



## National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations

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### 23<sup>rd</sup> Arab-U.S. Policymakers Conference

*Framing and Charting the Region's Issues, Interests, Challenges, and Opportunities:  
Implications for Arab and U.S. Policies*

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### ***“GEO-POLITICAL DYNAMICS: SYRIA, LEBANON, IRAQ & IRAN”***

***Chair:***

**Dr. John Iskander** - Chair, Near East and North Africa Area Studies, Foreign Service Institute, U.S. Department of State.

***Speakers:***

**H.E. Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian** - Research Scholar, Program on Science and Global Security, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University; former Head of the Foreign Relations Committee of Iran's National Security Council (1997-2005) and Spokesman for Iran in its nuclear negotiations with the European Union (2003-2005); author, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir and Iran and the United States: An Insider's view on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace*.

**Dr. Judith Yaphe** - Senior Research Fellow and Middle East Project Director, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University; Adjunct Professor, Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University; former Senior Analyst on Near East-Persian Gulf issues, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, Directorate of Intelligence, CIA.

**Dr. Najib Ghabian** - Special Representative to the United States, National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces; Associate Professor of Political Science and Middle East Studies, University of Arkansas.

**Dr. Imad Harb** - Distinguished International Affairs Fellow, National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations; former Senior Researcher in Strategic Studies, Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (Abu Dhabi, UAE).

**Dr. Trita Parsi** - Founder and President, National Iranian American Council; author *A Single Roll of the Dice - Obama's Diplomacy with Iran* and *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Iran, Israel and the United States*.

*Remarks as delivered.*

**[Dr. John Iskander]** Ladies and gentlemen, welcome back. It's a great pleasure to announce our next panel. My name is John Iskander. I am the Chair of the Middle East and North Africa Area Studies Program at the State Department's Foreign Service Institute. I'm here of course in an unofficial capacity.

We are going to run – Dr. Anthony has given us the green light to run the session for its full length. I have asked our speakers to prepare for brief comments, so we're looking forward to brief and punchy introductions to their theses, which we will then have a chance to discuss in question and answer afterwards.

We actually have six speakers – as I said they will each be as brief as humanly possible I think, and have generously agreed to this.

We're going to begin with Dr. Seyed Hossein Mousavian. Dr. Mousavian is a Research Scholar at the Program on Science and Global Security at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, former head of the Foreign Relations Committee of Iran's National Security Council until 2005, spokesman for Iran in its nuclear negotiations with the European Union from 2003 to 2005, and author of the "Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir," and "Iran and the United States:" recently published, "An Insider's View on the Failed Past" and the Road to Peace. Dr. Mousavian will speak to us about the Iranian perspective on the U.S.-Iranian relationship as well as on the Gulf countries as viewed from Iran, so how these things look from Tehran, again from somebody who's an insider and outsider in viewing this.

Our next speaker after that is Dr. Judith Yaphe. Any of you who have been to these conferences in previous years will know Dr. Yaphe, Senior Research Fellow, Middle East Project Director – George Washington University Elliot School of International Affairs, as well as a Senior Analyst formerly on Near East-Persian Gulf issues, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis at the CIA. And she'll be speaking to us about the question of Iraq in crisis, can it survive this crisis, and what if it fails. An important question for us at this moment.

Dr. Najib Ghadbian. Special Representative to the United States for the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, also an Associate Professor of Political Science and Middle East Studies at the University of Arkansas. Dr. Ghadbian will be speaking on the perspective of the Syrian moderates about the war on ISIS/ISIL.

Dr. Imad Harb is Distinguished International Affairs Fellow here at the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, former Senior Researcher in Strategic Studies at

the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, and he'll be speaking to us about what the U.S. will gain from staking a claim to helping in institutional development and protection in Lebanon and in the future Syria.

And then on the addendum to the schedule you will see Dr. Trita Parsi, who had originally been invited and is back. We're very grateful. Dr. Trita Parsi will be speaking to us about again the U.S.-Iranian relationship but viewed from the view here in Washington and focusing on U.S. Congress.

Dr. Mousavian, Ambassador Mousavian, thank you.

**[Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian]** Thank you very much. It's really a great pleasure for me to be actually the first Iranian former diplomat or official to be invited to the 23rd annual U.S.-Arab Policymakers Conference.

Therefore, I understand my limits. I should not be too critical about the U.S. and Arab approaches towards Iran because I'm afraid I would not be invited for the next year.

However, I really believe to touch up on first the relations between Iran, the U.S., and Arabs. I think there would be no dispute here on Iranian perspective that during the last 35 years since revolution 1979, the U.S. and majority of Arab countries they have followed a dual-track policy towards Iran. The first track regime change; if not possible, the second track weakening and isolating Iran.

However, in every Arab community interviews, meetings, conferences you go they are now complaining about power and influence of Iran after 35 years. Therefore, I think it's clear for Americans and Arabs, the coercion policies of the last three decades have failed.

They really tried whatever they could from military invasion of Iran, from use of weapons of mass destruction, from coercive sanctions, to covert war - everything. But however today Iran is stable, if not the most stable. It's powerful, if not the most powerful, and is very influential, if not the most influential nation and country in the region.

Therefore, I would really suggest to bring a change from the U.S. and Arabs and also Iranians, for bringing a change to a new relation. At least the geopolitics, dynamics, and shifts in the region is dictating us, and we look at the Arab League - practically there is no Arab League. The Arab League has collapsed and is completely irrelevant.

When we are looking to the Arab world we see a lot of failed states. The U.S. allies collapsed like Mubarak, Ben Ali. Thanks, God, they are not blaming Iran on the collapse of Mubarak or Ben Ali – Iran has not been interfering. And some failed states at least like Libya that they are not blaming Iran interfering Libyan affairs. And unfortunately there is no leadership in Arab world today.

On the peace process, Iranians maintain from three decades ago, two decades ago that Israelis are not serious, and after at least 20, 30 years the Iranian narrative on peace process has been realized. The peace process is failed, the two-state solution is failed, and everybody knows this is not Iran's problem; this is Bibi's problem resisting two-state solution.

The U.S. policy whether we like it or not is shifting and will shift from Persian Gulf, Middle East to Asia. Even if Americans, they are not going to shift it, they don't have resources and capacity to continue the traditional policy of invading countries or investing like what they have invested in last 20, 30 years. Although I would say even if they invest they would not be able to manage the Middle East. The reason is the result today in the Middle East; the situation is enough reason about the U.S. incapability of managing the crisis in the Middle East.

Iran-Iraq – no more rivalries and they are going towards alliance.

Egypt – the main Iranian rivalry in the Arab countries is really in domestic problem and at least for a decade they would not be able to play their role in the region.

Turkey – neither Iranian ally, nor Arab ally, nor U.S. ally, nor Syrian ally, and nobody really knows where Turkey is going because they are supporting Hamas, Muslim Brotherhood, Jabhat al Nusra, and at the same time they are a member of NATO.

Russia after Ukrainian crisis -- everyone understands Russia would be different, regionally and internationally, and creating international consensus against Iran would not be possible anymore.

The ISIS is a great danger and threat to everybody – Iranians, Arabs, region, Americans, Europeans, Russians, but we need to address, we need to deal with the root causes of ISIS. The current policy of the U.S., just military strike doesn't work, won't work. I think everybody understands. To my understanding we have four root causes we need to deal with ISIS.

The first one is ideology. ISIS is not just a bunch of terrorists that have been created for one night. This is ideology with a deep root in Arab countries.

Millions – they really ideologically, not the terrorist activity, but ideologically they are on the same page with ISIS.

Second, bad governance in Middle East for decades.

Third is the lack of a regional platform coupled with foreign intervention.

And the fourth is peace process. Israeli behavior towards Palestinians for 50, 60 years.

They are really the root causes of creation of terrorist groups like ISIS. It's not going to be ended by ISIS. We need inclusive coalition to deal with ISIS. We need to focus on weakening ISIS in Syria to save Iraq and the region. We need to use the opportunity for Shia-Sunni rapprochement because this is a real threat to Shia and Sunni both.

And the next is about Syria – I will try to be very, very short.

I believe we need also in Syria a two-track policy. The first – cooperate with Assad to prevent the collapse of Syria as Syria, as a government, as a country, and as a nation. To prevent the collapse of military and security establishments. Not to make the same mistake as done in Iraq. To preserve the integrity of Syria. To wipe up the terrorists from the Syrian border and country. To end the sectarian and civilian war in Syria. And then in parallel to agree with Assad on a transitional period establishing a new governing system based on power sharing with the rule of majority, Sunnis majority.

How to deal with the Middle East today. I would say first we need to learn how to deal with Islam and Islamists, Middle East is Muslim, and I think the west doesn't have right strategy how to deal with the Islamists. We need a grand strategy to support the moderates versus radicals.

Second – create a platform for regional cooperation. The first phase in the Persian Gulf between GCC, Iran, and Iraq, and second a broader Middle East with major playing role for four big powers, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt.

Then to finalize a nuclear deal with Iran. I just want to tell you on the nuclear because I was asked to explain a little bit on the nuclear – a deal by November 24th can be reached – I'm 100 percent sure – if the work powers are going to sign a deal within the framework of international rules and regulations.

NPT is the criteria. Within IAEA status and NPT there is nothing beyond three arrangements. Subsidiary arrangement called 3.1 additional protocol and

safeguard agreement. These are all about transparency measures. If the P5 are really serious for a deal Iranians they would sign to all three arrangements.

Internationally there is nothing beyond these three arrangements. But unfortunately what the U.S. and four powers are negotiating with Iran today, all the elements they are negotiating are beyond NPT, beyond international rules. There is nothing within NPT. Capped enrichment is beyond NPT. Capped stockpile is beyond NPT. Cap at number of centrifuges – beyond NPT. Technical conversions and heavy water at Arak is beyond NPT.

Currently everything they are negotiating with Iran has nothing to do with international rules and regulations. Iranians are ready to cooperate on many of these issues, but if the U.S. is clever enough not to demand very excessively on Iranians.

And on Palestinian issue we should never forget Israel-Palestinian crisis is the core issue of the Middle East, and the last would be to force Israel to give up its nuclear arms, nuclear weapons in order to realize the WMD-free zone in the Middle East.

And on the Iranians, I think Iranians are ready to go for a greater rapprochement with the regional countries, GCC, and as long as there is no regional cooperation between GCC, Iran, and Iraq there would not be stability and peace in Persian Gulf. There is no second alternative. GCC knows very well that they cannot balance the power and the weight of Iran. They are using the U.S. for over three decades to balance the power of Iran. Why we do not go for a regional cooperation system like EU where the big powers like Germany, they have been engaged, involved within a regional cooperation, and the small countries like Norway, they have no fear anymore from Germany. Why we cannot do the same in the region?

But we really need to respect and to recognize their legitimate regional rights and interests of Iran in the region, and the weight, and to engage to a regional cooperation. Thank you very much.

**[Dr. Judith Yaphe]** Well that was a surprise, wasn't it? I want to thank the panelists.

I want to thank Mr. Mousavian for pointing out through his very kind words about the United States what's wrong within the region, and what's wrong about U.S. influence.

I think it just goes to show that it's one more thing that Iran and the U.S. have in common, that both of us in some ways have had waning influence. I'm sure you would agree with me on that.

But I want to turn to something else, and I want to refocus back – I want to talk about Iran, and I want you as I start – and I know time is limited – if you heard me last year I will not repeat anything I said last year. Isn't that nice, because Iraq is not the same as it was last year. And next year it may not be there at all, who knows. It frightens me very much as someone who has long followed this country.

But ask yourself this before I get started. And ask yourself this as you think about the criticism you've heard today of the Obama Administration, of the support a few people have given for its different policies, and including what we have just heard from our Iranian friend. What would you do if you had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize after just taking office and now towards the end of your second term we're contemplating war, if not boots on the ground, a major crisis in Iraq, crisis has been going on in Syria, and that demands our attention.

You think it's a bit of a problem? It might be.

Now, what I want to do in the little time I have is to talk about what I call some simple truths, things to think about. If you don't hear anything else that I say for the next seven and a half minutes but it will sort of be encapsulated in these six thoughts.

Now, I want to give you this warning as well for purposes of full disclosure. It's this. I used to be an optimist on Iraq. Perhaps I was the last remaining optimist on Iraq, and in some ways I think I still am, or if not I am maybe the last one in some respects, but as I go through this and I think you heard the Ambassador this morning. You read the papers every day, think you have a hand on what's going on – things are very complicated. And I would also remind if you're reading and trying to follow who's up and who's down, who's winning and who's losing, that what you're seeing each day no matter what media you follow is only a daily snapshot.

You cannot go to major conclusions from one snapshot today. Did we take a village today? Did ISIS take it back? Who's in charge? Who's counting? You can't.

You have to take, as I think the Ambassador said this morning, the longer view. This is a crisis which will not go away quickly.

Now, for my simple truths. And again my first was, I guess and my apologies to Ambassador Faily who I have a great amount of admiration for – Iraq may not survive, but if not as he says what then? You have to consider the consequences.

I think that if you consider those consequences and how you view things, how you view what's happening in Iraq depends on where you sit. Do you sit in Kurdistan? Do you sit in Baghdad? Do you sit in Najaf? Do you sit anywhere? You can't sit much in Anbar. As a Sunni friend told me yesterday he hasn't been there, which is his home, in a long time.

Now, it's not just where you sit, but it's also, I think, what do they want? And that's getting difficult to sort out, because we still don't have a country that's come anywhere close to agreeing on the need for national consensus and reconciliation. And that to me is one of the basics that's needed. What I'm told by the Iraqis I speak to, high-level, in between, but Iraqis – we are a mess.

The Kurds will not fight for the Sunni or the Shia. The Shia won't fight for the Kurds or the Sunni. The Sunnis won't fight for anybody else. Each has his own economic interest, his own community, his own tribal, his own interest, but none will fight for each other or for Iraq, and that is a great problem, and it's one that you will not solve by saying well I know, let's set up national guards for each federal unit. That's not going to solve that. What the Ambassador for example believes very strongly is Iraqis need a new identity. For Iraq's whole history, at least the past 90 years, it's always been about identity. Anyway, Iraqis are willing to talk, but there's no trust, and it's going to be hard to build trust a second time, especially among those communities that feel so marginalized and so cheated after the first go around and the first phase of the civil war.

Now, the other thing is I think that if you look at who's in charge in Iraq, the controls, you can look at it either way. We used to talk about Maliki is he the new Saddam or not, and now we wonder about Abadi who is not Maliki. In many ways his background is different, his approach is different – I'll come back to that in the end – but I think the point is that how much control he will be able to exercise is a serious question.

As a friend of mine said yesterday – Iraqi, a Sunni I will tell you – that the mafias are in control in Baghdad. And you can guess who those mafias, who those political party factional interests are.

Now, I would point out comments as well. There's a question on the Iranian connection. Either we gave Iraq to the Iranians – no. Either we let them in – no. They were there already, that's not the issue. But there was a lot of growing – I

mentioned this last year – growing dissatisfaction among many Iraqis with the role the Iranians were playing.

One can only say with all honesty given the difficulty that erupted so surprisingly – it shouldn't have been a surprise to Malaki and others – that ISIS has such a rapid success. Who answered the cry for help first? And yes, it was the Iranians. They were there and they were there immediately. They're the closest ones there, and everybody else was thinking about it before they decided on what they would do. So that does give I will say one to you, one to your side. Not yet already.

Let me move on to that – if you're looking at it from an Iraqi point of view, Iraq has several options, and they may change, one up, one down, a little more or less, but I think if you think about it what's happened. Why Iraq failed – I'll make it real simple. The collapse of the military, no control of corruption, of the widespread bribery that was going on, no interest in capabilities or even if you had the units manned and armed and able to fight. Direct interference from Malaki, politicization of the military, security services, insistence on sectarian quotas – I could go on with a lot of things, but the point is there was an absence of all of these things, so what are the options for Iraq? I have what I call the four, three, two, O plan.

And let's start with Iraq, one, which means Iraq stays pretty much as it is united in some kind of a balance while they fight this out. I don't know if that will happen. It may be a short-term solution.

Iraq, two – yes, the Kurds separate, the Arabs come together, because there is a feeling of Iraqi nationalism, and at some point they will fight in the end if the Kurds have taken all the territory and power with them, that will be the next battle.

Iraq three – the mini states. Sunnistan, Shiastan, Kurdistan – I don't believe in that. I don't think that's what the Arabs of Iraq want, Shia or Sunni. The Kurds may want it as well, but again right now they are not that interested publically in talking about this because of the great pressures that have been brought to bare on them.

So what do we have in the zero solution? That's chaos, and that's no solution because that's simply we'll perpetuate the situation that we have, and you know that in the absence of governance, in the absence of a state, of a rule of law what you have is the ability to declare a caliphate, the ability to recruit, and the fact that this cancer that is Da'esh, ISIL, whatever you want to call it does not just disappear.

So can Iraq be saved? I would like to think yes, but a body must do, must try to do certain things to happen. First of all, the military has got to come back, and the Iraqi military has to defeat Da'esh. They have to resolve as well the problems, which allowed this group to flourish. Those are the so-called root causes, but you're not dealing with a group that believes in negotiation – I think we already see that.

The second point I would make is that the answer is not this government of national unity that is created where you bring back every politician that's held some position since 2003, 2004 or 2005 and think this is going to succeed. It's not. It simply does underscore that Abadi is in a weak position. He represents the party's desire to stay together and stay in control, but he is not in total control. He's got to deal with factions that are still more interested in their "wasta" not in the state itself, and that is a major problem. He has to remove Malaki's advisors in the civilian and military government. He's got to end that corruption, and that's not an easy thing to say. Yes, I know.

I have one more sentence and that's this: it may not be possible to save Iraq. I would like to think that it is. But Mr. Abadi needs a base of support. He needs the ability to make decisions, and I think he's capable of that. I think he's also a very rational man. He did not grow up in exile in two police states. He's not a conspiratorialist the way Mr. Malaki was.

He spent his exile in England as a successful entrepreneur and engineer, and was independent – did not have to depend on anybody for his daily living. His ability – he's got to be able to act on them, and that is something a) his cabinet, his government, the Iraqis have to give him, and the second is that we have to help him with that, we the neighbors whether it's Iran, it's the Gulf states, but the neighbors, the international community, we have to show our support for that as well because if he loses, ta da a loss, we will all lose. The mafias will lose, the Iraqis will lose, the neighbors will lose.

So I think if I've done anything to bring home this threat to you I think I've succeeded.

Thank you, very much.

**[Dr. Najib Ghadbian]** I want to thank the organizers as well, for including Syria on this year's conference, and in my eight minutes I'll actually revise my comments to address some of the points mentioned by Ambassador Mousavian.

Let me start by saying the war on ISIS is a welcomed strategy by the international community from the perspective of Syrians, and when I say Syrians I'm talking about most Syrians, those who suffered the atrocities of the Assad regime. The good news is there's a unity over the purpose, and there's a unity over the need to defeat ISIS.

The bad news so far – the way the war has been conducted has not been effective. In fact we have some evidence that ISIL, Da'esh, has been able to recruit more lately. We've seen some figures in just the last 48 hours. This is why from our point of view, moderate Syrians, we believe a comprehensive strategy to fight ISIS must include three other elements besides defeating ISIS militarily. And under defeating ISIS militarily we welcome the fact that the strategy announced by the Obama Administration does include working with the moderate opposition, which includes a specific program called Train and Equip, but I think we need to accelerate that program and we need to be very creative and effective in implementing that because the time is of the essence.

But the three other elements of the strategy I think that must be included in a comprehensive strategy to defeat ISIS should include the following.

First, we should actually address the question of foreign intervention of all its form, and I place the Iranian intervention at the top of the list. I think when we want to talk about terrorist organizations we should include other terrorist organizations that are fighting in Syria. Hezbollah has been terrorizing the Syrian population on the side of the regime. There are a dozen Iraqi Shiite organizations been recruited by the Assad regime to kill Syrians. I think they must be included.

The second element, which is the core element in the minds of most Syrians, is to address the underlying causes of terrorism. And here I disagree with Ambassador Mousavian about the underlying causes. I agree with him about one of them – the bad governance. In fact, I would go further and say the brutal governance, the criminal governance of the Assad regime was the first underlying causes of bringing ISIS into Syria and giving it a cause.

So any strategy must include a political solution, and that political solution from our perspective should be based on the Geneva document, which creates the transitional governing body. That leaves no room for Assad. In fact in Geneva it allows for both sides to have a veto on the other side, and I could assure you that most Syrians will not accept Assad after what he committed, all of these crimes against humanity and all the war crimes. So you suggested about the two-track policies, Mr. Ambassador – will not be accepted for most Syrians.

So the underlying causes again is the brutality of Assad, is the barrel bombing, is the support of Iran and Russia and the providing of a political cover for a criminal regime to displace half of its population and destroy the rest of the country.

The last element of any strategy to fight ISIS must in fact support moderate governance. And one of the rationales presented by the Ambassador for working with Assad is to save Syria. I'm sorry - half of Syria is already destroyed. Half the population are either internally displaced or made into refugees. That figure is 11 million. And the person who is responsible for that is Bashar al Assad.

So for Syrians, without the departure of Assad there is no solution. This is the beginning and the end of any comprehensive strategy for fighting ISIL and fighting all other terrorist organizations. There are groups on the ground trying to fill that vacuum. There are local councils, there are local communities trying to provide governance into these areas, and I think one way to help that immediately is to provide safe zones.

For a lot of Syrians they cannot understand how the international community put up an alliance of 50 countries to fight one terrorist organization and it could not tell Assad to stop the daily barrel bombing that's going at the same time while ISIL is committing its atrocities.

So providing a safe zone immediately I think can help the cause of fighting terrorism and allow the moderate opposition to provide humanitarian assistance and to establish good governance. So from this point of view of most Syrians the war on terrorism begins and ends with the departure of Assad.

Thank you.

**[Dr. Imad Harb]** Good afternoon. Good to be with you again. I decided for myself to talk a little bit about what the United States can do to help basically reinstitute institutional life or create such in Lebanon and Syria.

Syria is going through its civil war, its own destruction, very, very unfortunate. And Lebanon seems to be to many observers to be on the road there. Unfortunately it had fought with itself for 15 years and now the seeds have seemed to be re-germinating after so many years of peace and rebuilding and reconstruction. So people like me, who see life in half full glasses not half empty, wish that something can be done about institutional rejuvenation in these countries.

But first just a couple of observations. The situations in Lebanon and Syria seem to be not only the result of obviously domestic issues, but also the manifestations of wider and a general struggle for basically almost the future of the Middle East. To me such important questions, there are many, many important questions of which are probably the following.

Is the area to remain an arena for continuing violence and conflict, not only Lebanon and Syria, but the entire Middle East?

Is the politics of the area going to be a function of sectarian divides only or are the really a function of sectarian divides?

Are we headed towards a redrawing of the overall map as many are really speculating whether Sykes-Picot can be scrapped for a new Sykes-Picot so to speak?

Can the new map be drawn if so desired without causing innumerable damages and unbearable costs and pain for everybody involved?

For how long can disaster politics continue to define intra-Middle Eastern affairs and international affairs in the Middle East?

In my opinion there is a definite, definite need for institutional development away from obviously personal politics. I know this is a very, very difficult thing to do but there doesn't seem to be any other answer other than getting rid of personalized politics and building institutional life for all of these political systems.

The United States positive intervention and purposeful positive intervention and knowing positive intervention to build institutions for the area to me is very essential. Unfortunately, what actually worries me and worries a lot of people like me is almost the apparent nonchalance, that appearance that accompanies some poor knowledge of some very, very basic things in the Middle East and in Lebanon and Syria obviously.

It's almost like a headfirst approach to thinking that only religious and sectarian considerations should actually be entertained. And these are the best indicators really of trouble. Nobody seems to really look at - everybody seems to be digging in the same hole. They say if you find yourself in a hole, stop digging. Apparently everybody is still digging the same hole and trying to find yet more gems so to speak of the current situation.

The Middle East and the Arab world and the international community watching from afar see only religious divisions. What needs to actually be seen is day-to-day issues – poverty, lack of meaningful education, health services, hopes for the future. People want to live their lives and that's the most important part.

In Lebanon, there are very, very many issues that need to be really dealt with, specifically on institutional development. The United States has been helping Lebanon; thankfully I'm sure for the Lebanese, militarily – arms and training, sharing intelligence. Lebanon is part of the international coalition to fight ISIS, and it actually should be although I doubt it can really do much militarily about it. There are very, very essential issues.

The presidency – there is no president in Lebanon. The last president finished his term last June and since then parliament has not been able to even convene to elect a new president. Whoever it is, just at least to continue that institution to be the head of that executive authority in the country, and that provides basically legitimacy for the political system as it is now.

There needs to be a consensus candidate. There are people who are proposing now to be president, and one of them is a former war criminal, the other one is a less so of a former war criminal, unfortunately. And honestly things – truth has to be said, although it hurts a lot, and it especially hurts the Lebanese because they really don't know what to do about it.

Samir Geagea has killed many, many people during the civil war, and now he's running for president while General Aoun wants to be president, is being supported by Hezbollah, and Hezbollah and General Aoun won't allow their deputies to go to parliament to convene a quorum, to have at least two-thirds of the members so the parliament can do its job. So apparently there are more important things. I doubt that there are, but apparently they see that this is a good thing to do.

Parliament – Lebanese parliament has extended its own term from almost seven, no 15 months ago it was supposed to have been reelected in June of 2013 and they decided at the time there wasn't a whole lot of political consensus around the country or in parliament so they decided that we'll just for one time and that one time by the way has been repeated many times. They extended their own term for seventeen months until November 20<sup>th</sup> this year next month, and now so far they haven't decided on a new electoral law or anything of that nature which basically means that they're going to extend yet one more time for another two and a half years almost until June 2017.

So there has to be a renewal of that parliament, and the problem with this is presidency and parliament, the presidency is for the Maronite Christians and the parliament, the head of the parliament is a Shiite Lebanese. So the Maronites say well we have to elect our president before we renew the term of parliament or elect new parliamentarians because that would be an extension of Shiite so to speak role in government without an extension of Maronite role in government. So basically this institutional renewal has been sacrificed to just bickering over which confession really has its way or which doesn't.

There also are some things that are related to the international situation in Lebanon. In other words Lebanon has in 2006, Hezbollah fought a war with Israel and Resolution 1701 was supposed to have finished all hostilities and basically spread Lebanese army troops and U.N. troops around the country and the borders with Israel and Syria. That has not been done.

What I think the United States can do is basically reinvigorate this issue of 1701 and truly have a demarcation of borders between Syria and Lebanon and truly spread all the - put troops on all the borders so there won't be incursions between, in and out of Lebanon for terrorists or anybody who is going to be involved in the Syrian crisis, which basically has become, long ago has become a Lebanese crisis when Hezbollah decided it is its own duty to defend the Bashar al Assad regime.

In Syria, I really won't put my foot in my mouth on institutional development in Syria, but I think there is a very desperate need so to speak for institutional development. No personalized politics. I believe Bashar al Assad has lost his life expectancy in Syria. He should be gone. I think the United States can help in trying to rebuild Syrian institutions.

I think probably the best thing to do is to start with now basically help develop ultimate state institutions in whatever liberated areas can be liberated from the Syrian regime and ISIS control. My time is out. I'd love to entertain some questions later. Thank you.

**[John Iskander]** Dr. Trita Parsi - I didn't introduce him properly - President and Founder of the National Iranian American Council and author of several books including a book on U.S.-Iranian relations.

**[Dr. Trita Parsi]** Thank you, thank you so much for that, John, and thank you for the organizers for inviting me here again. It's always a pleasure to come back to this conference.

I thought I'll give a brief update. I'm going to leave the region for a short while and take it back to the United States and talk a little bit about the current negotiations, what is likely to happen, and perhaps towards the end if I get a chance share a couple of thoughts of how this may or may not affect the rest of the regional equation.

I think it's quite fascinating to see how far things have gone just in the last year. Compare it to where the United States and Iran have been on this nuclear issue for about 15 years. Take a look at the American position during the Bush Administration when at first there was a refusal to even engage directly with Iranians.

Sometimes it's forgotten that it wasn't too far long ago in which the United States believed that if it sat down with the Iranians it would legitimize the Iranian government, and as a result nuclear negotiations took place in absence of the United States. Then was the insistence that the Iranians had to dismantle the entire program and have zero enrichment – not a single spinning centrifuge.

Today, we're in a situation in which negotiations have made significant progress and the conversation is about the dimensions of the Iranian enrichment program, which likely is going to be quite a few centrifuges more than three or 4,000 actually, rather than being down at zero. Now some would say this progress has been done because of the pressure that's put on Iran as a result of sanctions, and without a doubt sanctions did harm the Iranian economy tremendously, but I think that is a rather simplistic analysis mindful of the fact that there's been a significant shift on the American position.

In essence, what actually did happen I would believe is that the two sides gave up their pipe dreams, their insistence on completely unrealistic positions, and once they embraced each other's redlines within a year we've seen dramatic progress. Iranians essentially had to give up their pipe dream, the idea of being able to present the international community with a nuclear fait accompli.

On the American side, the pipe dream of rolling the Iranian nuclear program back to zero centrifuges and zero enriched uranium was also given up. Once that happened and the two sides embraced and accepted each other's redlines, we've seen a tremendous amount of progress. In the words of Wendy Sherman herself just last week, she mentioned that in the last year on an issue that was viewed as almost impossible they've come approximately 90 to 95 percent of the way towards a deal.

In fact, I would say that right now there are clear indications that something very significant is happening just in the last two weeks in the negotiations. There are

reasons to believe and to be far more optimistic, and I think many of us have been, and the clear sign of that I would argue is that for the first time the administration itself has actually begun selling the deal on Capitol Hill and in Washington at large.

A principle of the Obama Administration has been not to go particularly aggressive or forward-leaning on the issue of selling diplomacy at home because the idea was there is no idea of trying to sell something that we actually don't have yet. Now put yourself in the embarrassing position of trying to sell the contours of a deal and then come back with either no deal or a rather different deal.

That's why for instance the speeches that Barack Obama has made about the strategic rationale for engagement were all made by candidate Obama, not by President Obama.

By the time he became President, a different attitude was adopted in which diplomacy was pursued, but not necessarily in such a manner that it would be sold at home. This has now changed from last week. Now the Administration is actively selling the deal on Capitol Hill as well as to the media, and I think there are good reasons to believe that the reason this decision has been made is because they've come so close to a deal right now that they are confident they will be able to bridge the last couple of percentage points of the road by November 24th, and come back and as a result having prepared the ground of being able to get acceptance for that deal in Washington, D.C.

Now, for some in Congress this is not good news, this is bad news. They would much prefer not to see a deal take place between the United States and Iran. We can go into the motivations of them later on, but one of the ways in which the attempt is now to try to derail this process is to force a vote in Congress one way or another on this issue as early as possible. The calculation's quite understandable. If you go and try to get acceptance, an up and down vote in Congress on this issue prior to the deal actually having been implemented and prior to the two sides being able to prove and demonstrate that they're actually living up to the agreement, the chances of this 35 year old enmity and historical animosity between the United States and Iran will prevail and the vote will be a negative one.

If, however, as the President is seeking to do, you first use sanctions waivers and other measures that are reversible, that will provide Iranians with relief but can be changed in case the Iranians are not living up to their end of the bargain, and only later on go to Congress – a year and a half, two years from now – to call for a vote, you have the opportunity to have two years of good news, dramatically

changed atmosphere on Capitol Hill, and make a vote on sanctions relief in Congress that currently looks completely impossible quite possible two years from now.

In order to prevent that measures have been taken to make the argument that the President is trying to circumvent Congress and as a result Congress needs to assert its authority and call for an early vote. The President has never had the intention of circumventing Congress because at the end of the day there's not going to be a deal with the Iranians unless the sanctions are permanently lifted, not just waved. The question is when you go to Congress, and the idea of going to Congress right away is in many ways a rather strange calculation, unless of course your intent is to prevent a deal.

For some in the region as well this may not come across as good news, fear being that the negotiations will leave the Iranians not just with capability, but to be frank has nothing to do with the details of the deal. It has to do with the fear that legitimizes Iran as a nuclear threshold country, that it legitimizes some of the gains of influence that Iran has made in the region in the last decade or so, that it reduces the animosity between the United States and Iran without necessarily reducing automatically at least the animosity that exists between Iran and some of regional powers, and as a result leaving those regional powers in a more vulnerable and lonely position vis a vis Iran than they currently are.

That calculation has led some to very vocally oppose the interim deal and others to oppose it perhaps a bit more quietly. And that calculation may not have been entirely incorrect when there was some sort of a prospect of being able to undermine the negotiations. But if we're in a situation right now in which this looks increasingly likely I think it would be worthwhile for regional powers to start considering what are the potential positives of this deal that at the end of the day would be beneficial for the region as a whole, but also beneficial for individual states.

Does an improved U.S.-Iran relations and resolution to the nuclear problem, the reintegration of Iran into the global economy, provide opportunities to tame Iran's radical impulses, real or perceived? Does it provide opportunities to actually engage in a much more fruitful and constructive dialogue between the GCC and Iran about security in the region? Does it provide opportunities to perhaps pursue real diplomacy in Syria as well, and make sure that some sort of a solution can be found there by actually including all of the key stakeholders in that process rather than thinking that the process can be successful by excluding them?

Does an Iran that has more Javad Zarifs and Hassan Rouhanis and less Ahmadinejads provide opportunities in the Middle East for other regional states to be able to find a better relationship with Iran? I think it would be wise to start thinking about those questions rather than as some have, but not all of course, think that this ultimately is a categorical negative for the region as a whole.

I'll close there. Thank you.

**[Mr. David Bosch]** Having just listened to these presentations I can see that we won't be able to get through all the questions that the presentations have raised. But I see that there are several major themes here, and rather than deal with many very detailed questions I think I'll just ask for our distinguished speakers to answer maybe a few of them and have a chance to talk a little more about the big picture.

One question that I think is a major one here is how realistic is it given that Iran's seven Arab neighbors all have their own issues with Tehran to expect that the United States will likely be able to reset its relations with the Islamic Republic without upsetting or unduly impinging on the interests of Iran's Arab neighbors? And here particularly we're looking at the GCC countries and Iraq. And I think we've heard earlier today many of the accusations of Iranian terrorism in the region and interference in the region, but at the same time we've heard about the possibility of the game changer, a nuclear deal, perhaps an arrangement for a common strategy in fighting against the common enemy, ISIS or whatever we call it.

And I would like to see what reasonable chances each one of you sees for this kind of a game-changing deal, and if so how would you arrange it? How would you negotiate it? Would you tie it into a nuclear deal or would you make it a separate aspect of some kind of security arrangement with the GCC countries plus Iraq?

Something a little bit on the big picture thing. I think related to this is the question of who in Iran actually can make a decision? Is it Rouhani? Or is it the Supreme Leader, or some kind of combination? And many people are unclear on that.

Let me start on this side and ask the first speaker, Ambassador, to come up here.

**[Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian]** David, who decides in Iran is like who decides in the U.S. Actually nobody knows really - the Congress decides or Obama or lobbies like Jewish lobby.

Iran also has its own system. They have the government independent from parliament, judiciary independent from government and parliament, and national security council, but the most important decisions are taken by the Supreme National Security Council, which the government, parliament, head of judiciary, everybody is there and the leader needs to agree with the decision. That's why when you have seen nuclear policy during President Khatami with the same leader completely different with the nuclear policy during Ahmadinejad with the same leader because the National Security Council, they were deciding and the leader was not going to reject. You have experienced two very different nuclear policies with the same leader.

Whether there would be a possibility for rapprochement between Iran and the U.S. while there is a big gap between Iran and their neighbors, I believe not.

Iran needs to recognize a parallel policy for approaching the regional Arab countries, the neighbors, at the same time with the U.S. Of course the nuclear deal would be a breakthrough to open the door for regional cooperation's. Our Arab neighbors also they need to recognize that the U.S. is the major international player in the region, and Iran is the major regional player, and Iran and the U.S. they have a lot to deal directly, like the situation in Afghanistan. I mean the Iranians and Americans - they are the key players there, not Arabs.

Even today in Iraq, if it was Malaki, Tehran and Washington - they were both supporting Malaki. The removal of Saddam - Tehran and Washington, they cooperated to remove Saddam. Today, Abadi - Tehran and Washington, they are both supporting Abadi.

They have a lot to deal directly together, and this I believe is the way to go.

**[Dr. Judith Yaphe]** Briefly put, if you look at the nuclear deal as a game-changer, for Iraq it will not be. The Iraqis can't afford, don't have the time to be that interested in what it will mean. They have an existential crisis, meaning that takes precedence, and that is the fight with ISIS and surviving. And they have never gotten involved, and even Malaki did not say much at all about the negotiations except to offer to facilitate them, host them, help them. So I don't think that's a real game-changer.

To me the game-changer, if there was one, might have been in Iran's reconsidering its support for Malaki. When they saw that he was costing them more than supporting him and keeping him in power was paying off, paying them.

That is, do a cost benefit analysis, Malaki's gotten too expensive. He's put Iranian interests at risk. If you make that same cost-benefit analysis towards Syria and the support for Assad, if you want to have better relations with the United States and the region, and as Mr. Mousavian has said, there is recognition that the two are related, U.S.-GCC relations, then this would be, I would think, a very important element and might work to get Iran to the table rather than the exclusion that we currently see.

**[Dr. Imad Harb]** Well, this is really quite complicated, but I don't think that the neighbors of Iran would be upset with a nuclear deal. They are not upset - they would be upset if the nuclear deal turned out to be to their own detriment, obviously, and I don't think the United States is prepared to do that. I don't think that they are prepared to accept anything less than what they think is safe for them considering they would be the very first ones to be affected by what a nuclear deal would be, whatever its terms are.

It would be a game-changing thing if it were to really come at the expense of either party anyway. I don't think the GCC nations are calling for a nuclear deal to come at anybody's expense. I think they have already staked their position as they welcome any nuclear deal that would respect international law, that would respect international rules. And they're fine with it.

The only problem the GCC countries and other countries have in the area is that Iran - with all due respect to the Ambassador - he used the very words Iran is "THE" major regional player as if everybody else is just simply there.

No. It's not true. The GCC is there. The GCC is very, very essential to the area. It's very essential to the security and the peace of the area and the prosperity of the area. Without the GCC signing off on some very, very important things, whether it is a nuclear deal or whether it is peace and security for the area I don't think that anything can be game-changing in that respect.

The other issue is the GCC and others are also very, very worried that an Iranian ascendance so to speak, Iran coming out on top basically is a very game-changing for I think everybody in the negative fashion.

In other words, Iran is now at the entrance to the Red Sea. It is with the Houthis. Iran is now with Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran supports al Shabab in Somalia.

I mean, Iran is in Syria, Iran is everywhere. In other words, GCC countries are just simply a sitting duck right in the middle. I don't think that would really be very, very good and healthy situation.

That's enough, thank you.

**[Dr. Najib Ghadbian]** I think it's an excellent question when you talk about who decides in Iran because I think you have this duality. From one hand you have the charm of Rouhani especially in pursuing international diplomacy, but at the same time you have the national security establishment.

In Syria the person in charge is General Suleimani of the Revolutionary Guard. They are running the operation. The Revolutionary Guards are in Syria. They are providing expertise, they are providing money, they are providing intelligence information – they are basically running the war on behalf of Assad beside their allies.

So while we welcome – I mean the Ambassador said Iran is stable, if not the most stable. Powerful, if not the most. But its aggressive expansionist, if not the most expansionist and aggressive, and I think unless we address that question Iran is part of the problem, not the solution.

Again, when it comes to Syria we welcome a more constructive role for Iran. In fact, we believe the Geneva process failed because it excluded – the regional aspect, that is – more Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, which is I think needed because the conflict has its local, regional, and international dimensions.

So again, we would like that diplomatic charm coming out of Iran, but we would like to see action, and I think Iranian constructive role in Syria can pave the road for better relations with the GCC countries who are in fact not very fond of Assad, as you can tell.

So for us, again, we believe that if Iran is serious about becoming a more acceptable regional player they could do that in Syria by ending their support of a criminal regime.

**[Dr. Trita Parsi]** Let me just add a couple of things. I think there is an understandable fear on the GCC side, because these are going to be some potentially profound shifts in the region, but there's also an element of exaggerated fear.

There's a fear the United States would move towards some sort of relationship with Iran similar to what it had with the Shah, in which Iran was the primary balancer in the region for the United States.

I don't think that is in the cards in any way, shape, or form. It's not an attractive option for the United States, nor is it even an option for the Iranians for a combination of strategic as well as ideological reasons.

The Iranians even post- a nuclear deal are not going to position themselves to compete with Saudi, Israel, Turkey, perhaps Egypt about who is America's main friend in the region. They're going to continue to adopt a position in which they're going to position themselves as the main state challenger, rival of the United States, but in a far less hostile way than it's been in the last 35 years.

They're doing this for their own reasons – it has less to do with the United States. But that also means that it's not going to try to position itself in such a way that it would replace some of the other GCC states or gain its influence in Washington at their expense.

Beyond that I think that the main theme of the conversation that worries me is the fact that this is all taking place within the paradigm of balance of power. Whereas in reality I think there is a need for the region as a whole to try to transcend this and move towards a collective security mentality and a collective security conversation.

Clearly it doesn't matter how powerful Iran is or perceives itself to be. It will never be secure unless the rest of the region also feels secure, and that's true for the other side as well. Security is not something that one can have at the expense of the other. It's a collective good.

That mentality I fear has not taken much root in the region, and until it does it doesn't matter how the powers shift this way, that way, how the order of the system changes. It will not be a secure region. And that conversation should have started a long time ago, and perhaps today's at least the least, worst day for it to start beginning as well. Thank you.

**[Dr. John Iskander]** There are clearly many more questions I think that we could address. We're going to pull this together I think, and I don't feel like I can do justice to that.

Just to say a few things, in a sense following on what Trita just said I think one of the, we all know that in the region whether it's on the Arab side of the Gulf or from the Israelis we hear a lot of concern that changing U.S.-Iranian relations will impact our relations, the U.S. relations with the GCC countries or with the Israelis and so on.

And I think this discussion that we just had now is a really interesting and valuable one, and having Dr. Mousavian frame the discussion as he started off I thought was very useful.

In a lot of ways – I mean, Dr. Mousavian is a professor at Princeton – he’s in many ways somebody who is, as well as his illustrious career within the Iranian power structure, but he’s somebody who is very much familiar to us. And at the same time I think the framing is one that really shows clearly the difficulties of breaking through the status quo.

This is one of these relationships with its long history and with its institutional presence that is very difficult to break through, and really to change the dynamics I think are very hard.

What we see now of course in many ways is an attempt to solve the most pressing of those problems through the nuclear negotiations, and I think everybody will benefit from seeing some kind of resolution. But it’s also interesting to note then that this doesn’t really seem to change very much else on the ground, right, because for us to go beyond that in many ways is then – unless we do get to as Trita said more of a collective security sort of framework, then it requires one side or the other to back down. And that seems unlikely to me. It seems to me then that what we’re seeing here reflects a dynamic in which we’ll have in some ways a continuation of the status quo, but one in which the level of tension is reduced. That is a good thing.

That reduced level is good for us, the United States. It’s good for our Arab allies. It’s good for the Israelis. And it has a potential to lead to some of the other crises at least having a slightly more favorable outcome, the situation in Iraq clearly, the situation in Syria and Lebanon. These are things that need a reduction intention among the major players rather than an increase. And this is something then that one can at least hope for. We’re pleased – I mean I think in that sense this is a very positive thing.

We’re pleased to have had the opportunity to hear from all of our panelists. We are going to I think end our session now, and we’re going to bring us back a little closer to on-time.

Thanks to all of you, thanks to the panelists for their wonderful presentations, and thanks to the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations.

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