JON B. ALTERMAN: (In progress) – CSIS. I'm Jon Alterman, senior vice president, the Brzezinski chair on global security and geostrategy, and director of the Middle East Program.

It is my special pleasure to welcome Senator Tammy Duckworth to CSIS. Just before we start, a brief security announcement. We don’t expect any – (audio break) – and what she learned, and how that should help inform us moving forward.

So, Senator, thanks very much for coming.

SENATOR TAMMY DUCKWORTH (D-IL): It’s great to be here. Thank you. Thank you to everyone who’s here.

MR. ALTERMAN: So you were in Iraq on a congressional delegation.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Yes, I led the delegation.

MR. ALTERMAN: And what were you able to see?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: So we were able to meet with all of the government’s leaders. The president, the prime minister, and the speaker were very gracious to make time for us in Baghdad. We were up also in Taji. I was able to visit my shoot down and see the clearing in the field where I landed my helicopter 15 years ago. And then we went up to the Kurdish region and we met with Prime Minister Barzani up there and had a very good conversation and was able to see the changes in the intervening 15 years, because when I served in Iraq I flew all over the country so I could see the changes that had happened.

MR. ALTERMAN: What kinds of changes did you see?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Well, the Kurdish area looks completely – I mean, when I used to go up to the Kurdish area there was one fancy hotel on top of a hill and that was it, and we landed on a hillside, and we would park our helicopters and walk up to the one hotel. Now it’s got a high rise, it’s gleaming, it’s modern. There – of course –

MR. ALTERMAN: This is Irbil.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: This is Irbil. There is, of course, unfinished area where after 2014 with ISIS happening. But it’s very vibrant. And I left from an international airport on a regularly scheduled Air Dubai flight. I was like, this is an international, cosmopolitan city here, very different. And very different to be in the same country and see the difference between Irbil and Baghdad, but then also to see the difference between Irbil now and Irbil 15 years ago.

MR. ALTERMAN: I know it's always hard when you're on a government trip to judge what security feels like, because the government’s sense of security is they want to keep you very secure. But did you get any sense for how activity had changed? Whether there was more commercial activity, how that felt?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: I sense a lot more commercial activity in Baghdad. But remember, when I was there in 2004 it was the height of some of the really bad – the worst times there. And so we were very much in a siege mentality with T-barriers everywhere. You
just didn’t go outside of the – and the Green Zone was massive. There are new – you know, now that we’re there the speaker has been pulling down all of the T-barriers, and so it’s really nice to be able to drive out – what had been inside the Green Zone was now outside the Green Zone – and see people driving around and the commercial activity, a lot of college students – young people going to school. And so it’s kind of nice to see all of that and to see that the T-barriers have gone down, that you see flowers and all. It’s not an image of Baghdad that I had seen in the past.

MR. ALTERMAN: And, yet, one of the things I’ve seen you talk about is that in many ways the sense that we’re out of the woods in Iraq is a little bit misplaced.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: It is.

MR. ALTERMAN: That you have felt that there’s a – there are dangers lurking that we need to be careful about.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: I do think that Iraq is in a precarious situation right now. Prior to me going, I also was of the belief that ISIS had been defeated and now it’s time to slowly focus on economic development and that ISIS is no longer around and we just had to deal with the widows and orphans. Well, that’s truly not the case. ISIS is defeated in the sense that it no longer holds territory.

But the personnel, those fighters, are there and I learned that many of them actually have been ordered to be intentionally captured so that they can use some of the camps to reset – get fed, get stronger, and be around and be able to survive to fight another day and then, of course, you have all of those – the 30,000 ISIS widows and orphans that are – that must be dealt with. Otherwise, that will be the next generation of ISIS fighters in just a short time frame as five to 10 years.

MR. ALTERMAN: And there is also deep suspicion of the broader Sunni population – that, in fact, all of them fall into this ISIS category – that they might say they’re not ISIS now but, in fact, every Sunni in Iraq, a substantial part of the population, is considered to be suspect.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: There is that sense and, you know, but I think people also saw the people got up and went and joined the fight against ISIS and were able to repel ISIS, and that both Sunnis and Shi’a did that. It wasn’t just one particular group. I also have to say that the Sunni population certainly is, you know, somewhat justified in their sense that they were mistreated in that but that they bought into something with ISIS that they had no idea what they were getting into. And then there’s just as many displaced Sunni out there as well. I mean, so what we have now is these Iranian-backed militias now hold ground that Sunni populations or Christians or Yazidis used to live and they can’t even go back there even though ISIS is no longer there because now these Shi’a militias hold this ground.

MR. ALTERMAN: Generally, coming from the south, as I understand, right?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Yes. Mmm hmm.

MR. ALTERMAN: And that’s a – that’s a piece of Iraq that’s always puzzled me, is their – the problem that the sectarian identity becomes so strong that then the map becomes more
determinative than it can really be and you have pockets of this and pockets of that. It's almost like redlining in a U.S. racial sense. And that's – I mean, that's a problem in Iraq and Kurdistan so, certainly, a problem in Kirkuk. How do people talk about that problem, the problem of sectarianism still being so important to the way Iraq works?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Well, I mean, even their government is set up, right. We helped them write the constitution and the government is set up so that there is this division where if you have, you know, as you do right now, a president who is Kurdish then the prime minister is going to be from one group, and then the ministers of the various – the heads of the various ministers. So you've got a minister who is Sunni, then you have to have Shi'a as a deputy and then you get the right – you know, of the right coalition, of the right backing group. And so this is why so many of these – of the positions remain unfilled.

That said, I will tell you that I was presently surprised that uniformly among all of the leadership that I met with there was a real sense of – at least an effort to present a national Iraq identity, that when I – when they talked about repelling ISIS from Baghdad they talk about Iraqis defended Baghdad. They said, yes, the Iranian-backed militias were there and sort of they did part of the fight. They were very careful to always thank me and the Americans for being there. But they also talk about “Iraqis fought off,” and it wasn't Sunnis fought them off, Shia fought them off. And so I think there's this emergence of a(n) Iraqi nationalism that the leadership, at the very least, I got the sense are trying to foster and build. And I especially get this, interestingly, from the prime minister.

MR. ALTERMAN: Yeah. Do you think there's an American role in encouraging that? Or is that something that largely Iraqis have to work out among themselves?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: I think there's an American role in that. And certainly our U.S. embassy personnel, when I spoke with them, they're always very encouraging of all three of us.

So I went with Senator Angus King, an independent; Johnny Isakson, a Republican; and me, a Democrat. So we were a tripartisan delegation, a rare one because there's only two independents and one's running for president, so there's only Angus King.

MR. ALTERMAN: He's not going to Iraq –

SEN. DUCKWORTH: (Laughs.) I don't think so.

But our State Department was very careful to always remind us to please help support this effort on the Iraqi leadership to foster an Iraqi identity and to, you know, really congratulate them on defending Baghdad. And yes, we helped, but really, you know, it was the Iraqi people and this sense of nationalism.

I also sense from some of the young people a real resentment, almost as if – especially in the Baghdad area – that the Iran-backed militias had overstepped their bounds, and that – and that they felt like Iran had gone a little bit too far and they were pushing back against that.
MR. ALTERMAN: And that’s one of the hardest things for me, is realizing how much influence Iran still has even though we’re the ones who fought a lot of the war. You know, we go to Iraq secretly; the Iranians go to Iraq with big parades. We’re always concerned about security; they don’t seem concerned with security.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Yeah. Right.

MR. ALTERMAN: How much influence –

SEN. DUCKWORTH: They made a note of that, haven’t they, recently?

MR. ALTERMAN: That’s right. How much influence do we really have? Do we need more influence in Iraq? Are there ways to build more U.S. influence? Or is this just something that is falling to its equilibrium?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: No, I think we need to engage more. I think we definitely need to engage more with Iraq, and it has to be beyond a military solution.

And we were joking in the back oftentimes people think, OK, well, we fought the war. We won, right? So why are our troops still there? The best description I got was that the U.S. forces were the rebar that hold the coalition together, so the concrete crumbles without the rebar. And so even though we don’t need to be the main force that’s there, we need to be there with our coalition partners. That’s on the military side.

We have to engage economically as well. One of the complaints I heard from some of the young people was like, you know, I’m just tired of these cheap Iranian shoes that’s like – the stuff that’s flooding our economy, and it’s not very good stuff, and we’re like the dumping ground for Iranian – cheap Iranian goods that’s low quality.

MR. ALTERMAN: As they gets pushed out by cheap Chinese goods.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Right. (Laughter.)

MR. ALTERMAN: So you need a market, right?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Exactly. But then I hear from – you know, I heard from young people, and especially in the Kurdish area, were like, you know, I want to be able to buy stuff off of Amazon too, but I can’t get a credit card, you know, because the banking system here isn’t good enough. And so this is where the young people are. I think we really need to engage economically, as well as diplomatically and militarily.

MR. ALTERMAN: How do we do that?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Well, not without a lot of help from their government. One of the –

MR. ALTERMAN: From their government?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: From their government. So they have to change some of the issues that they have right now, just for example the visa process. And I saw a big difference in this between the Kurdish area and Baghdad. In Baghdad, if you’re an American businessman and you want to do business in Baghdad, it takes you three months to
get a visa, and it’s a single-entry visa. You go up in the Kurdish area and you can get, you know, it pretty quickly, and it’s multi-entry. If you’re doing business, you need to be able to get in and out and have some sort of ability to build those relationship(s) and make those investments.

And certainly in Baghdad the prime minister said he was working very hard to abbreviate that process, but you know, there’s no minister of interior right now. He is the minister of interior and prime minister. That’s a lot on one man’s plate to try to handle.

MR. ALTERMAN: Are there other things that you think the U.S. government needs to do in terms of legislation, investment guarantees, incentives? I know we’ve worked a lot with the Gulf states to try to encourage them to invest. But what are the other U.S. government components to help the Iraqi economy along?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: I think getting the Gulf states to invest would be very helpful. I think being a friendly nudge to the Iraqi government to really fix some of these problems that are more economic and spend some time looking at those issues. Something, you know, as I said, as very bureaucratic as fixing the visa process is something that’s critical.

I was very happy to hear that the prime minister was just last week up in Europe, I think, signing a deal to develop their natural gas capability there. Because, you know, they burn their natural gas, their own natural gas, and then they buy natural gas from Iran. But they’re burning their own because they haven’t developed the processing plants. So I think that was a major step forward. So I’m very happy that they did that, that they’re moving forward.

MR. ALTERMAN: And are you worried about the level of Iranian influence, or do you think that’s something the Iraqis are adequately concerned with on their own?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Oh, I’m worried about it, but I think what we should be focused on is what can the United States do to be a good ally to the Iraqis. I don’t think that this idea of trying to keep Iraq – not saying that that’s what we’re trying to do – but I always feel like when I talk to the general population they feel like, you know, Iraq should be beholden to us and, you know, we liberated them and all of this. I don’t want Iraq to be like a little brother to us.

I want Iraq to be an independent, strong nation in the Middle East, with its own strong ties across multiple nations. So I want to encourage them to have stronger ties with Jordan, and Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, and so that Iraq is an independent, strong nation. That’s the best ally for U.S. interests than an Iraq that’s beholden to either us or Iran. I don’t think it should be this either/or zero-sum game – are you going to align with Iran or are you going to align with us? No, I want them independent and able to forge their own way, because that is better for us than anything else.

MR. ALTERMAN: And let me ask a hard question, because I know you’re new on the Armed Service Committee.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: I am. Not for lack of trying, let me tell you. There was a lot of whining to – (laughs) – to Chuck Schumer for those two years I was waiting to get on. (Laughs.)
MR. ALTERMAN: How important should Iraq be as the U.S. thinks about the Middle East? And when you have to rack – you know, rack and stack all of our interests in the Middle East, where does Iraq fit? Where should it fit? How much more – we’ve put a lot into Iraq. How much more should we put in? And what should we maybe do less of so that we have more bandwidth to do more with Iraq?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Well, I think that Iraq is very important to U.S. security. And I think that with where ISIS is right now, that is it’s pretty much pervasive but underground, if we don’t do something to support the Iraqi government and help them move the ball forward, and encourage them to deal with their internally displaced persons, to encourage them to figure out their solution for the ISIS widows and orphans, other than the current solution which is put them in a camp in the middle of the desert and do nothing with them – because all you’re doing then is you’re just – that’s just an ISIS training camp waiting to happen. So we have – I think we need to do that and help them deal with these issues.

That will allow them to grow and become stronger, become the leader in the region. I think Iraq has great potential to be a real leader in the Middle East and a real ally to us. One, you know, their independent in terms of natural resources. They’ve got the stuff to be a real leader in the region, the just have to figure out their internal issues, because there’s so much being thrown at them right now. And it’s almost like they’ve become the battleground for – you know, for Saddam and then now it’s like U.S.-Iran issues. And it doesn’t – what we need to do less of? We need to stop declaring by tweet that we’re pulling out of Syria and abandoning our Kurdish allies. We need to stop declaring the Iranian Republican Guard a terrorist organization just out of the blue without talking to key advisors and both our diplomats and our military leaders.

We need to – you know, now I guess we’re moving an entire battleship into the region, an aircraft carrier –

MR. ALTERMAN: The strike group, yeah.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: A destroyer group?

MR. ALTERMAN: A strike group, with bombers, yeah.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: With bombers into the region. I had craft day at my daughter’s preschool this morning, so I haven’t caught up on my reading yet. (Laughs.) But –

MR. ALTERMAN: But the CNO also said they were already going there, so it’s not really a change.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Right. This was the thing, right? You get the White House that’s amping up the temperature, often unbeknownst, unannounced, unsolicited from his own diplomatic – you know, their own State Department or the military leaders on the ground. And then you find that the State Department and the military has to, like, tamp things down –

MR. ALTERMAN: I’ve never met an administration who was willing to be led by the State Department. I think the White House always think their job is to lead the State Department.
SEN. DUCKWORTH: This is true, but if you have somebody that you've appointed, you should maybe call and ask their opinion, you know? When I sit in Armed Services Committee and I ask every four-star officer who comes in front of the committee, and every diplomat who comes in front of the committee and say: Were you consulted before the president tweeted that we were pulling out of Syria? And not a one said yes. And they all say, oh, I learned about it on Twitter. That's a problem. That's a problem.

MR. ALTERMAN: So, I mean –

SEN. DUCKWORTH: You lose trust. Your allies don't know whether or not they can – why would your allies listen to the – our diplomats on the ground or our military leaders when all of the work that you've done to try to build relationship(s), to try move the ball forward, is just undermined completely by a tweet?

MR. ALTERMAN: So somebody from the White House watches this on the Web and says we're going to show bipartisanship by going to Senator Duckworth and we're going to say, OK, if you think we're not being strategic in Iraq, what's our – what should our strategy really be? I mean, boil it down: strategic objective, here are the resources, here's what we're going to do more of, here's what we're going to do less of, here's what we're going to stop doing in other places so we can afford to do it.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Well, I think two camps: economically and militarily.

I think maintain our position within the coalition, but really push our role away from the combat type of role. We're already in that advice role. But really push the Iraqi military to be able to do some of the things that they're not doing very well of. For example, they are not very good at doing their own intelligence operations. They're not very good at maintaining their own equipment. The Illinois Army National Guard is there right now, Task Force Lincoln 44. We've got 44 guys down there, and it's a logistics unit. And I sat down and talked with these folks, and they said, you know, they're even just teaching the Iraqis to do the maintenance on their own tanks. And they have four – you know, four tanks sitting at Taji that have never been driven. They've got F-16s sitting I think it's in Arizona that have never been flown. So you've got to stop just buying new. You've got to push for maintaining what you have, and that switch needs to happen. And the Iraqis are perfectly capable of doing this. We just have to say, hey, the days of the U.S. writing checks for you to buy a new tank are over. Here we're going to work with you because you've got smart people who can learn to maintain these tanks. So that's sort of the military part, maintaining – being the rebar for that military coalition to move forward and let the Iraqis really be able to handle it themselves.

Economically – we really need to engage economically. And that means that, you know, I think the Chamber of Commerce did a whole delegation there, and I don’t –

MR. ALTERMAN: They did. I think in December, right?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: In December. I don't think much came out of it. But I think that's the kind of thing we need to do more of.

MR. ALTERMAN: Can I ask on the congressional piece?
SEN. DUCKWORTH: Mmm hmm.

MR. ALTERMAN: You've been on this tripartisan delegation.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: (Laughs.)

MR. ALTERMAN: How does planning for the trip change the way the Armed Services Committee work(s)? How does it change the way – I mean, did you – is the act of traveling with colleagues, did that fundamentally change your relationship? Or did it just sort of build on what was already a positive one, you wouldn't decide to travel with people you didn't like anyway?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: (Laughs.) Well, if you announce it you're going to go and see who signs up, and a couple folks had to drop off that I hope that if I – when I do this again they'll come.

Marsha Blackburn, she has a large Kurdish population in Nashville, and she had really wanted to go and at the last minute couldn't. So I was disappointed because I was really looking forward to getting to know her. She and I have nothing in common other than we both served in the House at one point. I don't think we've ever voted the same way on anything, but it was a good – would have been a good opportunity to really get to know her, and she's been very positive about wanting to go.

Johnny Isakson and I have known each other for a long time, and so it was nice to develop that friendship. And already coming out of Iraq Angus King, Johnny Isakson, and I have already identified several things that we're going to work on together economically in terms of legislation, not even Armed Services but legislation that is more economic to try to move the ball forward a little bit.

MR. ALTERMAN: Has Iraq become more of a bipartisan issue now that it's less on the frontpage, and has that enabled the Senate to come together? Or is Iraq so far off the frontpage that people just don't even have positions on it?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: I think it's so far off the frontpage. I really do. I think people think, oh, we've won, ISIS is defeated, all right. Let's – you know. If anything, I think it becomes fodder for presidential candidates to say let's pull all of the American troops out of there, what are we doing there, because that's a popular line, right?

MR. ALTERMAN: And what do you see the spillover from Syria being like into Iraq if ISIS is able to sort of reestablish itself over the border in the absence of an American presence? Do you think that would necessarily come over to Iraq, or is the border secure enough that the Iraqis have the means to isolate it?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Oh, the border's absolutely porous.

MR. ALTERMAN: Totally porous?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Totally porous, yeah. The border is totally porous and this is where I think the Kurdish region and the Kurds are doing an amazing job out there. You know, I think 1.8 million of the 3 million internally-displaced persons are actually going into the Kurdish areas and they are certainly – have some real challenges, you know, trying to take care of their own population, trying to deal with making sure
they get their – enough payments and then the deals that they have to make with Bagdad and all of those relationships.

And then they have all of these – I mean, you know, in this one little region you have more internally-displaced persons than in the rest of Iraq and that’s really quite remarkable that they’re trying to do what they’re doing and they’re taking care of all these people at the same time, and you’ve got these fighters that are going back and forth. And so this is where we have to – as a country, we have to make it clear that we stand with our Kurdish allies. They have always been there when we’ve called on them. They’ve also been there to fight alongside American troops and we cannot abandon them. And that really was the impetus for me to go on this CODEL. Originally, I just wanted to go into Syria and I just wanted to go and show real support for our Kurdish allies, and we – this is a dangerous place, potentially.

MR. ALTERMAN: Do you think the – do you think the administration made a mistake not being more supportive of the Kurdish referendum or should it have been firmer earlier and headed it off? How do you think they handled that whole issues –

SEN. DUCKWORTH: They should have headed it off.

MR. ALTERMAN: Should have headed it off?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Yeah.

MR. ALTERMAN: Be forceful early?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Yeah.

MR. ALTERMAN: And do you –

SEN. DUCKWORTH: I think – I think the Kurds ended up hurting themselves with that referendum and I don’t think it was helpful. I think it might have been helpful for the Kurdish people to coalesce around that. But on the ground I don’t think it was very helpful.

MR. ALTERMAN: And lingering wounds?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Yeah. I think they’re still having to deal with those issues.

MR. ALTERMAN: I think we have some time to go to the audience if people have questions here. We’ll have a roving microphone. If I could ask that you identify yourself, that you only ask one question and that you ask your question in the form of a question, which is not to make a long speech and say, “What do you think of my speech?” So we’ll start with –

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Dick Durbin – Dick Durbin always says that if you don’t – if it’s not a question and you just want to make a statement then you have to run for office yourself. (Laughter.)

MR. ALTERMAN: Excellent. And then you have to raise money.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Yeah.
Mr. Alterman: We’ll start right here in the aisle.


During the Iraq War, Shi’ite militias, backed by Iran, often targeted and killed American forces. In recent years, there’s been essentially an informal truce between the United States and these militias as they focused on a common foe – the Islamic State. Now that the administration has designated the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization and is applying maximum economic pressure, there is concern that this truce may become undone. When you were in Iraq and talked to American forces, what was their perception of the threat posed by the Shi’ite militias and what is your concern that this threat, which has been relatively dormant in recent years, might be reactivated now with the downturn in U.S.-Iranian relations?

Sen. Duckworth: So the sense that I got from our American leaders on the ground, both military and diplomatic, was less of a kinetic fight threat from the Iranian-backed Shi’a militias but more of a seizing of power by those militias. So they had an election just last year and they had some of the lowest voter turnout. But the Iranian-backed Shi’a militias actually had enough – they were so well organized that they actually won seats in the Parliament because they were actually able to get the people – either through threats or just through better organization people to go to vote whereas overall, across – you know, across the population voter turnout was low. So they ended up winning a disproportionate share of the votes and now what you have is the Shi’a militia – these Shi’a militias actually have – Iran-backed Shi’a militias, I should say – have seats in parliament. I think it’s more a seizing of power politically is where I got more sense of concern from Americans that I talked to there who are on the ground than it is about, you know, are there going to be more Shi’a militia – more guys out there trying to shoot down American helicopters. I didn’t get that sense.

Mr. Alterman: In the front row.

Q: Thank you. I am Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman. I’m the representative of the Kurdistan regional government.

Thank you very much, Senator Duckworth, for the things that you’ve said and for visiting Erbil and Baghdad. I couldn’t agree with you more. We need to widen the relationship between the U.S. and Iraq and, of course, Kurdistan region. I often say to our American friends: You have invested so much in our country, but how well do you know us? You don’t know our music. You don’t know our cuisine. I hope you do by now. But, you know, I think that since Americans have invested so much in our country, in capital, human capital, political capital, in treasure, in blood, we really do need to get to know each other. And I think commercial ties, cultural ties, as you said, are they key. And it’s a struggle for us, as you’ve pointed out as well, how to maintain the interest in Iraq. What we fear is that Iraq, Kurdistan, all of us, we will muddle through with the challenges that we have – ISIS as a rampant terrorist organization, these armed militias that aren’t – frankly, many of them aren’t really under control.
We will somehow muddle through, while the U.S. and other allies turn their attention away. And there will be another crisis, and then everybody has to parachute in again. How can we avoid that without being overly alarmist, but also being realistic? We need the United States to stay the course, to pay attention. And I don’t know how to do that beyond what we and others here in Washington are doing, which is to do the rounds, to remind people: Don’t, you know, pay attention – don’t focus all of your attention elsewhere. I think the U.S. should be able to multitask and maintain a real eye on Iraq and Kurdistan and help us to get through these situations. And, again, thank you for all of your support.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Thank you. I think that’s a really great comment. And one of it was actually brought up by our charge d’affaires that I met with there. And he said that he’s trying to encourage Iraqi leaders from Baghdad to take more trips to the U.S., but there’s almost a sense of if I don’t get to go to the U.S. and meet in the Oval Office, I’m not going. And that’s really – that’s not useful. And we should get more members of their parliament here to meet with American, you know, House and Senate members, and get those relationships and foster some relationship with our Kurdish allies. Certainly do a lot more of this.

You met with me, since I’ve been in the Senate, three times, I think, in my office. Once – at least once a year. And this is important. Those relationships are very important to build. But I don’t see that coming out of Baghdad as much. And I think that that’s really critical, is to make those relationship. And there’s such a great resource here in this country of Iraqi Americans and Kurdish Americans who really can help build those relationships. And I don’t think we’re leveraging that the way we should. But, you know, getting them to – I don’t think the word is lobby – but getting them to come more regularly and meet with us is important. I mean, it doesn’t – every visit doesn’t have to be a state visit.

MR. ALTERMAN: And we had Prime Minister Abadi here a few years ago, on this stage. So we can get a prime minister again.

Thanks, sir. Yeah.

Q: Hi. I’m James Martone from Sky News Arabia.

And you mentioned the men and women who are in camps for having fought for ISIS. And I’m glad you mentioned that. What are – as a Senator, but also as a mother – I’m more concerned about the children. Because these adults, you know, they made decisions, whether it was good or bad, but what about those children? And also, very little is known about these Yazidis’ women children that have been taken from them because they’re not allowed to go back to their group unless they give up the children? So what are your thoughts on what the United States should be doing to ensure that these children are taken care of?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: This is really hard. This is –

MR. ALTERMAN: Let me just give background for people who don’t – I know the story, and I’m sure you do – but it’s important for people to understand. These are the children of ISIS fighters and Yazidi women who were not given Iraqi citizenship. The Yazidis will not take the women and children back.
SEN. DUCKWORTH: They’ll take the women back –

MR. ALTERMAN: They’ll take the women back, but not the children. And so – and there were – it’s not exactly right? OK, you wrote a story about it. Can we give her a microphone? She can explain the story.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Yes, fill us in, because the bottom line is I think this is where I had some of the greatest frustration while I was there, because I spoke with the United Nations refugee program people and development program people that were there. And when I spoke with the Iraqi leadership, there was a sense of they were more worried about – and this is important – more worried about the coming rolling blackouts this summer in the Basra region. And their solution to these children was to put them in a camp, you know, in the middle of the desert. And it’s, like, all you’re doing is just warehousing kids who were going to be radicalized. And they’re going to be – I think out of 30,000, 10,000 are under the age of five, or even younger. So that’s the next generation of fighters in less than 10 years if we’re not careful.

MR. ALTERMAN: So I learned that story from her, so.

Q: Kim Dozier with The Daily Beast.

Picking up on James’ question, I did spend about three weeks there and met Yazidi elders who explained that while they welcomed the women back, the Yazidi religion passes through blood. You can’t convert to being a Yazidi. So the women who were coming back with ISIS children, they didn’t know what to do with them because the Iraqi constitution’s Article 26 requires that if you register a child who either has a Muslim father or an unknown father, the child automatically is registered as a Muslim, and that automatically changes the women’s religion to Muslim. So it’s Yazidi genocide by constitution. But then – so that’s one issue of what happens to these children that have come back. But then the other issue is estimates I heard were up to 100,000 or more families, including the mothers and the children, being kept in these camps that – the concern was that they were becoming de facto internment camps.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Yes.

Q: So the question is, what is the U.S. or the international community able to do? What strength are you able to bring to bear from Congress to reach out and say: We’ve got to deradicalize, we’ve got to reintegrate these folks back into the community?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Well, that’s the question, right? The Iraqis have to come to some sort of a willingness to want to reintegrate these displaced persons back into society. And there’s a real resistance to that. And there’s a real – I almost want to say – I mean, a very head-in-the-sand, they don’t want to deal with that problem and it’s too overwhelming. We’ve got to deal with these other things first, because if I don’t deal with the rolling blackout this summer I will not be in office anymore. And so that’s a real issue.

But for the United States and these allies, we can’t go and participate in helping maintain an internment camp, for example. We can’t advise or consent to that, so it’s a real issue. I spoke with the U.N. folks who were there, and I said, well, what
happened in Rwanda? What did they do to forgive and reconcile? Isn’t there a tradition of payments that can be made to right the wrongs and move things forward? And then it was brought up to me that, well, actually, these Iranian-backed Shia militias are now sometimes holding territory that was Sunni that Sunnis can’t even go back to because how there are people there that are not – that were never there in the first place. So it’s a real conundrum.

I don’t know what the solution is, but I do know that we have to work with the Iraqi government to encourage them to continue to try to figure out what that solution is with the international community. But we can’t just ourselves turn our backs on it, because that’s a – you asked about the fighters who are going to come shoot and target Americans? That’s the next generation that’s going to do it if we allow them to continue to be radicalized. And by the way, ISIS is making widows’ payments to these women – the most radical of the – not the Yazidi women, but the radical – the 30,000 are getting widows’ payments. They’re actually successfully able to enter into these camps and make payments to them. So yeah, they don’t hold territory but they’re still very powerful, and they still very much have resources to do – to function.

MR. ALTERMAN: Remaining and extending is their old slogan, and they seem to – right there. Yes, sir.

Q: Hi. My name is Farhad Pouladi. I’m with the Voice of America Persian Service.

My question is that – so you’ve recently been in Iraq, and you talked about Iran’s influence in Iraq, especially the Revolutionary Guard. As a member of the armed services, do you have any recommendation for the administration, or are you willing to go ahead with a bill or resolution to curb or, yet better, eradicate Iran’s influence in Iraq? And if I may ask a second question, what’s your appraisal of the beefing up the naval presence of the U.S. in the Persian Gulf? Do you see any sort of even limited engagement or limited strike against Iranian targets? Thank you.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Well, I haven’t seen all the intelligence that the White House is claiming has brought them to the point where they’re bringing in a greater naval presence. But as you said, their commander was saying, well, we were already on our way there anyway.

The sense that I got from going there is that the designation of their Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organization was an unnecessary poke to the eye, and this whole idea of also maybe designating the Muslim Brotherhood. And it made the jobs of our diplomats and our military men and women on the ground that much harder because it means that once they’re designated you can’t deal with somebody in Iraq who’s had dealings with those folks, and there’s not a lot of folks in Iraq who have not had some sort of dealings with the Iran – some sort of element of the Iran-backed – the revolutionary-backed Shia militias. So you’re basically tying the hands of our diplomats on the ground from being able to actually do their jobs, same with our military men and women. And so this was not necessary. We can still oppose Iran’s influence. We can still certainly make sure that we push forward American interests without these moves, which were, you know, almost a propaganda-ish move to make but really didn’t help us further our cause on the ground and made things harder for the folks on the ground who are trying to do their jobs.

MR. ALTERMAN: Yes, ma’am. Right here in the front row.
Q: Laurie Milroy, Kurdistan 24. Thank you, Senator. It was a very interesting presentation.

You’ve described a lot of problems in Iraq: ISIS has gone underground, the huge amount of displaced persons. You could have added the corruption that inhibits reconstruction of the area. Do you think it’s possible for Iraq to address these problems without something like the far-reaching decentralization that Senators Brownback and Biden proposed a decade ago? Would that – might that be something to consider?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: I think the solution has to come from the Iraqi people. And I have to say I was very much impressed with the current leadership that are in Iraq now, with the – with the president but especially with the prime minister and with the speaker – very dynamic, very much brilliant men who really are trying to do something here. And maybe not always what America wants, but they’re trying to – they’re trying to move the ball forward on behalf of Iraq. I really got that sense, that they – I know that there’s been some criticism of the prime minister as being too tied to Iran, but I almost – what I got from him was more a sense of Iraqi nationalism than I did, you know, wanting to move to Iran.

And so I think that helping them move the ball forward, and helping them and pushing them – being very firm in pushing them to do things like – some of it is very mundane, like changing their visa system, like signing this contract to develop their natural gas, like – let’s do something so that you can actually make foreign investment more attractive here. Fixing the banking system.

You know, they have some great resources not just in the oil that’s – and natural gas that’s underground. They have 100,000 – I think it’s 100,000 – young people entering the workforce. Or maybe it’s 180,000. No, it’s 800,000 young people entering their workforce every year. That’s a challenge, but that’s also a resource. You know, I don’t know an area where you have young people of that age who don’t figure out how to do banking on their phones. I mean, if you can solve this problem in Africa, why can’t you solve this problem in Iraq?

MR. ALTERMAN: But to be fair, I mean, we’ve been trying to persuade the Iraqis to sign certain kinds of oil deals and approve certain parameters – we have been – we have been in the encouragement/urging mode in Iraq virtually every year since 2003.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Yeah. And if you don’t do this, we’re – you know, we can’t be here forever. And by the way, you got a real existing problem right now. You have to do – and you –

MR. ALTERMAN: So are we doing it wrong?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: No, I think –

MR. ALTERMAN: I mean, we’ve been – we’ve been trying to –

SEN. DUCKWORTH: I their the conditions have been different. I think there are different players who are a combination of folks that are in leadership now. I think the combination of the – of the prime minister and the speaker is a really powerful one. I think what the Kurds have been able to do up north sets an example of the type of – the type of
progress that can be made if you would just do some of these very simple liberalization things.

Remember, the same boom that happened in the Kurdish area happened in that short amount of time, right, up until 2014. So they showed that it can be done if you would actually put in these policies that fix things. And by the way, they did it while they were under-resourced, and now they're doing it and trying to regrow their economy while they're still dealing with 1.8 million displaced persons in the Kurdish area. So I think that there's potential to be made.

I'm really, really pleased that, as I said, the prime minister is signing this gas development deal, which is critical. I hope he fixes the visa system, which is what he said he was going to do. And we'll see what's next.

MR. ALTERMAN: Thank you. Hani's going to have an economic question, I know, because Hani always has an economic question.

Q: Thank you, Senator.

You've mentioned about the importance of Iraq –

MR. ALTERMAN: Hani, you have to introduce yourself.

Q: I'm Hani Findakly. I'm an investment banker by profession.

You've mentioned about the importance of Iraq for the U.S., and I do not see Iraq on the radar screen in the U.S. It had a flurry of articles because of your visit, but that's about it. I travel throughout the world in Asia and the Middle East, and it's not – it's not on anybody's radar screen. But it has become a very important country for Iran, and this week it has become even more important with the end of the exemptions that the administration has given to five or six countries for Iran to sell its 1 million barrels of oil per day. Iran is now hard-pressed to find outlets, and the only outlet that makes sense and is available and is very easy to deliver is through smuggling into Iraq. So Iran will find a very easy outlet for 1 million barrels or more. Iraq becomes more important to Iran. Iran becomes more important to Iraq. And yet, we're sitting there looking at small bits and piece of this – listening, fighting ISIS, and dealing with some of these other issues.

So my question, really, is: What kind of strategic vision do you have in which economics has to be the centerpiece of it? Because ISIS did not develop in a vacuum. It developed in the – in the – in an environment of an absence of central government and central power and economic stress. Now Iraq is facing exactly the same situation.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Yeah, that's the – that's the central conundrum of what's happening. I think there has to be some sort of an economic strategy. And it can't just be the United States, though. That's the other part of it, is we can't be – again, we have to be that rebar and we have to work with the international community to come up with some sort of a plan. Unfortunately, we continue as a nation to enact these decisions without ever talking to our allies, which is really frustrating. And yet, Iran is there every single day and now with seats in the parliament via their militias. And so they're there in a way that we're not, and we have to change how we're there, and we have
to change how we engage as an international community. But I do think a greater emphasis on economic development and financial development is something that we need to focus on.

MR. ALTERMAN: Thank you. Sir, a question here? Yes, right here in the second row. Yeah. Danny (sp), can we get the microphone there? Second row.

Q: Hello. First, I wanted to say thank you for your service and for all you do.

And second, I wanted to ask how you think that the private sector and government contractors can continue to help support U.S. government efforts in Iraq. Specifically, where do you think the support needs to be focused? And I ask that because I come from a company that has almost 3,000 employees overseas in Iraq, but we work in Balad and we run the Balad Air Base. We run the largest medical facility over there. And I’m wondering how else we can kind of support U.S. goals and efforts in the country.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: So I think the current model can’t be sustained long term, and that is where basically U.S. forces are out and now we have contractors doing what the U.S. forces did and the Iraqis are not doing for themselves.

So, for example, the M1A1 Abrams tank is a great example. Those tanks are being maintained, but they’re being maintained by American contractors. The Iraqis are not maintaining their own tanks and they’re not driving them and they’re not exercising them, all the ones that they have. And so we have to shift this mode over where they’re doing this themselves than sort of just paying for, you know, foreign military sales or using military aid that we give them to then go ahead and pay for contractors to come in to do this work.

MR. ALTERMAN: Is there a reason, do you think, they don’t want to do it?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: That’s just not been the mode and that’s not how – we’ve been giving them the money. We’re part of the problem. We’re like, oh, you want this? Let’s go buy this. Foreign military sales? Yeah, I’ve got Boeing in my state. Yeah, I’ve got, you know, whoever, and we’re going to sell it to you. It’s also American politicians who have been part of this problem.

What we need to do is work with the Iraqis to develop their maintenance and their capabilities. And if we’re going to use contractors, then let’s use contractors to do that, to be able to work with the Iraqis so that they can set up their logistical network so that they can do these things themselves, and get out of this mode where we’re just using the U.S. defense budget and foreign military sales to help them buy things they buy from American companies who want to make the stuff to sell to them. But then they don’t have enough pilots that can fly them. They don’t have people who can maintain them.

MR. ALTERMAN: All right. I saw a question in the back. Yes, sir.

Q: Hi. I’m from Skokie, so thank you for being my senator.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Thanks.
Q: My question is, the Trump administration provided Iraq with energy waivers for a few months at a time, and we have – and they’ve been threatening to withdraw that waiver for their energy sales to Iran – for the energy purchase from Iran. So the last one is going to expire in June. What would be the consequence if the United States removed that waiver and said that they might sanction Iraq for continuing energy sales for – to Iran?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Well, it would be pretty devastating because oil – you know, something – a huge percentage of the Iraqi population is employed in government and they’re paid from oil sales. And I think it would be detrimental toward their economy, and if anything it will push them closer to Iran. And that’s not helpful to us at all.

One of the thing I heard time and again from all the leaders on the ground there, especially the Iraqi leaders, was they just wanted some consistency in U.S. policy and some sort of a willingness to commit at a consistent level over a period of multiple years. They’re like instead of, you know, this pendulum, can you just say that you’re going to commit to us for five years or 10 years at doing something instead of the very up-and-down nature of how we – how we work with them? And again, they weren’t saying, you know, don’t give us $100 billion; give us 10 billion (dollars) over 10 years. That’s – you know, but it was something along those lines, just be consistent with your support and what you want us to do. But don’t do these, like, you know, two months at a time, three months at a time position because we can’t make any decisions and we can’t – and we’re paralyzed from moving forward because nobody wants to work with us because nobody knows what the U.S. is going to next.

MR. ALTERMAN: So it would be similar to the kinds of relations we – or the kinds of agreements we have with Israel and Egypt, where they understand many years out where it’s going.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Right. Exactly, exactly. And that will allow – and that’ll actually empower the leaders who are there dealing with a very tough situation. That’ll empower them to actually make some of these tough decisions that they have to make.

MR. ALTERMAN: Think there’s congressional support for that? Or how could you win it? How could you win – what would it take to win congressional support for that kind of long-term commitment to Iraq?

SEN. DUCKWORTH: A lot of hard work on the – on the part of people like me, I guess, doing my job. You know, just working with my colleagues and really just showing how it is in our best interest long term to do this.

MR. ALTERMAN: Well, presumably it also requires some confidence that the future government in Iraq is going to be the same dream team that you’ve described having now.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Well, I don’t – wait, wait, I don’t think they’re a dream team whatsoever. I’m very frustrated with them as well. But I’m just saying compared to what’s been there in the past that I have seen – I see in some areas a significant improvement and a real effort there.

I think the prime minister is brilliant. He was nobody’s first choice. He was more of a consensus pick. Is he frustrating? Yeah, I found him frustrating. I couldn’t pin
him down on the question of the 30,000 refugees. But I do think he’s resisting, you know, everybody in trying to forge a more Iraqi path forward, which – I have respect for that.

The speaker, very young, very dynamic. We’ll see where he goes. He’s, you know, fairly new on the scene. He’s made a lot of changes.

It could – this could all go – you know, you could have a mass uprising this summer and this whole thing could fall apart.

MR. ALTERMAN: And so I’m wondering how you get Congress to do that kind of steady commitment when the politics remain fragile. There’s the perception of an enduring threat from Iran, and Iranian penetration, and the issue of Iranian oil sales, and the closer integration of the Iranian and Iraqi economies. I mean, that strikes me as a complicated set of ingredients to put together the kind of strategic commitment that you said your trip persuaded you is really necessary.

SEN. DUCKWORTH: Right. But the alternate to that is worse for us. The alternate to that – or what I would say to my colleagues is the alternate to some sort of a long-term, steady commitment is an Iraq that completely falls under Iran’s control; is a resurgent ISIS not 10 years from now, but a year or two years from now. So that’s an even worse alternative. I think this is one of those cases where when I talk to my colleagues I say this is it, guys; either we be the rebar and we help them and we make some real commitments now, or we’re going to be looking at sending U.S. troops back in to help repel the next ISIS wave, or we’re going to be seeing Iran even grow, and then we really truly have lost Iraq.

MR. ALTERMAN: You have presented a really remarkable picture of a country that is both in a state of unprecedented promise and a state of really serious danger, that you have issues coming from ISIS, you have issues coming from Iran, you have issues coming from the sectarian divisions within the country. And yet, you have a leadership that is genuinely visionary, that can work in new ways, and presents opportunities for the United States that we haven’t had perhaps ever to put Iraq on a new course.

I appreciate your coming. I’m glad you got back safely. I hope you had a good trip, and you have more excellent trips. And we hope to see you back here at CSIS. Please join me in thanking Senator Duckworth. (Applause.)

(END)