

# **Center for Strategic and International Studies**

## **“Stabilizing Raqqa: Connecting Current Operations to U.S. Policy Objectives”**

### **Featuring:**

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U.S. Department of State**

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Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Middle East Bureau,  
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EROL YAYBOKE: Good morning, everyone. Thank you to all of you for coming out on Super Bowl Monday first thing in the morning on a brisk but beautiful day.

My name is Erol Yayboke. I am a fellow here at CSIS and the deputy director of the Project on Prosperity and Development.

I'm also your designated security officer today. So in the unlikely event of a security event, please follow me out the building. There are also bathrooms out and to my right.

So, without further ado, we wanted to get started on talking about stabilizing Raqqa. And to kick us off with some – an introductory briefing, we're really honored to have Rob Jenkins here. Rob is the deputy assistant administrator for the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance. We know of that as DCHA in the biz. And he's at the U.S. Agency for International Development. Most relevant to this conversation, Rob was just with a team of folks, some of whom are also on this stage, that were just in Raqqa, thinking about what it's going to take to stabilize the former capital of ISIS.

So Rob is – he's probably one of the more impressive people at an agency that's littered with people that have street credibility in some of the toughest places on Earth. And just to name a few, he has experience in Iraq, in Macedonia, in Serbia and Montenegro, in Kosovo, in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria, Syria, and a whole bunch of other places. So I can't think of anybody better to provide us with introductory remarks than Rob Jenkins. So please.

ROBERT JENKINS: Good morning, everyone. There you go. So thanks, Erol, and thank you all again, yeah, on a Monday morning after the Super Bowl, for showing up here.

I'd like to thank CSIS. It's always nice to be here. I can't think of a better place to talk about something as strategic and as – of international interest as CSIS. I'd also like to especially thank Melissa Dalton for hosting us today to discuss some of our recent trip inside Syria and how it fits into larger U.S. policy objectives.

So USAID Administrator Mark Green and CENTCOM Commanding General Joseph Votel visited Syria early this month to assess conditions on the ground for themselves, up close and personal, and to see the very real cooperation and collaboration that's going on between the Departments of Defense and State, and USAID, as the de-ISIS campaign in Syria makes that critical transition from being purely military and humanitarian assistance-oriented into the realm of stabilization.

And Administrator Green would very much like to be here today. He sends his apologies that he could not be here. A busy schedule keeps him somewhere else. And, unfortunately, you're stuck with me as a very poor proxy.

So, along with Melissa Dalton and my colleagues Maria and Karen Decker, I was fortunate enough to join the trip, and I'd like to share a few impressions of my own. First of all, it was fascinating. I can't remember – and I don't think I've ever had – a better, more exciting daytrip anywhere than to Raqqa. I've worked on Syria for something like five years now. Much of that was full-time on Syria. I never thought I would be able to set foot inside that country, and I honestly never thought I'd set foot inside Raqqa. And as we were walking around during our drive through Raqqa, I commented to Administrator Green: You know what, six months ago who would have thought that

we'd be here in the former capital of the caliphate? Administrator Green turns to me and says: More importantly, do you think ISIS would have thought we'd be here? And they didn't, but we were.

And as you drive around Raqqa, you see block after block after block of destroyed buildings. I think some of the pictures up there, but they don't really capture it. The destruction is massive. It's huge. You look down one block and you see going further and further and further, and then you turn the other way and you see further and further and further the pancaked buildings studded with IEDs and what we call explosive remnants of war. There's rubble everywhere. There's twisted metal.

And yet, you see signs of the human spirit. You see people moving things. You see water being trucked around. You see people who have opened their shops. You see women and men coursing through the streets, people sweeping the sidewalk, dusting things off. The trip was a stark reminder to the critical role we play in helping to save lives, restore essential services, and do what we can to rehabilitate livelihoods so that people can return home safely and voluntarily.

As we made our way around that very famous traffic circle that we all saw when it was liberated, and we saw the fence around it where ISIS used to put heads on the top of the fence, we made a right turn going through a street that had been cleared, and then saw traffic cones. After the traffic cones, we saw bulldozers, and more bulldozers, and some skip loaders, a bunch of guys in orange vests and helmets. That was USAID funding clearing the road, literally, through Raqqa so that people can make their way back to home and back to their lives.

So, as you might know, the United States is the largest humanitarian donor in Syria, almost \$7.7 billion since the start of the conflict. It's a huge news story that not many Americans know, all the assistance that we, the U.S. government, has been providing throughout the conflict. With our State Department colleagues who work with refugees, USAID and State Department – your government – helps 5 million Syrians every month, 4 million of them inside Syria – inside government-held areas, inside opposition-held areas. Wherever they are, whatever their needs are, we do what we can to help them every day.

Now, beyond the humanitarian, there's an immediate job to be done and we're doing it. In addition to lifesaving humanitarian assistance, we're helping to restore basic levels of service and restore livelihoods for those that are returning. And these are very early days. There's a lot more work to be done. But to think this soon after liberation, the work that is happening is rather amazing.

Now, our stabilization efforts include the restoration of essential services like water, electricity, schools, health care. We're also focused on revitalizing the economy, helping to restore livelihoods, allowing people to begin the return to supporting themselves and envisioning in their future – their own future.

As General Votel said in Syria, people are looking for responsive institutions, something that links them to their community and community leadership that's responding to their basic needs. That's happening now. As I said, it's early days, but that's happening now. And the structures that are in place aren't necessarily the structures that will stay in place, and aren't necessarily the long-term solution. That's going to be up to the Syrian people, for the Syrian people to decide what they want their future to be.

Now, after visiting Raqqa, some of us went to the Ein Issa IDP camp. Sixteen thousand people live there, including 2 million – sorry, 2,000 Iraqi refugees. And while we were there, we met with camp authorities, NGOs, beneficiaries, and we visited a community center.

The IDPs we met there, while few – I would have loved to have been able to walk around for hours – told us of their resolve to return home to Raqqa. Administrator Green commented that he's visited other IDPs in other places and been struck by the fact that they never knew when they'd go home. Many of them never thought they'd ever go home. But these people that we met, to think about what they had gone through, the living hell of living under ISIS, and yet they're still hopeful – very hopeful – and want to return. That's why we're there.

I expected to see destruction in Raqqa. I saw it. I expected to see evidence of the true, ghastly evil of which humankind is capable. Sadly, we saw that too, at the stadium where they held mass executions, walking down there, below it the torture chambers and the cells, is to come face to face with evil. I expected to see hard work going on. We saw that, too.

What I didn't expect to see was such dramatic evidence of the power of the human spirit. Until recently, Raqqa was truly one of the Earth's darkest, scariest, most-depressing places. And now it's actually a source of light. I did not expect to see that.

So this visit highlighted USAID's comprehensive programming in Syria, including both the humanitarian assistance and the critical stabilization assistance. And it was new evidence of our commitment to the Syrian people.

With that, I'd shut up and turn it over to the panel. Just want to thank you all for giving us the opportunity – Melissa, the rest of the crew – to share what we saw and to talk a little bit more about the important work that all of us are engaged in right now in Syria. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

MR. YAYBOKE: Thank you, Rob, for that sobering, but dare I say hopeful, account of Raqqa. And again, to echo what you said, I don't think the word "hopeful" any of us anticipated to use in the same sentence as Raqqa anytime soon, so.

You know, pushing ISIS out of Raqqa was really important. But, as Rob mentioned, it's just a first step. Now the hard work truly begins and the hard interagency work truly begins. So services need to get going, without which a now-stable Raqqa could turn to be an unstable Raqqa again.

So, to really dive a little bit deeper on these issues and to tell us a little bit more about what they saw from their perspective, we have a really distinguished panel here. And so, without further ado, I wanted to first introduce Maria Longi. Maria is the senior deputy assistant administrator of the Bureau for the Middle East at USAID. In her current capacity – which, as USAID folks are quick to mention, titles tend to shift here and there – but in her current capacity, Maria oversees the efforts of USAID missions and development programs in 10 countries in the MENA region. She oversees a large and varied portfolio that provides nearly \$1.5 billion annually in assistance across the region.

Maria, if you could talk to us a little bit about why stabilization in Raqqa is so important right now and, ultimately, comment from a USAID perspective what your priorities are in achieving that stabilization.

MARIA LONGI: Sure. Thank you.

And thanks, Rob, for giving a very good description of our seven hours in Raqqa. It truly was amazing, the size and scale. Hopefully, the pictures behind our heads are showing you that.

I think that – why stabilization is important to us and why we're doing it, I think if you listened to Secretary Tillerson's speech a couple weeks ago at Stanford, some of the end states that he described are exactly why we're doing this. For one, the enduring defeat of ISIS. ISIS, the caliphate, they're not sitting in Raqqa anymore, but they're – if Raqqa doesn't get back up and going, and if it's not governed in some way going forward, there's the potential for them to return or others like them to return. And so I think part of reaching that end state is doing the stabilization work that we're trying to do right now.

Another one of the end states that the secretary described was the voluntary and safe return of the refugees and the IDPs. There are refugees in Jordan, in Lebanon, and there are IDPs in Syria at the camp that we – that we went to. And so to get to that end state – end state for Raqqa, Raqqa needs to be a place where they feel like they can move back to, where they have the services that a government normally provides. And so that's another reason why we are doing – why we're doing what we're doing.

As far as our priorities for stabilization, the stabilization work we do very closely with the State Department. So the number-one thing that has to be done is, as Rob said, remove the explosive remnants of war. ISIS mined the city – and Karen can probably explain that better – but all over the place. One of the colonels that I was driving around with talked about how they were – they found mines in food, in baby formula, in baby cribs. So the mine removal has to be the number-one thing that happens before people can safely return. And I'm proud to say that the State Department has had a program in Syria for years and has totally ramped up, and is doing very, very good work with coalition partners, with Syrians to get that process moving.

A priority on AID's front, as Rob also said, was getting essential services back up and running. And so that's not something that we would do on our own, so we are working with the Raqqa Civil Council and with local groups that have gathered together as a group to figure out what their priorities are for stabilizing their community to get their neighbors back home. And so some of that work – they've prioritized water, electricity, schools as things that they are focused on, and so those – their priorities are our priorities. And so that's where we are trying to work with them to get those services back up and running.

And then a final priority, I would say, is working with – is getting that connectivity with the Syrians so they can lead their communities going forward. So it's the local governance structures, it's the community groups. They're the ones that are going to stabilize their city and their country. And so we need to make sure that they have the governance tools, the ability to work with their neighbors to figure out what they do next and how they do it.

So I would say those – that hits our priorities.

MR. YAYBOKE: Since I've got you here, Maria, what are the challenges to doing that, especially – I mean, mining a baby's crib, I can't even – that's an unfathomable level of evil. That's obviously a challenge. The devastation that we've seen on the pictures is obviously a challenge. But on the governance side, what are the – what are the challenges you see to achieving what you said is critical, which I would agree with, that return of social structures and the local council authority?

MS. LONGI: Karen's been on the ground with the local governance folks for longer – well, for a lot longer than I have. I had seven hours.

But I will say that part of it is the makeup of – if you're looking at the Raqqa Civil Council, it's the makeup of the council. So we would like to see an inclusive, participatory governance structure, and there are – there are questions out there about whether that exists right now. And so the work that we're doing tries to convey those concepts to the people that we're working with and to try to get them to a place where we're comfortable working with the groups.

And it's not just us. It's other donors, right? So we don't want to be the only donors working in Syria, but there are others that have these same kind of principled approaches as we do, and they're looking at the structure of these entities as well.

So I would say that's –

MR. YAYBOKE: Excellent. Well, you mentioned Karen several times, so we'll go ahead and turn to Karen.

Karen is – Karen Decker is the director of the Syria Transition and Response Team, otherwise known as START, which is a part of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs at the U.S. Department of State. She holds the title of minister-counselor as a member of the Senior Foreign Service at the State Department, and she's served as the director of START since June 2016. START implements – for those that don't know, START implements foreign assistance in northern Syria, and is responsible for all humanitarian and stabilization assistance in support of the counter-ISIS campaign. Karen herself leads interagency teams in Syria and Turkey.

So, Karen, what are your priorities? And maybe you can answer some of the things that Maria brought up, as well, and build on those. But especially if you could talk about gaps and challenges in the context of START's priorities.

KAREN DECKER: Great, Erol, thanks. Happy to be here. I see a couple of familiar faces in the room, which is nice. I've got work for you, if you want to come back to Syria. (Laughter.) Let me take a step back and give you just a quick snapshot of what START and START Forward is, because I think we occupy kind of a unique space in the broader U.S. government effort to address the challenges of Syria.

START came into being 2012-2013, when the U.S. government realized that it had to do more than pump humanitarian assistance into the Syrians fighting the revolution. So our – we were born out of that particular part of the Syrian conflict. And with the ramp up in the counter-ISIS campaign in the northeast, we seem to be the best home for similar types of foreign assistance that would be required in support of that campaign. But those two things were very different – supporting the revolution, supporting the opposition in western Syria, sort of the counter-Assad fight, was our primary purpose. And a range of humanitarian assistance and stabilization programs to support that have been ongoing for five years now.

And then starting in 2016, we began to absorb some responsibility for stabilizing communities liberated from ISIS. And the – and so we – so what's unique about us, I think, is that we look at both parts of Syria. What have been two completely different wars, two completely different battle spaces

kind of comes together in what – in what START was put out there to do. And I think that that has made us very conscious of not just what is today the snapshot in Syria, but where Syria needs to go if we really want to bring an end to ISIS, if we really want to defeat extremism in this part of the world. It's going to be knitting those two campaigns together. And it is going to be a whole-of-Syria political process that is – that reunites kind of western Syria and eastern Syria. And so that is something the team both in Turkey and in northeast Syria has as on their very long to-do list.

But to focus now on the counter-ISIS fight, it really all – Raqqa, for us, came out of a failure in Manbij. So in the summer of 2016, when the Syrian Democratic Forces, the SDF, backed up by U.S. and coalition combat power liberated Manbij, there was nothing. There was no humanitarian response; there was no stabilization response. We didn't have partners. We hadn't – we hadn't thought through the requirements. And of course, we have a very challenging partner in northeast Syria for anyone who sits in Turkey. (Laughs.) So it was really through a process of looking at the lessons learned of Manbij and recognizing that Raqqa was going to be Manbij times 12, that we couldn't be unprepared. So what didn't happen in Manbij? What was going to be necessary not only for Raqqa but as you move down to Raqqa? The Syrian Democratic Forces had to – had to move south.

And so it became clear to me, and I think was not a hard sell in Washington, is we needed to have people on the ground partnering with our coalition military partners, as well as with local actors to really manage what we would see as the post-liberation phase of Raqqa – of Raqqa's stabilization. So that – we began a very intensive process that was both interagency in the U.S. government and intergovernmental with seven coalition partners participating in that process. And that's what got us to where we are today. And the snapshot that Maria and Rob and the administrator saw on their visit is something I have seen now 15 – more than 15 times in trips I have made into Syria, getting closer and closer and closer until October, when I went into Raqqa for the first time.

And the – and the – I'm not – I'm pretty sure I'm not getting at answering your question, but I think it's important. I want you to understand how I've seen the transition with our local partners on the ground, that as they have worked with us they have become more capable. In May of 2017, when Brett McGurk and I were inside, they were frantic about humanitarian assistance. They had thousands and thousands of IDPs fleeing Raqqa. And they had no capacity to manage that. So we worked through that problem. In October, when I went to the – for the first time Raqqa, the challenge was the ERW, was the explosive remnants of war. And the examples that we saw and heard about, and the partners whom we lost due to IED strikes, sort of speak eloquently to the lifetime of work that ISIS has left for us in Raqqa.

And on this visit, I had the pleasure of spending an extra five days in Raqqa, because you guys left, and the weather turned to shit, and I couldn't get out. (Laughter.) But in the conversations I had just after the visit with the administrator, they had sort of moved – I guess they'd sort of embraced the totality of their ERW challenge. But they were already – Syrians were already looking ahead. How are we going to make a living? Yes, you're removing the rubble. Yes, you've turned the water back on. How am I going to make a living? And so to me, when you speak of hope, it is those kinds of transitions that we have seen on the ground with our local partners, who are not focused first and foremost on the politics and the geopolitics of Syria. They're focused on what their kids are studying in school and how they're going to make a living. And those are our priorities.

MR. YAYBOKE: How are they going to make a living?

MS. DECKER: Construction.

MR. YAYBOKE: Construction and mine removal and –

MS. DECKER: Construction. (Laughs.) Agriculture. I mean, there is a lot of – a lot of how Syria used to make money is still there. Yes, the city of Raqqa is pancaked and will, I think, probably prove to be a distraction in discussions about the future of Syria, because that's not where the money was made, right? The money was made in agriculture. The money was made in oil. Those facilities – put the oil in a special box, because we do still have the Assad regime.

But agriculture is a fairly straightforward fix. And USAID's doing it, clearing miles of canals, working with cooperative groups of farmers as well as with local authorities to try and figure out how you get both the ability – address food security needs. And I think USAID and the Middle East Bureau and OFDA have this really kind of extraordinary experiment going on where you've got the humanitarian and the stabilization together working on food security issues, but then also cash crops and generating revenue.

MR. YAYBOKE: Excellent. Thanks, Karen. I will want to follow up with you and several other people on Turkey, but – and their incursion into Afrin. But before we do that, I'd love to loop Mark into this conversation.

Mark Swayne is the acting deputy assistant secretary for stability and humanitarian affairs at the Department of Defense. With – in that role, Mark develops defense policy for embassy security, humanitarian assistance, disaster response, peacekeeping, stability operations, international rule of law, and a whole host of other things. Mark has been working on defense policy since 2002, even when he was active duty in the Navy. Thank you for your service, Mark. He retired in 2008 and has working – been working in a civilian capacity on defense policy since then.

So, Mark, if I could ask you to reflect briefly on what you heard here, but then specifically talk about how the transition from counterterrorism to stabilization, how is that going from a DOD perspective? How do we achieve that balance of counterterrorism to stability? And ultimately, do we have the right tools?

MARK SWAYNE: Well, that's a lot. I'll pick up the thread for where Karen left off. As far as my perspective, I think – I completely agree with her analysis of what we have done, the good work that we have done since Manbij. Erol, you commented that the hard work is just beginning. I'd say for the good side of the story is we have done a lot of hard work planning for the last 18 months. And since Manbij, the amount of interagency cooperation between State, DOD and USAID I think is some of the best that I have seen in my experience in government. And that has a large part to do with people like Karen, Maria and Rob for the incredible amount of dedication and devotion that people put towards this, because we've learned a lot of lessons in our years of mostly Iraq and Afghanistan. And then Syria is a place where we have soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines on the ground. And it's a place where, for the Department of Defense, as we were defeating ISIS, we want that to be sustainable. We do not want ISIS to return.

And so tremendous amount of stabilization activity and planning have gone on, along with humanitarian assistance, between ourselves and with our coalition partners on – of what we can do in the area. I would just point out, I wasn't on the trip. General Votel didn't invite me. He invited Melissa to go, but I didn't get to go. I did go to Syria – northeast Syria. I was there in July, when we started the START Forward concept. So Karen talked about, we realized that we'd be more effective

as a government having State and AID people on the ground doing their business. Not doing the business of the Department of Defense, but doing their State Department and USAID work. And we work hand-in-hand with them. So DOD provides the security, the living spaces, the transportation, the security when they move into northeast Syria. And we're proud of that contribution.

I went there in July, one of the first, to make sure it all worked out with my State DS counterpart. And I expected the DOD people on the ground may have been, like: Look, we have a mission to do. I don't need all of these civilians running around getting in my way. And I was pleasantly surprised that my DOD colleagues were like: No, this is a great opportunity. We want to be hand in hand, not – we'll work on the frontlines, but just behind the frontlines there are places that are – ISIS devastated those areas. And we need to restore some humanitarian assistance and essential services to those people. So we're proud of that work that we started, and lots of planning and efforts that went into that.

On the question of the – how is it going right now and our transition to stabilization, I think that the global coalition of partner forces have made significant progress in the campaign to defeat ISIS. We want to highlight that. But important work remains, to be sure, with that. We want to ensure an enduring defeat of ISIS, as I said earlier. We want to ensure they cannot regenerate, reclaim lost ground, or plot external attacks. This is essential to the protection of our homeland, as well as to defend our allies and partners. For us, we want to consolidate our gains. The United States will continue necessary counterterrorism and stabilization efforts in northeast Syria. And we look to sustain a conditions-based military presence in Syria to combat the threat of terrorist-led insurgency, prevent the resurgence of ISIS, and to stabilize liberated areas.

Right now, we are working closely with our State and AID counterparts for stabilization because for the Department of Defense, on both humanitarian assistance and stabilization, we're not the lead federal agency for that. But there are times, Manbij is a perfect example, that the only United States official that was on the ground was a U.S. military person. So there are times when we might be the eyes and ears on the ground right away, but we need to share our information as quickly as we can with our State and AID counterparts so that when we have defeated, in this case, ISIS, then we can move to that next phase and be more effective as a government in sharing information. So I think I've said that numerous times, but that's where we are with humanitarian assistance and stabilization.

I would like to highlight that some of those trucks, the humanitarian assistance, might have been some DOD funding. We certainly have a more modest amount. But I would like to point out that after Karen went with Brett to Ayn Issa in May, we realized that DOD needed to up its game on the humanitarian assistance. So the secretary authorized the use of \$15 million of OHDACA, the Overseas Humanitarian and Civic Aid Account. It's our humanitarian assistance money. We've used that 15 million (dollars). And the secretary has now authorized another 5 million (dollars). And again, my words of how we use that humanitarian assistance money, it's for us to prime the pump. There's a place and time where DOD is on the ground first. And maybe we can spend a little bit of our money to prime the pump for that larger effort for humanitarian assistance.

You asked another question about stabilization. We don't have a stabilization fund in the Department of Defense. We're working hard to have a legislative proposal. And we're working with our interagency partners and OMB to get approval for this. And then we'll go up to the Hill. So it's a little bit premature, but it would be a defense support to stabilization. For those of you who are very familiar with stabilization issues, DOD has used CERP funding in the past. I would say the difference between that funding and this funding – or, let me point out that right now when we spend OHDACA

money, that 15 million (dollars) I talked about in northeast Syria, everything that we do, we go back to USAID, the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance.

They have a DART person on the ground, a Disaster Assistance Response Team leader. And they validate everything that – our use of OHDACA. Again, we want a whole of government approach for humanitarian assistance. What we don't want to do is DOD just start doing humanitarian assistance projects that are not coordinated with USAID. That's foolish and not the best way to spend taxpayer money and not to get an effect on the ground. We'd like to do the same thing with the stabilization fund, have some small amount of money that we can prime that larger pump, and so that we can be a good partner to USAID. So thanks very much for that.

MR. YAYBOKE: Excellent. Thanks, Mark.

I want to turn to Melissa. And first of all, I want to say that the Project on Prosperity and Development is really excited to co-host this event with the International Security Program. So thank you for including us in this, Melissa.

Melissa is a senior fellow and deputy director of the International Security Program. Her research focuses on security cooperation with allies and partners, U.S. defense policy in the Middle East, and global U.S. defense strategy and policy. I didn't know – so Melissa is, I think, well known to a lot of people in this room for her work at DOD and on the Quadrennial Defense Review in 2014, and a whole host of other impressive things she's done. But I didn't know that she taught English to middle school and high school students in Damascus, Syria in 2006. So that's a – that's an interesting nugget.

I will also plug a really important paper that Melissa wrote, probably on the plane back. I mean, it came out so quickly after this trip. It's called "Squaring the Circle: Connecting Current Operations to Policy Ambition in Syria." And I used it as a way to really frame my own mind and how I was thinking about these issues before this event. So I highly encourage all of you to download it and take the 10 or 15 minutes to read it, because I think it really provides a really solid foundation and addition to this conversation.

So, Melissa, if I could just ask you to reflect on what you've heard here, and really hone in on the challenges you see to actually stabilizing and moving forward in Raqqa.

MELISSA DALTON: Absolutely. And thanks, everyone, for coming here today. And delighted to co-host this with the PPD program and Erol today. It's been terrific to hear the reflections of colleagues across the interagency. You know, we talk a lot about the importance of the whole of government approach in U.S. strategy. And I think you see here today a representation of a real effort taking place on the ground in Syria.

I think my colleagues have very well-covered the ground, so to speak, in terms of what we saw there. But just to highlight some of my key takeaways. And then pulling back and looking a bit more from a policy perspective in terms of where we go from here and how we begin to knit this together, as Karen pointed out. I was really struck by the fact that ISIS's goal in leaving Raqqa or being driven from Raqqa was clearly to make the area intractable to anyone that attempts to govern the area going forward. Whether it was booby trapping through mines, severing water pipes, it was, clearly, a very deliberate effort to make it near impossible for anybody to follow in their – in their footsteps.

And yet, in the face of that, I think, is – you know, really came through in Rob’s opening statement – the resilience of local Syrians, despite these challenges, to step up and to try to rebuild their future, and I think that’s what makes Raqqa distinct from perhaps some of the other stabilization experiences that we’ve had in the last few years where there’s a clear partner on the ground that wants to be in the lead and is truly in the lead. And so the human capital is there. They just need the financial resources and technical assistance to give them a leg up.

I think it’s also really important to remember, you know, in the – in the litany of news flashes, news cycles that we’ve had over the last couple of years, I think we’ve lost sight of how truly terrible ISIS’ reign was in Raqqa. If you can rewind your mental tape to 2014 and some of the images and videos coming out of that part of the world, a truly terrible reign of terror and, you know, we saw the artifacts of that and its – there are strategic reasons for us to be involved in Syria, certainly in Raqqa, in order to prevent the regrowth of son of ISIS or ISIS itself coming back.

But I think there’s also a moral obligation here in terms of what these people have been through and, frankly, the degree to which the U.S. military campaign necessarily leveled the place because ISIS had embedded in civilian structures. The level of devastation is truly terrible and a reminder of the terrible costs of war, particularly when we’re engaged in urban warfare in the 21st century. And so there’s strategic reasons to be engaged but I think also a moral dimension.

But what we’re signing up for, I think, is not nation building. You know, there’s a great aversion to doing so post-Iraq, post-Afghanistan. We have problems at home. We need to rebuild our own infrastructure here in the states. You don’t need to go far down 395 to discover that. What we’re talking about is demining. It’s clearing streets. It’s relinking the water for these people, helping them to open their schools, their clinics and their local hospitals and, again, Syrians are in the lead. They just need the financial resources and the technical assistance.

I think the real pivot point is governance, however, and, you know, I think a couple of my colleagues alluded to how tenuous that is right now. We’ve had a very capable partner in the northeast. The SDF, which – you know, I think the coalition has done a lot to try to broaden representation in the SDF to include Arabs and Turkomen, but the leadership of the SDF is still Kurdish, and as we make this transition in these areas to governance and who are we empowering, who are we helping to lead these areas, going forward, you know, it’s – particularly in Sunni Arab communities it’s critical that we’re supporting Sunni Arabs to step up and play this role.

And I think there are some big questions in terms of local governance in Raqqa. There was a recent election I think just a couple of days before we got there to try to give the local community a chance to perhaps recalibrate the representation of the Raqqa city council to be more representative of the area.

But some serious challenges remain and particularly as we start to look down the Middle Euphrates Valley, which is increasingly Sunni Arab, how will those people be able to step up and be represented in a credible way when our going-in position, our clearing force, is the Kurdish-led SDF. And, of course, in the background of our visit was the Afrin operation taking place and the tensions in the SDF, the Kurdish components feeling that draw to go help their brethren in Afrin and the – you could see the flashes of the Arab-Kurd tensions portending. So some big questions ahead, I think, for northern Syria.

You know, and I think it also raises the question of if we are going to try to encourage Sunni Arabs to step forward more to play not only the governance role but the security role in the east and northeast. Some of those fighters are currently engaged against the Turks in Afrin – or with the Turks, I should say, in Afrin and so to bring them back to the holding and building force in Raqqa, down the Middle Euphrates Valley, what are the tensions that are going to play out between the SDF and these FSA Sunni Arab fighters that have been aligned with Turkey. Some big questions to come in that respect.

And I think, more broadly, from a policy perspective, thinking through the political implications and policy implications of our efforts with stabilization, it's inherently more of a political activity, and what role will our U.S. military forces play, going forward, as a point of leverage to help connect to the political and policy process beyond stabilization? What then is the role when it comes to interactions with Russia, Iran and Assad. All of these questions need to be sorted through if the United States is going to sustain a presence on the ground and under what authority do we remain there if the Assad government is not agreeable to the terms of us being there.

And, ultimately, what is the U.S. goal? I think Secretary Tillerson laid out some very clear markers in his Stanford speech. But what role does the periphery that we are building and stabilizing play vis-a-vis the center, which has been the center of gravity for Syria, going forward. If we're banking on creating some point of leverage in the periphery by stabilizing these areas, what sort of leverage does that give us in the political negotiating process to come to try to sew Syria back together, as Karen noted?

So those were the big questions that I had top of mind coming away, and would love to engage with the panel if they are so willing on some of these. Thanks.

MR. YAYBOKE: Thanks, Melissa, and much as you did in your paper, I mean, you gave us a lot to think about and you pose some very fundamental and deep questions about Syria that are not going to be resolved on this panel and they're not going to be resolved maybe in the near future. But they're really fundamental issues that need to be resolved before we can really talk about truly stabilizing and rebuilding in a place like Syria.

I'm really interested in the Turkey dynamic and the incursion into Afrin, and so I wanted to bring Mark into this conversation a little bit, if I could, to talk – maybe you and then Karen to talk about how you guys are thinking about Turkey and, you know, we all know that Syria is much more complicated than it's made out in the news a lot of times. There's – it's not just good versus evil and it's not just, you know, one person shooting at another person. It's very complicated. There's a lot of different groups and different people with different agendas. It's political. It's military. It's all the things.

So if, Mark, you could just comment a little bit about how DOD is thinking about Turkey being a NATO ally and also being now present militarily in Syria.

MR. SWAYNE: Well, thank you. As you highlight, Turkey is a NATO – member of the NATO Alliance, like the United States. Certainly is a very, very important relationship that we look to maintain and it's a very successful and good relationship, especially on the mil-to-mil side for a long time and I don't think that is going to change.

We're certainly – anytime there is increased violence or increased chance of instability anywhere in Syria we're concerned about that, and that is something that we are taking a look at to determine, you know, where that's happening and then it also – when that happens it has a significant potential to increase civilian displacement, refugee flows and casualties, and then that – just for the Department of Defense of where we have personnel operating on the ground and how that may flow into that area, something that we certainly are looking into and are concerned about. As we look at the stabilization areas in Raqqa and going down the Middle Euphrates River Valley, it's certainly an area that we look to continue to work on that transition from the CT to the stabilization in that Middle Euphrates River Valley and then post-Raqqa fighting. And stabilization and CT efforts go hand in hand in these liberated areas from ISIS, and we certainly – everything that we're doing there is to prevent the resurging of ISIS and other violent extremist organizations.

So thank you.

MR. YAYBOKE: And I'm sure Turkey's aligned with those goals as well and I'm assuming that the mil-to-mil communication lines are still open and strong.

Karen, if I could bring you into this conversation. You have dealt with Turkey. You have responsibilities over folks in Turkey and in Syria. So how did the incursion into Afrin change the dynamic for you? And, you know, Mark mentioned that there's been 18 months of planning. How did this throw a wrench into the planning exercises that you – that you all were – you're doing and how are you thinking about this, moving forward?

MS. DECKER: I mean, the short answer is it didn't. I mean, Turkey has been pissed off at the United States over our stance and partnerships in Syria for two years now. So Afrin is a manifestation of part of that sort of chasm in how the U.S. and Turkey look at – look at stabilization or the recovery of Syria writ large.

I think it was Secretary Mattis who pointed out not only is Turkey a NATO ally, Turkey is the only NATO ally that borders a country with an ISIS presence and the only NATO ally with an internal insurgency, the PKK, which has direct ties to its Syrian branches. So there are – Turkey is the higher partner in this relationship. They are the strategic ally of the United States.

Now, we have said that to them over and over and over at the highest levels. But the – Turkey's reaction to the counter-ISIS fight in Syria and the way we have prosecuted it through the SDF is not a strategic rational response. They are incredibly emotional about the fact that 40,000 Turks have died at the hands of the PKK, and to them, we are partnering with the PKK. They make no distinction politically or militarily. And we have tried to empathize with the very real security challenge that Turkey has. The levels of rhetoric have not been helpful on the Turkish side. Domestic political developments in Turkey – I arrived in the summer of 2016 the day of the ISIS bombing of the airport in Istanbul and followed two weeks later by the coup attempt. So there's a lot going on in Turkey that complicates their strategic calculus and makes it – makes it necessary that we have a high degree of patience for what it is they're working through.

I have been told point blank by the – by the Turkish Foreign Ministry that one of the few ways that they can get our attention to demonstrate their high degree of uncomfortableness with the SDF is to sanction NGOs and humanitarian partners operating out of Turkey. There is no ability to deliver cross-border assistance from Turkey into northeast Syria. We have had to remove those staff and those programs and offshore them in order to get the work done.

Turkey's emotional response to the SDF, the PKK – call it what you will – I think has been incredibly shortsighted in how they have responded to humanitarian and stabilization assistance going into western Syria, which has absolutely nothing to do with the PKK or the YPG or the PYD or any acronym you choose to use. And part of my thankless job is to go in on a regular basis to the Turkish government and try to explain to them why it is in their best interest that they continue to register NGOs to work from Turkey into a place like Idlib or Aleppo. And I have to say, it has been a constant challenge to get them to see the benefits to them of those types of programs without getting it all completely messed up with what it is we're doing in northeast Syria.

But the fact of the matter is, I go in and out of – I go in and out of northeast Syria on a regular basis. I brief the Turks before I go and I brief them when I come back. I am still allowed in. My American staff is still allowed to work. We have picked through some of the really thorny NGO issues, and they are still allowed to work. That space has collapsed. And I find a lot of that unacceptable, but they haven't completely closed the door to us, and I think that is because there is, at some level, a recognition that they don't want another 2 million refugees on top of the 3.5 million they've already got.

MR. YAYBOKE: Maria, can I bring this – bring you into this conversation, especially on the last few points that Karen made on humanitarian access and NGOs? And I don't know if you cover Turkey, actually, and as part of your portfolio. But even if you don't, talk about it from a Syria angle and humanitarian access and NGOs.

MS. LONGI: Sure. So access is an issue, right? So as Karen said, as Turkey has closed down, we've had to pivot to other locations. And so we've moved some of our program management for the stabilization work to Jordan. We've had to look at access for these programs to come in through Northern Iraq, through Kurdistan. So we've had to do a whole lot of work to deal with the dynamics that Karen's talking about in Turkey. And then we have to – you know, we provide assistance for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, in Jordan, and so we've got those relationships that are very complex. They're complex with our bilateral work, with the Syrian refugee work, and with the added kind of pressures we're putting on these to try to manage our Syria work more and more from these places. And so it's definitely a challenge.

MR. YAYBOKE: Melissa, I've got a couple other questions, but I wanted to defer to you to see if you had any follow-ups on any of the things that the panel has said before.

MS. DALTON: Yeah, I mean, I think, you know, we have a unique opportunity with representation across these three agencies to unpack a little bit more in terms of how collaboration is going both on the ground but also in Washington, in terms of your planning as we make this pivot into stabilization. And then, you know, it may be a bit beyond the discussion today, but looking ahead to some of those policy aims that have been set out by Secretary Tillerson for the United States – how is that interagency planning going, and maybe reflecting on some previous experiences that you all have had in other theaters.

MR. YAYBOKE: Excellent.

Maria?

MS. LONGI: A quick response to what Mark raised about DOD doing stabilization work. So, as far as what's going on in Washington, as this process has bubbled through DOD, we and the State Department have been very involved and they've sought out our views on if and how DOD should be getting – or getting informally into the stabilization business. And so our view is, I think, State and AID has been consistent is this – is that this is not military activity. Stabilization, as you said, is inherently a political function. You need the governance piece of it, which is what our agencies do and have experience in. And so our feedback to DOD, which I think they've taken on board, is that if they're going to do it – because Mark is right, they are often the boots on the ground and the ones that are there first – then they should do it as the OHDACA funds are used, which is getting validation from State and AID to say, yes, this makes sense, this is good practice in stabilization, and this is a fine way of going forward. And so we have been consulted very much on this process, and we hope that it continues.

MR. YAYBOKE: Yeah, Karen.

MS. DECKER: So the hardest part of the job is interagency cooperation, right? You can look at the pictures of Raqqa being blown up and you can say that looks like a big mess. That is not – that's nothing. (Laughter.) That's the easy part.

MR. YAYBOKE: We ask for truth on these panels, Karen, so, you know –

MS. DECKER: The thing is, I mean, I think we all forget because everybody is oversubscribed in terms of the challenges that, you know, Maria faces, because she's got Yemen to worry about as well – right? – and like she said, the entire Middle East – we forget that how labor intensive collaboration is, and that it – communication is difficult if you rely in the main on email. I mean, these are not problems that are going to be strange to any of you, right? We have them in everyday life. So it's – I think it's quite a testament to the leadership at DOD, the leadership at USAID and the leadership at the State Department to invest the time in the collaboration that was necessary to get the stabilization campaign to the point it is now. It's small. Our parameters for stabilization in newly liberated areas is pretty small, but it still requires the input, active input of hundreds of people to get it to that point. So it's unlike any interagency collaboration that I've seen in 30 years in the State Department, working in conflict areas in a lot of those, and that's all to the good.

The rather modest limits that have been put on us in terms of what we can do on the ground I think is important because it doesn't mean – it prevents us from overspending. It prevents us from, you know, papering Raqqa with dollar bills that cannot be spent anywhere, cannot be absorbed, completely skews the economic markets, and all of the other lessons that we've learned in a number of different places. So we're a tightly focused group and we're a group of people that really in the last 18 months have grown together to make this happen. You get the things like Afrin thrown at you, you get the Iraqi Kurdistan mess thrown at you, then you've got access problems on all fronts. You've got a number of things. Don't forget, Assad is still sitting in Damascus. There's nothing about Syria that's easy, to include the interagency component. But it's – we have worked hard to make that part of it successful.

MR. YAYBOKE: Thanks, Karen.

MR. SWAYNE: Can I jump in on that too?

MR. YAYBOKE: Please.

MR. SWAYNE: The – for the stabilization issues again, DOD doesn't have a stabilization fund, but since we have people on the ground, I think the biggest thing we can do is help support State and AID. And all of that good planning that we did for the last 18 months continues. And while we have a DOD presence in northeast Syria – and that presence is there to defeat ISIS and maintain and consolidate those gains to ensure that they do not return – while we have a DOD presence and we have civil affairs teams on the ground, it makes good sense for us to continue the cooperation that we started with START-Forward. And I think that we'll – we're working right now to figure out where START-Forward is best located, how many people need to be in that element, and how can DOD help with that – how can we help with this, provide the security, provide the logistics, the transportation for those personnel to do their jobs, let them – or the State and AID counterparts – let them do their jobs for stabilization. And if there are places as we move farther to the south that they can't get to right away, then we have civil affairs teams that are on the ground that can be the eyes and ears and go take pictures and go ask questions for their START-Forward counterparts. So we can be an enabler in that DOD relationship of the supporting-supported. We will be the supporting commander to help their efforts in that regard. So I think that's where DOD can assist.

MR. YAYBOKE: Excellent.

Melissa, you're not encumbered by government service currently, so can I ask you to just reflect on your own question? And especially in the context of what you saw on this trip to Raqqa, what are the challenges going forward of interagency cooperation and really working well in the sandbox together, even though as Karen mentioned it can be the hardest thing to do on a daily basis?

MS. DECKER: I was really impressed by the folks that are working in the field, you know, a lot of really seasoned individuals that, you know, this is not their first time to the rodeo, having served in Iraq, Afghanistan, and also just reminded of the really great people that we – that we put in these positions and how they rise to the occasion.

I mean, I think where the stress points are come down to how departments and agencies have been aligned throughout the course of our experience in Syria. You know, I think the DOD relationship with the SDF is extremely strong, and a lot of loyalty there, and understandably so. This is a partner that has bled alongside U.S. forces in the fight against ISIS, and so there's a sense of, you know, filling the political aspirations that the Kurds have in that area. But then how that is translated politically in a whole-of-government sense from a U.S. policy perspective, that's really difficult because, as Karen rightly pointed out, our NATO allies strongly objects to those political aspirations of our Kurdish partner. So, you know, I think that, as an observer, that, you know, that's a point of tension in the interagency right now. I think, you know, DOD at the highest levels is doing a very good job of communicating that, you know, we have a NATO ally. But I think where you see some of the reverberations in other parts of DOD, particularly our personnel that have been on the ground working very closely with the SDF, those tensions sometimes play out.

And I think it also just comes down to resourcing. You know, bringing it back to Washington, the congressional picture, the priorities of this administration, the deemphasis on diplomacy and development as arms of government. If this is truly a strategic question for the United States in terms of our competition with Russia, with Iran, preventing the regrowth of ISIS, right now the critical pieces in the picture are diplomacy and development, and so we need to resource them adequately. And I'm not hearing that reflection on the resourcing side. It has been articulated as a policy goal of this

administration, but that's in direct conflict with the resourcing picture that they've laid out, so I worry about that.

MR. YAYBOKE: That's a really good point.

I have about 30 more questions, but I'm also cognizant that we have a really distinguished audience here, and so I want to move to questions. But before I do that, I actually wanted to see if Rob had any thoughts. OK, good, pass, pass. Excellent.

So I want to take – I want to group three questions. And I always forget to see this side of the room, so I want to make sure – I'll start with this lady right here, gentleman on the far end there, and then we'll go with the gentleman right here. So if we could get microphones to this lady here first.

Please stand and say who you are as well. And so I'll just group these questions, and then we can respond to which ones we want.

Q: Hello. I'm Tomoe, a visiting fellow with CSIS, and thank you for your talk today.

I'd like to know what roles that the countries would play in near future. You already mentioned about Turkey and you mentioned a bit about Russia or those things. But so how do you see roles of other countries? Like, I'm thinking about, like, Russia, obviously, and Arab countries, GCC states, and maybe Europeans or those countries. So how do you see them, maybe, in your policy of stabilization of Syria? And are they – are there going to be any coordination with those other countries? Thank you.

MR. YAYBOKE: Excellent. The role of Russia and Europeans and others. It's something we hadn't touched on, so it's a really important question.

So the gentleman in the back.

Q: OK, Stanley Kober.

I'd like to pursue the issue of Turkey and Manbij. I'm looking at an article that was just published in the Turkish paper Daily Sabah. The title of the article: "Will Turkey Target U.S. Troops in Manbij"? According to the article, the Turkish public views the fight against terrorism as a war against the U.S. This strikes me as very serious in terms of – so we've beyond stability, here. And I just invite the response by the panelists.

MR. YAYBOKE: All right. Thank you, sir.

This gentleman in the front here, and then we'll move to responses of these initial sets.

Q: Hi. Bryant Harris. I'm a reporter with Al-Monitor.

My question is primarily for Miss Decker, but please anyone feel free to chime in. You mentioned the need to stitch the two campaigns in Syria together – Eastern Syria against ISIS and Western Syria against the Assad regime, but for all practical purposes, it seems like the Assad regime has won the war against the opposition.

So how do you go about stabilizing and eventually moving to reconstruction for areas controlled by the Assad regime when it looks like Assad isn't going to step down, and what sort of complications does that make for U.S. policy? Are we eventually looking at the U.S. working with the Assad regime for stabilization and reconstruction? Realistically, is that on the table?

MR. YAYBOKE: Excellent. Three excellent questions: one on Russia and the European partners, and others that we didn't get to; digging a little bit deeper on Turkey, especially in light of a recent article; and we hadn't talked about Bashar al-Assad and so tackling the Bashar al-Assad angle.

Melissa, I know in your excellent paper you wrote a little bit about other allies, so maybe I can kick it off with you, and then we can move down the panel and pick and choose. If we don't get to all three questions, I'll call on someone, so hopefully we get to all three of them.

MS. DALTON: Sure. So to kind of pick that question into two – Russia and the Europeans – I mean, because I would separate the two. I mean, think certainly the United States is conducting full-court press right now with all allies and partners to raise the imperative of stabilizing Raqqa, for all the reasons that have been discussed today.

You know, the United States, I think, plus two French personnel, are the only personnel on the ground right now, minus a MSF clinic that is doing fantastic work, of course, in Raqqa. So there's a real need for European allies, for allies in Asia to step up and assist in this area after local Syrians have pushed out an international scourge of ISIS, and we owe it to them. So I think there is a key role for European allies to play there.

When it comes to Russia, I mean, I think the Russians have made it quite clear whose side of the equation they come down on – Bashar al-Assad. They have redoubled their efforts there, and I think, you know, are calculating that they currently have the upper hand in entering into diplomatic negotiations, trying to leverage the Astana process, although representation wasn't so great in Sochi recently, and so I think we'll continue to see them riding the Assad horse quite into the future.

I think practically, though, that we should not close the door on trying to work with the Russians and those that they support on some practical steps for stabilization for humanitarian access that, you know, we've been trying for years to do that, you know, and I think have been forestalled at many twists and turns throughout that process that my colleagues have been engaged on, but I don't think that we should cease from doing that given the critical importance of flowing stabilization and humanitarian resources into these areas.

MR. YAYBOKE: Mark?

MR. SWAYNE: For the – for the DOD or the – I would say the lead element for our government on the de-ISIS campaign, we have a coalition – and I think that coalition is strong – to defeat ISIS, and I think that coalition will continue to defeat ISIS, so I will leave the rest of the question to my other colleagues for where they have the lead.

On the issue of will Turkey put troops in Manbij, Manbij is an area where there are U.S. troops and personnel on the ground, and I think that our cooperation and mil-to-mil communications with our NATO ally is excellent, and I don't expect that will change at all. So our mil-to-mil communication will continue. I have no indication that they are going to move into Manbij, so – thank you.

MS. LONGI: I'll quickly stay on the role of other countries on the stabilization and the assistance front. The coalition that Mark referred to – we talk to them all the time about how we were going to work together on stabilization.

Right now we – on some of AID's programs, we do have contributions from other countries directly into the programs or they parallel ours, and so we work very closely. We also have a Syria Recovery Trust Fund, which has a dozen-plus donors, and that has existed for several years now. And we are talking with them actively about doing more stabilization work in liberated areas, so we engage quite heavily with other donors on this front.

MR. YAYBOKE: Are those trust fund funds being deployed? No?

MS. LONGI: Sure. Not as much in the Raqqa area yet. We have access issues, we have – we have relationship issues, right, and so that's in train. We have – the trust fund has worked in Aleppo. That has gone down as it has been harder to work there. We do have a lot of programs in the south as well, so it has been active, yes.

MR. YAYBOKE: Excellent.

Karen, you had one question directed at you, but I have a feeling you have thoughts on the other two as well, so –

MS. DECKER: I can start with the last question first. (Laughs.)

Don't mistake the war in Syria for the revolution. The revolution was not launched to take territory away. It was a revolution of ideals, and any Syrian I think that you speak to would say that. It's easy to get distracted and horrified by the fact that Assad is willing to kill half a million of his own people to stomp out an ideal, but Syrians continue to fight for the values that launched the revolution in the first place.

And I think one of the things that we are – that even I am sometimes in danger of forgetting – is that there was no civil society in Syria before the revolution. There is civil society across Syria today that will not be denied, so fundamentally, the tools of governance now, even as – even if all you want to do is focus on the fighting – the tools of governance are exponentially greater now for Syrians than there ever was in the past.

I do not believe Assad has won. I do not believe there is any way he or any of his proxy partners can justify a long-term power-sharing arrangement in Syria.

Now the devil is in the details. What the – what do I mean when I say long-term? I am sure that my definition is more elastic than that of a Syrian living in – trying to live today in eastern Aleppo under the control of Shia militias, or down the MERV where there may still be an ISIS presence, or down in southwest Syria, where you have JKW? JWK? I don't know the southwest Syria bad guys so well.

So they've abrogated any authority they have. They can rule by brute force. You can argue, I think, that the only way for Assad to remain in power is to remain at war.

Syrians – whether I talk to them in northwest Syria or in northeast Syria, so from Idlib to Deir ez-Zor, they are tired of fighting. I think that, to me, was the big takeaway, especially in Raqqa talking to Syrians about Afrin – was their sort of dumbfounded response that, what, we're at war again? Haven't we had enough?

So to me, the – to me Raqqa is temporary. This stabilization is not permanent. It is interim; it is temporary mechanisms to get life going again in a place that you've seen got the shit kicked out of it, both emotionally and physically.

It's – so stabilization is what is going to get us to the next part of Syria, the next phase of Syria, which is this politically driven, negotiated solution for all of Syria. And that's when you are going to address real governance issues in northeast Syria, and that's when you're going to address what has been – what remains kind of my skepticism when I listen to my DOD colleagues talk about stabilization.

I'm with them. I have seen all too – all too well the effects of not – of getting civilians in there to do it and using that primer for the pump I think is super important, but ISIS was grafted on to Syria. It was dealt with. It was – it's the most simple part of the Syrian conflict, and it will be eradicated, no doubt in my mind. But what allowed it to metastasize in Syria is a long-term problem that DOD stabilization isn't going to be around to do. It is going to be USAID, it is going to be DIFD, it is going to be SIDA. It is going to be a range of international actors that is the real, final solution for ISIS and extremism.

Did that get at your question?

Q: Yeah. I'm still a bit curious, though, about the – I mean, how that portends for – (off mic).

MS. DECKER: So I think one of the things – so we've got to get a political process going again, right? And so everybody identifies that as the thing that needs to happen next, and everybody's really, really, really sketchy on the how – (chuckles) – that's going to happen and what sort of changes with the Russian dynamic being what it is, and how do you get the regime to the table.

One of the things that I think is extremely helpful in how the political folks are now looking at the next Geneva process, for want of a better term, is the idea that it will not be limited to largely exile-based Syrian political groups, that there needs to be a role for the people who are currently inside Syria keeping the peace. Those are people on Raqqa. Those are people in Deir ez-Zor. Those are people in Manbij. Those are people in Jarabulus. Those are people in Idlib – for my particular part of the country. And I think the desire to see Staffan de Mistura include representatives of Syria from Syria engaged in Syria now is a way to start opening up that conversation about what the future looks like.

The Turkish press. Let me just comment. I think the question about Manbij is not a question so much about Manbij as it is a sort of commentary on the state of the Turkish media, which is not a helpful interlocutor in terms of helping the U.S. and Turkey manage its relationship. And the Turkish press has served to whip up sentiment. I will say my colleagues who work on the bilateral relationship would probably say that, yes, right now the Afrin operation is very popular in Turkish public opinion, but I think that's – there's a big, huge difference between popularity of Afrin and the idea that Turkey and the United States would be shooting at each other. And I think there's still a lot of distance. And, as Mark said, there are a lot of conversations going on in mil-mil channels to make sure that we don't get anywhere close to that.

MR. YAYBOKE: I think we have time for one more question. Melissa, did you want to take the last question, or should we let the audience do it? Yeah.

MS. DALTON: Yeah.

MR. YAYBOKE: All right. This gentleman here in the front had his hand way up, so. (Laughter.) If you could stand and tell us who you are, and then –

Q: Michael Gordon, Wall Street Journal.

So I've not been in Raqqa, but I've been in Tabqa in northern Syria, so I'll start forward. I've seen west Mosul. And you've talked a lot about the destruction. And one conclusion I – impression I have from this group is there's a looming question out there, which is an important one but it's beyond your writ, which is who's going to rebuild Raqqa? Because you've all talked about the destruction. And the answer is probably nobody. The U.S. is not going to do it because it's not stabilization. The West is not going to contribute as long as Assad's bombing hospitals and using chemical weapons. The Russians and Iranians have shown no interest in this. And it doesn't – and what you seem to be suggesting is at some point in the future, which is – if there's a political settlement, which there never has been in all these years but if there is one at some point, in the aftermath of that perhaps there will be a plan put together to rebuild all this destruction. So do you – is there a vision that you have or a concept for what's to follow stabilization and who is to do it, recognizing it's not a U.S. responsibility? And beyond just the physical reconstruction, who's going to pay the teachers? Who's going to pay the administrators? Who's supposed to pay – like, that's clear – I don't think you're paying them. So who's going to pay them? The government? And then does the government determine what gets taught in the schools? How does that all work? How do you connect stabilization and the next phase?

MR. YAYBOKE: It's an excellent question. We have about three minutes to talk about how we're going to rebuild Syria. Sir, also the woman sitting right next to you across the aisle is the UNDP representative. And I think she probably has some thoughts afterwards. (Laughter.) But on rebuilding, any final thoughts on what it takes to move stabilization into that rebuilding space? Maria or –

MS. LONGI: Karen can go first then I'll go.

MR. YAYBOKE: Excellent. Karen and then Maria.

MS. DECKER: So I'm a pretty straightforward person. So I have a lot of very difficult conversations with local leaders on the ground in Syria – be they civil society groups that we're supporting or whether it's members of the Raqqa civil council or the Meshlab Community Center. The bureaucracy in northeast Syria is as challenging as anything else we deal with. And I'm – I had this conversation with them a week ago: You are in for tough times because nobody is lining up to rebuild Raqqa. And it could be years that every single day you are hit in the face with the same level of destruction that you had the day before. That – because we are not going to empower any part of the Assad regime.

And so I think – I think it behooves us to be honest in the conversations we have with our partners on the ground. They can be the best partners in the world, and we're still not going to rebuild Raqqa. That's not what's stopping us. Downtown Raqqa, there is no next after stabilization, until you get to a point where we can open that opportunity up to the Europeans – (laughs) – and the EU. But I

think there is a lot we do around the city center. I think you've seen – you've gotten pretty close down to Meshlab and Ramelli (ph), or you will on a trip be able to see these poorer neighborhoods of Raqqa city that ISIS didn't care about, because there weren't any resources there for them to control. So they're not hugely damaged. They're not sort of littered with IEDs.

Those people – you rebuild there, and then you build out the economic structure to support them. And that's going to be agriculture. And that is going to be as much as we probably do in the next 12 to 18 months, all the while supporting our friends on the political track side to get them to a point where there is enough momentum behind a negotiated solution that allows us to start talking about the infrastructure that is going to need to be built. But, I mean, I think the best I can – the most useful thing I can do on a day to day basis, and for our teams inside, is to – is for – to be honest with our local partners.

MS. LONGI: And I think if you – if you take Iraq as an example, which it's a totally different space – there's a central government and they're farther along in the sort of local governance structures. If you look at that, they're having an initial reconstruction conference next week, right, where they're bringing in the private sector, where they're having the government present their plans. So the timeframe can't be, you know, reinforced strong enough that it's not even close to a place where you can have a holistic discussion about the reconstruction of Syria right now, sadly.

MR. YAYBOKE: Mark or Melissa, any comments on that aspect, or any final parting words before we adjourn?

MR. SWAYNE: I think the answer's that. And thanks for letting me be here. Appreciate it.

MR. YAYBOKE: Melissa, last word to you.

MS. DALTON: The only other thing I would say is, you know, just as we move to stabilization it's inherently more of a political task, when you start talking about reconstruction, I mean, that is truly a political tool. And so who you're partnering with, who is going to be investing in these areas. I mean, I think the Iranians, the Russians, the Chinese are looking quite closely at opportunities in Assad-controlled territory. And so, you know, as we try to set the conditions for success in Raqqa and northern Syria, being careful about expectation management, as Karen said, but also what partnerships we're striking will be critically important to defining the political future of this area.

MR. YAYBOKE: Thank you all for coming on a Monday morning. And please join me in thanking the panelists. (Applause.)

(END)