid withdrawal from northern Syria during the Trump administration. We've obviously seen others since then, including last summer in Afghanistan.

Michael, as you look at your reporting here, and we look back at that northern Syria episode and the following months, and the way things kind of settled down. How do you see that in retrospect? How do you think it went? And how do you think it's settled down? And are there any broader lessons we can take away from that, as we look ahead to what Afghanistan might be, what Ukraine might be, and some of these other crises that are on the horizon?

GORDON: Well, I think it was a mistake to impulsively order troops out of Syria. They -- fortunately we still have troops and about 1,000 troops in Syria in the eastern Syria security area, and then on top of garrisons. The U.S. still has a presence there, which is important because it's hard -- over the horizon is not an ideal strategy for going after terrorists. This just happened a couple of days ago in Syria.

It's important to keep a foothold there. But the way that was -- the way the troops withdrew from some part of northern Syria was certainly -- put a strain on U.S. relations with the SDF. And I think put the U.S. in a somewhat less, in a more disadvantaged position. I mean, he's modest that he's sitting here in this front row. as Ambassador [William] Roebuck. He should probably say something about it, because he was at the Lafarge Cement Plant, for one of the -- for that withdrawal, when it was -- while the ammunition was blown up by the SDF.

And then later, after he left U.S. came in and blew up our own headquarters so it didn't, wouldn't fall into the Turks hands, but you had to live through that whole experience, what would you say were the consequences of that?

ROEBUCK: Just a quick observation that the decision did inject a tremendous amount of turbulence into the relationship with the SDF. The SDF is really, quite angry with the U.S. with strong feelings for a short period of (inaudible). And there was some fear, I think that if we were really going to leave completely that the SDF would splinter and possibly collapse. In the end, the decision was changed back.

As you mentioned, Michael, and you do a very good job in describing in the book, we did manage to maintain a political presence in half of the Northeast where we had been, and we maintained troop presence, so we salvaged the policy. But it was quite turbulent there for several weeks.

GORDON: Would you say there was some risk that they might have gone over to the Russians?

ROEBUCK: Yes, definitely. They in fact, did go to the Russians, in some ways. They let the Russians in in certain areas, Kobani and in some other places, and also the Syrian regime in there, in order to preserve those areas from the Turks.

MACFARLAND: They always were dangling that card in my discussion with the Syrian Kurds.

But I do have to say that to the most important indigenous people, by almost say three very important indigenous players on the ground that we were fortunate to have at the time were General Mazloum, Prime Minister Abadi, and President Barzani. And he, you know, he's a hard negotiator. But ultimately, was an important player and ally on the ground. Had any one of those three not been there, it's hard to imagine how this would have played out.

BOWMAN: OK. Other questions from the audience over here?

MORGAN: Hi, I'm Wes Morgan, national security journalist and author of a book about Afghanistan, *The Hardest Place*. Michael, a through line through all of your books about Iraq, is the role of Delta Force, which you've alluded to in your remarks here today. But I think a lot of people who read "Degrade and Destroy," will be really surprised to learn just how extensive that role was, particularly in Syria. You know, far from being just engaged in boutique counterterrorism raiding, that I think a lot of people associate Delta Force with.

It comes to the point where it is running all the advise and assist efforts inside in Syria and for the most part is running an air campaign within an air campaign. I wonder if you could sort of describe how this unprecedented situation came about. And then also comment a little on, you know, and I'd be curious to hear from General MacFarland to about this, and what were the pluses and minuses of this in terms of freedom of action that it gave the U.S. government, versus command-and-control issues, versus the obvious transparency issue of having a huge portion of this campaign run by an organization that the U.S. government won't talk about, or even after the fact to getting them to talk about it, as you have done, is like pulling teeth.

GORDON: I'll give a quick answer so General MacFarland can weigh in. I mean, Delta Force under – initially under Chris Donahue, which forged a relationship with General Mazloum – an absolutely essential role, even though its activities at times are in the shadows. And they had the central role in Syria, which was basically Assad Special Forces, theater.

And they were called – Task Force Nine was the nomenclature – and then they, because they were few in numbers, they had to put the 5th Special Forces Group underneath them to do a lot of the training and build up the cadre that had the fight that became 9.5. And they carried out, basically, that war, and I think it posed and though the climactic battle of Baghuz, which was really the end of the physical caliphate.

I interviewed people involved in that at Camp Lejeune where they were temporarily, and they walked me through a lot of that. I think it posed at times, probably some command-and-control challenges, because I don't think I think you didn't directly control them. They had initially their own chain of command, they called in their own airstrikes. I think for many of these operations General MacFarland had a [red] card authority, right? You could, you could veto something that they were going to do, but you didn't really directly control it.

So, it was a sort of unique feature, the war that we have this kind of bifurcated war. Where we have this army moving on Mosul, basically a kind of conventional army run by the conventional U.S. Army. And then we had a SOF war in

Syria, against ISIS, run very much by those guys lashed together, but not under, you know, direct command and control. How would – what would be your thoughts on that?

MACFARLAND: Yes, it was, it was definitely a hybrid command pro arrangement. We stood up the Special Ops Joint Task Force for Operation Inherent Resolve. And Secretary Carter’s initial thought was, all those JSOC guys would be underneath that. And, you know, without going into the sausage making, that wasn’t the ultimate outcome of the discussion. But there was broad agreement, because the JSOC commanders were friends and battle buddies of mine from Afghanistan. And you know, we were going to get along, we were going to work well together – Tony Thomas, and I, and Scotty Miller. And you know, I mean, we’d serve together.

And so, we were committed to making sure that all this worked. So, we had Major General Jim Craft, commanding the Special Ops, and he was the supported commander in Syria, and the 82nd, followed by the 101st was the supporting commander in Iraq, and each one supported the other in the other country.

And, Jim, you know, yes, he had these operators running around you know, and 5th Group supporting them and all that stuff, but it was Jim’s job to kind of sort all that out. I was the target engagement authority for both Iraq and Syria, Gus was my – the guy who actually made that all work for me. But so, you know, the strikes were all happening based on what level of delegation I gave to those guys, and they had their own way we call CJOC – combined joint operation center – that enabled them to make their own strike decisions that then delegated level of authority, just as the JFLC did.

You know, so. So, it all worked out. And, you know, I’m from New York, so I believe, you know, Yogi Berra was right when he said, “if it ain’t broke, don’t break it.” And, you know, the ODA there, the JSOC guys were the first ones on the ground, they had a relationship with Mazloum, you know, and the Special Forces guys are set, were savvy enough when they came in, and Green Berets being all about relationships, and hey, we’re not going to sever any relationships that you have. We’re going to build on it. We’re going to support it.

We’re going to wrap around it. And that’s what they did, very effectively. So, I think our Special Ops community found ways to, you know, make it all work without confusing Muslims. Like which tribe of Special Forces, are you? Why am I talking to you now, instead of you? And they figured it all out, I think exceptionally well.

And it was really a commitment to teamwork by the Special Ops folks to each other, and with me, the conventional guy that really smoothed out a lot of the peculiarities of the C2 arrangement.

BOWMAN: Another question over here in the back please.

ZAIS: Thanks, Brad. Thanks, Michael. It’s great to see you again.

My question is about the efficacy of this by-with-and-through. My name is Matthew Zais and I’m a co-author of the *Army’s history of the Iraq war*. And I think there’s no question that there’s unanimity about the tactical success of by-with-and-through. But one of the findings we found in our history of OIF was the greatest benefactor of the war may be Tehran.

So, my question on that is, if we look at Iraq and Syria today, that came out of this larger than the Iraqi army, the IRGC controls a lot of communication from Tehran through Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut. Combined with-and-through

developed to deliver effects beyond the tactical level of the political or strategic level, and how do we assess that efficacy to whether by-with-and-through really works at those levels today?

MACFARLAND: So yes, I can affect it. When I was in command, well, that's when we occupied Al-Tanf. You know, for a couple of reasons. One was to gain control of the tri-border area, another was to provide a springboard for operations up to Abu Kamal in the Balikh River Valley, just southeast of Deir ez-Zor, which is really kind of the heart of darkness there. And then the third was because it was right astride this line of communication that we saw, being created by a number of Iranian-backed – or Soleimani-backed actors, you know, through Anbar Province up into Syria.

Which is probably why, you know, the Russians accidentally bombed us there while I was there, and they didn't like us there. And so, by putting ourselves on the ground there, we were able to largely mitigate some of these Iranian efforts at creating, I think, this expanded sphere of influence over western Anbar, eastern Syria. And not to say we completely eliminated it, but we certainly reduced it.

Likewise, by being on the ground with Mazloum in the north. In the East and the Tigris River Valley, it was more of a challenge. And I could see the fingerprints of Soleimani on some of the plans put forth by the Iraqi general officers on how we're going to go up to those into Mosul and around Fallujah.

And by having a strong voice and being the people there -- the person in the room who could bring the most resources to bear to help the Iraqis we were able to keep a lot of the Iranian influence, you know, at an acceptable potential -- at an acceptable level for some time. Around Mosul got a lot more complicated, and I can't really talk to that because Steve Townsend had replaced me by then. But leading up to that, talking to Hadi Al-Amiri, you know he wanted PMF, and Tal Afar, and places like that.

It was a real challenge trying to keep but – keep them at bay. But because we could provide more help to Iraq than Iran could. Iran could cause more trouble for Iraq – we could provide more help. You know, there was sort of a balance there that we were able to strike with Prime Minister Abadi. And so, the by-with-and-through provides a way to mitigate those kinds of situations. Not to say it's perfect, but it's better than nothing.

FLOURNOY: Can I jump on that question. By-with-and-through is an operational option, and you are mitigating second and third order effects of a much larger strategic decision that was made years earlier, which was to invade Iraq, and take out Saddam Hussein's regime. Which ended, you know, a very long period of Iran and Iraq essentially contained each other, being fully preoccupied and containing each other in the region.

Once you took away Saddam's regime, and you'd have the chaos of Iraq, you know, the opportunity for Iranian influence to grow which was exponentially. So I agree, you know, stuck with that reality, you can use by-with-and-through to manage some of the second and third order impacts and mitigate some of the challenges. But it can't be – the strategy decision was a bigger decision that was made much prior, that set the conditions that you can only manage but can't really change with life.

MACFARLAND: That's true.

BOWMAN: Thank you. One last question from the audience.

MARROGI: Hi, I'm a retired Colonel Aizen Marrogi with U.S. Army Medical Corps. Michael – thank you very much for your book.

And this question is for the three of you. In medicine, we talk about prevention and treatment. But I wanted to ask you a question about – we spent \$30 billion army, Iraqi security forces. And then 500,000 insurgents came on and melt away. And then the same thing happened in Afghanistan.

And just curious to see where is the problem in harming security forces of these countries is, we spent so much effort doing that, but it didn't pan out. I think, maybe you can help us, or somebody like me next time.

MACFARLAND: Can I say something as somebody who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan, before the collapse of their respective militaries, and trying to do what you're talking about. You know, you've – if you've ever taught a kid to ride a bicycle, you know, you run alongside, the hand on the back of the bicycle seat, for quite a while until that – they're ready to pedal on their own. And that can take quite a while. I mean, look at what the British have done, you know, with their some of these forces around the world in Oman and places, you know, with seconded officers serving in their formation. Sometimes it doesn't take a lot, but it takes just enough.

And there's a little bit of science and art mixed together there and understand how much of a presence you need to have to provide that reassurance and that level of professionalism, to ensure that your money is going into the right place. You know, for every billion dollars that you send, how much is actually reaching the point of need? You have to have enough of an infrastructure there to monitor that.

So, I don't think that the problems that of Assad, Iraq, and Afghanistan, negate, the model. You know, what I think if anything, they reinforce the model, to say, you know, you need enough people on the ground. You know, I had inspector General's come around saying, "Where's all this stuff that you provided to the Iraqis?"

"Well, I don't know, I'm not allowed to leave the FOB. You know, so we gave it to them. I assume they're using it, I see them shooting ISIS on – through my UAV feeds, you know, so. But can I account for every bullet? No, I couldn't in those cases." But in Syria, when we had troops on the ground, Turkey wanted to know, "Hey, you know, where's all this ammunition going? Is it going to be used against Turkey?"

And we were able to provide a reasonable level of assurance that no, it's going to be used against ISIS, because we're there with our hands on the back of the bicycle seat to make sure that it's being used for the intended purpose. So, I think, really, the model is fine. You know, it just needs to be followed through. And sometimes it takes a lot of patience across multiple administrations.

BOWMAN: Secretary Flournoy, you want to add to that?

FLOURNOY: Yes, no, I think the U.S. hand on the bicycle is key. And these things take, you know, a very long time. And usually, we lose patience or interest, or willingness to bear the cost, whether it's human or financial. And we take our hand off the seat. I think the second challenge is, you know, if you were to do it, another one of my favorite proposed lessons learned is, you know, as a real historical study of under what conditions does counterinsurgency succeed or fail.

A huge factor that we tend not to pay enough attention to, is the credibility and legitimacy of the partner that we choose. SDF had incredible local legitimacy. Huge benefit. The Maliki government, not so much. You know, Karzai in

Afghanistan, not so much, huge corruption. And so, the really – a clear-eyed assessment of ‘does this partner have the credibility and legitimacy to be supportable in a way that’s successful or not?’

Because I think that’s a factor that we’ve tended to discount or to believe that we can somehow – we make them and we can change how they’re viewed among their own population. Which is probably something more than we actually can do.

MACFARLAND: Yes, that that is a tricky point. I’d just associate myself with that. And, you know, say that that was how we turned the tide in Iraq and OIF was the legitimacy of the tribal forces. You know, outstripped anything that the Iraqi Security Forces or they provided enough of a veneer of legitimacy to the Iraqi Security Forces that they were able to turn the tide against al-Qaeda.

BOWMAN: Before we conclude, I can’t resist the temptation at one last quick lightning round question, Madam Secretary, for you and for you, General, in as some of you may have seen, there was a press release yesterday, we got from U.S. Central Command, announcing that we had conducted a drone strike against two ISIS officials and one – maybe both of them – were killed. We’ve talked about the ISIS threat and lessons learned. But unfortunately, this threat to some degree is not completely in the rearview mirror.

Understanding the difference between a proto-state, as you said, a terrorist organization, and an ideology, those three things aren’t the same thing. Is ISIS defeated? One, to both of you. And based on your answer to that, what force posture do we need going forward in Iraq and Syria to contain that threat?

FLOURNOY: So, I once had a counterpart from the Middle East tell me, “The problem with you Americans is you think that every problem can be solved. Many problems in our part of the world can only be managed.” And so I think we should continue to pursue the defeat of ISIS, al-Qaeda, other groups that pose a threat to the United States’ interests and allies.

But I think these are very long-term projects. These groups tend to re-institute or re-regenerate themselves. I don’t know why anybody would want to lead ISIS at this point or be the number one or two because, you know because you don’t tend to have a long lifespan in that case – but they do tend to regenerate. And I think this is something where you have to keep after the problem repeatedly, until you know, it goes away. Which may or may not happen, so we can contain the threat to us.

I don’t think ISIS is posing a huge threat to the U.S. homeland. But you look at – even put al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, very busy with the civil war and doing other things. But if they turn their attention to the United States they have the historical credibility to actually reach out and touch us.

So, you got to keep your eye on them. So, we have to have a sustainable, manageable way to keep our eye on these groups and keep putting pressure on them so that they cannot be successful in planning and executing external attacks against us.

MACFARLAND: I’d say absolutely ISIS was defeated, because we prevented them from achieving their stated goal of creating a caliphate. Are they eliminated? No. And they’ve been knocked down from a proto-state hybrid conventional force down to a terrorist entity more amorphous and more difficult.

And before the famous FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency manual came out, all we really had was the old low-intensity conflict manual and it said the two principles of low intensity conflict were one, as we mentioned earlier, legitimacy, and two, perseverance. You know, we've kind of figured out the legitimacy thing. I hope we've learned the lesson on perseverance as well.

GORDON: Right. Can I just very quickly interject? I agree with only with both those comments. But it's important to note that Operation Inherent Resolve, which was the name of the ISIS campaign that probably 90 percent of Americans never heard of. Under that description, it still continues to this day. It's still in effect. The Caliphate has been defeated, I think is destroyed, but it's still remnants. The operation. It's still – there is a commander, there's 2,500 US troops in Iraq.

And there's 1,000 or so in Syria. And seems apparent that one lesson the Biden administration has learned from history is it's not planning to take these troops out and understands it needs to maintain this presence to keep the lid on situation.

FLOURNOY: Can I say one thing, caveat on the perseverance, absolutely. But I think we can't let any of this get on automatic pilot, where we just kind of treat it like it's unchanging, because situations, whether it's a threat, whether it's the partners and what they're willing to do, whether it's other factors – they continue to change. And I think if we don't keep refreshing our assessment of what's going on, what does it take to go with the investor authorities, capabilities, et cetera? We can, we can get in trouble.

So, I'm not saying that we're there at this point. But I do think that, with all this happening in the world, the rise of China's case. What's happening in Russia and Ukraine, North Korea, Iran, pursuit of nuclear weapons, all of these things, we – there is a risk of sort of just putting the counterterrorism work, kind of in a background, ongoing, self-generating set of operations. And that that's dangerous to do. We got to keep focused on that as well.

BOWMAN: Thank you, Secretary.

Michael, congratulations again on your book. It's –if anyone hasn't read it yet, I highly recommend it. You can see my well-tabbed version here.

And thank you to our exceptional panel that you bring such insights and expertise. I really enjoyed the discussion. I wish we had more time. Thanks to our audience for joining.

Wonderful to have folks here in person and thanks to everyone online. For more information on FDD and our Center on Military and Political Power, please go to fdd.org and thanks again to CNAS for cohosting. Thank you.