

Senior State Department Officials On the Situation in Iraq - United States Department of State

MODERATOR: So I'm going to have [Senior State Department Official One] start out and just give a very – a very – we actually mostly want to make this Q&A, so [Senior State Department Official One] is just going to have a few remarks here. We obviously have the whole – whole Middle East team, senior State Department official. You know the drill. Let me know if you have any questions on the rules of this. But like I said, we want most of this to be Q&A, orderly, raise your hand, no chaos.

Go ahead, [Senior State Department Official One].

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: We did – this was a defensive strike that was taken and supported by very solid intelligence, and I've seen all the intelligence. This was strongly supported by everything that we were seeing that Soleimani was planning imminent attacks against American diplomats and our armed forces members in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and in the region.

Given – so Soleimani is the major architect. He is the architect of Iran's major terrorist attacks over the last 20 years. He's killed 608 Americans in Iraq alone. And so when we start seeing extensive and very solid intelligence that he is plotting imminent attacks against the United States, the President, as Commander-in-Chief, has a duty to take decisive action.

That decisive action has been threatened for a year and a half, since September 11th of 2018, when the White House put out a statement saying that there – this is after the rocket attacks on our diplomatic facilities in Iraq, and he said we are going to deny Iran the fiction of deniable attacks; we're not going to honor the distinction, the false distinction between Iran and the regime and its proxies, and if the regime or its proxies strike at American interests or personnel they'll – there will be decisive action. Secretary Pompeo said it on December 13th. We've said it more times than I can count. The Iranians just didn't believe us. And the Iranians met the condition of the threat.

And as – and so – and I'll also say this: If we had not taken this action, and hundreds of Americans were dead, you would be asking me, "Why didn't you take out Soleimani when you had the chance?" I get all these questions about, "Oh, aren't you – isn't this the beginning of something bigger?" and everything else. This was – the conditions were met to take decisive action to eliminate a very, very, very effective terrorist in the heart of the Middle East to save hundreds of American lives.

MODERATOR: Okay. Matt?

QUESTION: Can – so can you be more specific on what these – what the intelligence said about the planned attacks? And I know you've gotten this before, and you will continue to get it since what happened in 2003 happened, which is –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: You're not going to make the

Iraq comparison.

QUESTION: I'm just going to say that —

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: It's been — this is like the three —

QUESTION: — the U.S. — the administration —

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: This is like four administration —

QUESTION: The — it's like the Ford administration?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: No, no. I'm saying there's been so many presidential terms —

QUESTION: Well —

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: — in between then and now. It's just — it's a failed analogy.

QUESTION: I'm not asking you the analogy. It's — the question is —

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: You just made the analogy.

QUESTION: — the administration — the administration then said "believe us," so why should we now believe you when you say "believe us"? What was this intelligence? Can you be a bit more specific?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: You're saying because another administration made one claim, why should we believe in a different administration this claim? It just — it doesn't make any sense. It's entirely separate.

QUESTION: Let's limit it to this —

MODERATOR: Ah, ah, ah, that's not what we're doing today. Matt, you can finish.

QUESTION: Anyway, can you be more specific about what the —

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Qasem Soleimani was traveling in the region.

QUESTION: Right, but he does that all the time, though, right?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Well, he is under a UN travel ban, so perhaps the first question is why is a terrorist designated by the UN Security Council outside of Iran? We knew from what — you saw what Muhandis had said, who was also killed in the strike. On December 29th he said, "The blood of the martyrs and the wounded will not go in vain...the response will be harsh for the American forces in Iraq." Don't even take my word for it. They're already saying publicly that there will be a harsh response. KH said the attack was the, quote, "first lesson" they would teach the United States and that it would be followed by a number of other things.

So what they're saying publicly matches up with everything that we were seeing in the intelligence. He was traveling around the region. He's not there on vacation. He is there for the specific purpose to plan multiple attacks against Americans and facilities, and that's why he's hanging out with Muhandis. Why is he in the car with Muhandis?

QUESTION: That's an excellent question.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: You don't have to actually listen to what we say, although I think you should. Listen to what the IRGC statement said, what they said about the death of Soleimani, that he was in the region planning attacks.

MODERATOR: That's – well, there you go. Rich.

QUESTION: The other thing is that Zarif is supposed to be at the UN on, I think, December 9th, and the Iranians are complaining already that he hasn't gotten a visa yet. What are the chances of that, of him getting a visa? (Laughter.)

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: These things take time. We don't comment on consular affairs.

MODERATOR: Yeah, Rich.

QUESTION: [Senior State Department Official One], you said that the Iranians met the conditions of the threat in order to launch a strike. Had they before? And also in the timeline of how the United States and the administration viewed Qasem Soleimani, you talked about the September 11th, 2018, memo. What about the designation, the FTO designation from April? Did that also factor in how the U.S. viewed Soleimani?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Well, I also should just remind everybody that Muhandis was designated as a terrorist by the United States in '09. Soleimani was. He had been under a UN designation and everything else. And so both of these guys are the real deal in terms of bad guys. What did you ask me?

MODERATOR: Sorry.

QUESTION: The first one was you said the Iranians met the conditions in this case of a threat?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Right. Well –

QUESTION: Had this happened – was there – had they previously met the conditions?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I'm saying if you look at all of the statements that the Secretary and the President and I have said over the last year and a half, and there's – it was said in different ways, but the thrust of it is if the Iranian regime or its proxies conduct armed attacks that injure American personnel, interests – there's a number of ways we have said it – there will be decisive action. They met the condition, and so then we then fulfilled the consequence.

QUESTION: Did they previously meet it?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: But the President had shown enormous restraint over the last year and a half against all of these provocations that we were seeing. The attack – the base where one American was killed, that was the 11th attack in two months by Qasem Soleimani and his proxies that he orchestrates, and so we asked the Iraqi Government to arrest the people who did this, bring them to justice. But after an American was killed and you had a number of American soldiers and you had Iraqi troops that were also injured, the restraint and the patience was demonstrated for a very long time, but then it was necessary to fulfill the threat.

MODERATOR: Nick.

QUESTION: [Senior State Department Official One], two questions. One, can you talk a little bit about what your communication with Iran has looked like in the time since? Have you been passing notes or communicating with them either directly or through the Swiss? And then also, Iran has already announced a replacement for Soleimani. Do you believe that his death hinders their ability to carry out such attacks, or are you expecting that they will be able to continue carrying out attacks with the effectiveness that they have before?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I think the Swiss put out a statement that they were summoned by the – in Tehran by the government and they said that they delivered a message from the United States. So I'll just leave the Swiss statement alone. I don't have any comment on it.

Second question was about his replacement?

QUESTION: Wait, they delivered a message from the U.S.?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I'll just refer you to the Swiss statement. I don't have anything to say beyond it.

MODERATOR: He's saying the Swiss said that, yeah.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: The Swiss said that. There was a Swiss statement that you can see, because there was public – they were summoned and the Swiss had a statement. They put out a statement on it.

In terms of the number two, that's not a promotion that I would accept. The IRGC did lose its best terrorist, and he is very effective and very deadly. When you look at –

QUESTION: Number two?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: No, I'm talking about Soleimani. I'm just saying that Soleimani, I think, was in many ways the indispensable man, and with Soleimani dead, it will be very difficult for these proxies to be organized on the scale, lethality, and effectiveness that they had under Soleimani. He is a remarkable official, but [Senior State Department Official Three] can –

MODERATOR: Go ahead, [Senior State Department Official Three].

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: Here's a Soleimani story from my experiences with him. He put a rocket through Stu Jones's roof in Baghdad in 2011 to make some message we didn't quite understand, but we didn't pay enough

attention to it. He then put a rocket through my roof. We were then trying to reach out and communicate with these guys, de-escalate, what I'm – was hearing all morning from our coalition partners, and he launched the Cafe Milano strike that would have blown up along with al-Jubeir some hundred-plus people. Now, it was always hard to get all the way up to the grand leader on that one, but it certainly was not hard to get up to Qasem Soleimani on this thing. This guy was, as [Senior State Department Official One] said, unique. There were things he could do that nobody else could do. He was not a decentralized manager; he was a hands-on, down-to-the-details manager. And we are not safe in the region as long as Iran is pursuing this general strategy, but we are safer without him than we are with him. I'll make that statement from years of experience dealing with this guy and his minions.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: And I can also say that there was a consensus in the President's national security cabinet that the risk of doing nothing was unacceptable given the intelligence and given the effectiveness that Soleimani presents. He's just somebody you have to take very seriously.

MODERATOR: Arshad.

QUESTION: Do you expect the Iranians to retaliate for this attack? What are you doing to protect U.S. personnel and facilities abroad from any such retaliation? And why should one not suspect that there may be an escalatory cycle that is beginning here if they retaliate and then you may judge that, once again, you feel you have to respond?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: We were already in a state of escalation before the strike. Just in that period that we were looking at and the days leading up to it, we had –

QUESTION: Not kinetic escalation, though.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Yeah, he –

MODERATOR: An American was killed.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: An American was killed.

QUESTION: Right, but –

MODERATOR: And servicemembers injured.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: How was that not escalatory?

MODERATOR: That's pretty kinetic.

QUESTION: Okay, no, no, you're right. You're right.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: And then they attacked – they attacked our embassy, of course.

QUESTION: No, no, right. Forgive me.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: And they – that was an attack on our embassy by designated terrorists of the United States. And so this was a – this was a defensive action, but it is also to de-escalate, because Qasem Soleimani was

escalating. This was an act of de-escalation. And if this – there is one thing that is clear. Retreating from the regime or accommodating the regime has very severe consequences, much greater than standing up to the regime. This regime is not used to being told no. They enjoyed about a good 10 to 15-year run on an – executing a violent and expansionist foreign policy, and President Trump has reversed that completely and has put the regime – today it's facing its deadliest – it's facing its worst financial crisis, its worst political crisis, and their top general is killed.

QUESTION: But do you expect them to retaliate? And what are you doing –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: But they already were retaliating. This is what I don't understand.

QUESTION: So you do expect them to retaliate or not?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: When I hear these questions it's like you're describing Belgium for the last 40 years. It's the Iranian regime. We've got 40 years of acts of war that this regime has committed against countries in five continents.

QUESTION: So you expect additional acts of war on their part?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: No, I don't.

QUESTION: Well, why don't you?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I'm just saying that weakness invites more aggression. Timidity will invite more aggression.

QUESTION: Why don't you? Why do you think they will be deterred? When you said, "I don't," why don't you expect retaliation?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Because we're speaking in a language the regime understands.

MODERATOR: Okay. Jessica.

QUESTION: Since this was all escalating over the killing of a U.S. contractor, is there any information that you can release that –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: That's not the only – that's not the only reason.

QUESTION: Not the only reason, but –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I don't want to – don't overstate. I'm just saying, don't overstate it.

QUESTION: Okay, no, not the only reason but the immediate step – the embassy, now this. Is there anything you can tell us about the identify of the contractor? And if you can't tell us anything about him, could you tell us why?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: I don't think we've released the name.

MODERATOR: I don't —

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: We haven't released the name and I haven't —

MODERATOR: I'd have to double-check.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I haven't asked, and I don't know.

MODERATOR: It's likely due to the family.

QUESTION: Why not?

MODERATOR: We can't answer that. Okay, way to waste your question. Go ahead, Jennifer. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Can you get a little more specific about what imminent means? Did that mean days? Did that mean hours? And when were you first informed of this specific threat? Were Secretary Pompeo and Esper aware of it when they went to Mar-a-Lago on Sunday? Was it discussed there?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Can't answer either question without getting into sources and methods.

MODERATOR: Tracy, I cut you off a few times. Did you want to ask something?

QUESTION: What was I going to ask? Yes. You said 40 years of acts of war. Why — I guess I'm still trying to understand why this act of war — this is the first American who's been killed by them — why this act of war precipitated this response.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Because the threat picture that the intelligence presented made very clear that in the absence of decisive action, hundreds of Americans would be killed.

QUESTION: Hundreds of Americans?

MODERATOR: Abbie?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Potentially hundreds of Americans killed in light of what we — what we knew he was up to.

QUESTION: Two questions. There was an interview earlier today with [Senior State Department Official One]. (Laughter.)

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Thank you for following me.

QUESTION: And I wanted to clarify some of the comments about the imminent attack. From what I understand, there was going to be attacks on U.S. facilities and workers in various countries. Can you elaborate at all on that or restate that in a way? And then also, do you have any or can you speak at all about which of your allies were briefed beforehand? Was Israel made aware, or Saudi Arabia, or any of your European allies?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I don't have — I think I

answered the first question. It's Iraq, Syria, Lebanon in the region. These were attacks targeting American diplomats, American military personnel, and American – facilities that house Americans. Whether it's – whether we're being hosted by the government or whether it's our own facility.

We don't get into process questions on who we inform and don't inform.

MODERATOR: Rogin.

QUESTION: Thank you. Could you take us through the – so you – could you take us through the diplomatic strategy for de-escalation? I mean, after the strike, what are the main elements of our diplomatic plan to –

MODERATOR: Yeah. [Senior State Department Official Three], you should talk about this too. Why don't you –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: [Senior State Department Official Three] can both talk about this.

MODERATOR: Yeah, [Senior State Department Official Three] – why don't – [Senior State Department Official Three]'s been doing –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: Yeah, first of all, we're stressing that we want to stay on in Iraq. We have an important mission there, the coalition. We just spoke with most of the key coalition members this morning, making that message to them. They also took the – well, you need to de-escalate. We raised the point – and [Senior State Department Official One] can talk about this in more detail – that we are ready to talk with the Iranians. We've tried to do this in the past. That's on the table.

And again, the point I took with them, and I'll take it again here today: We cannot promise that we have broken the circle of violence. What I can say from my experience with Qasem Soleimani is it is less likely that we will see this now than it was before, and if we do see an increase in violence, it probably will not be as devilishly ingenious. Other than Usama bin Ladin, he's the only guy – with Cafe Milano – a senior terrorist leader around the Middle East who has tried to seriously plot in detail a mass casualty event on American soil. Let him rest in peace.

QUESTION: So you said talk with the Iranians? You're ready to talk with the Iranians about –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: [Senior State Department Official One] can give you the detail –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Say again?

QUESTION: Can you talk more about you're ready to talk with the Iranians? About what? What's the off-ramp, what's the –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: The off-ramp has been there for three years. The Iranians keep projecting it. And it's not just us. I mean, call Macron, Abe, Khan in Pakistan, sultan of Oman – all these countries from all parts of the world have reached out to the regime and have failed to get the supreme leader to make better decisions. So he's now managing economic collapse and a political crisis, and the death of his Qods Force leader.

MODERATOR: Did you want to add anything about —

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: This is — I mean, the bill has come due for a lot of bad decisions.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: And the ball — the ball's in Iran's court. I mean, they can choose to escalate.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: The ball has been in their court — yes, they can choose to escalate. And they typically choose to escalate asymmetrically. It's the nature of modern terrorism. That's what — the IRGC we designated as a foreign terrorist organization. Rich mentioned this earlier. We are, again, denying them the fiction that this is some Westphalian country that has, like, a conventional defense ministry and a standard president and a foreign minister. It's a regime with clerical and revolutionary oversight that seeks to dominate the Middle East and beyond. You've heard me say this is a kleptocratic theocracy. And you look at the people of Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, are all rejecting the Iranian model at the same time. And there will be — there will not be tears shed in Iran for the death of Soleimani by so many Iranians — he recently killed 1,500 of them.

The IRGC and the Qods Force are famous for domestic oppression. They hate the IRGC and they hate the Qods Force, and I expect that you'll see further protests in Iran.

MODERATOR: Carol.

QUESTION: You mentioned that you had tried out — tried to reach out to the Iranians before on talks. Had you ever tried to reach out to Soleimani? And if so, at what point did you decide —

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Why would we reach out to him? For what?

QUESTION: To see if — and sometimes you have to talk with your enemy if you want to de-escalate. And whoever —

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Oh. Well, we've offered that talk to —

QUESTION: With Soleimani?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: — to the government. No. Look, publicly and privately over the last few years, we have made many communications — almost, I would say — I would say everything that we say publicly is consistent with whatever has been said episodically in private. And it's all the same message of: meet our diplomacy with diplomacy, and not with military force; let's resolve our bilateral differences diplomatically. The regime is not interested in that, and they're paying the price for it.

MODERATOR: Christina.

QUESTION: So you never had tried to reach out to Soleimani before?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: It includes — not this, the last administration — the Qods Force, without success, as part of the broad set of

many administrations trying many ways to get these guys to stop their activities in the region.

QUESTION: Sorry for my voice. [Senior State Department Official Three], I wanted to follow up, and anybody can answer it. Are you confident that this action has stopped whatever this imminent plan was? I know you said it made retaliation less likely, but can you speak to this threat and how this strike —

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: I've never in 50 years, from putting on the uniform in 1969, seen anybody in the U.S. or any other country that is able to predict future clashes of states and groups that you can state in that degree of absolute certainty. I'm just pointing out that I know of no Iranian that has come up with the devilishly ingenious and risky strategies like Cafe Milano and some of the other stunts he's pulled. And so, that off the plate indicates that we might see a different kind of escalation. Whether the specific plots that he has unleashed were so far advanced that they may be able to carry them out, I don't know, but my strong impression is that right now, everybody in his little foreign legion is scurrying for cover. In fact, I think you can take my word on that, that they are scurrying for cover right now.

QUESTION: So the decision to — can I follow up?

MODERATOR: Sure.

QUESTION: The decision to take him out wasn't necessarily a way of removing this — [Senior State Department Official One], the threat that you were talking about in these different countries and these different facilities — but it's a way to mitigate it in the future? I'm just —

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: It slows it down. It makes it less —

QUESTION: Since we don't know what the threat is — okay, that's what I was —

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: It slows it down. It makes it less likely. It's shooting down Yamamoto in 1942. Jesus, do we have to explain why we do these things? (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Ouch.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: Go look that up.

QUESTION: Yes, you do.

QUESTION: The Secretary talked about this as being wholly legal. I wonder if you can just explain the legal justification of the killing.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: You're going to have to talk to the lawyers.

QUESTION: And then —

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Well, I've got some stuff here — no?

QUESTION: Huh?

QUESTION: Holy beginning with an H, not beginning with a W.

QUESTION: Holy – holy, yeah. Anyway, just to talk about the legal justifications. But then also, can you talk about managing now relations with Iraq and – to be able to keep U.S. forces based there?

MODERATOR: Yeah, let's do [Senior State Department Official One] there, I think.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Well, this was a – this was an action taken in self-defense, and the United States has the inherent right to defend itself if it is faced with an attack. General – Secretary Esper spoke about what we've been doing. He said that Soleimani was developing plans to attack diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region, and so this is a defensive strike.

MODERATOR: Okay.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I've never heard anybody argue that we shouldn't defend ourselves if we're, like, attacked. I just – is there a question behind the question?

QUESTION: Well, it's – well, I mean, it's an assassination of an Iranian Government official.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: It's not an assassination. Come on.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: No, no, no, hold on.

QUESTION: All right.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: Hold on, hold on.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: That is not true.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: I did this for two years in the Bush administration. Assassinations are not allowed under law. Revenge killings, non-judicial executions are not. The criteria is do you have overwhelming evidence that somebody is going to launch a military or terrorist attack against you. Check that box. The second one is do you have some legal means to, like, have this guy arrested by the Belgian authorities or something. Check that box because there's no way anybody was going to stop Qasem Soleimani in the places he was running around – Damascus, Beirut. And so, you take lethal action against him. This is something that we have done many times over both Democratic and Republican administrations that I served in. It's the same criteria; it was applied in this case and all cases.

MODERATOR: Michele, you had a second question about Iraq, right?

QUESTION: Yeah.

MODERATOR: Okay. Go ahead.

QUESTION: About may –

MODERATOR: In the future.

QUESTION: About the ability to stay – maintain forces in Iraq.

MODERATOR: And then we're running – we're running out of time already.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Yeah, no, we've heard – we've heard talk about bringing to the COR a vote on the presence of U.S. troops. We're working with our allies on the ground to mitigate that, prevent it from happening. Iraqis want us in the country. Now, there are Iranian proxies who do not want us there, and they are threatening to kill or attack, intimidate those of the Iraqis who want us there to fight ISIS, to help build their military, to stabilize their financial system. We are a positive presence in Iraq, but not for Iran. They view us as a threat. They don't want Iraq to be sovereign. And our presence there helps build institutions and helps Iraq move towards sovereignty. If Iran remains there – and the Government of Iraq right now is faced with a choice whether they want to be an Iranian satellite state or whether they want to be a sovereign nation-state of good standing in the international community. We would help them move toward the latter.

MODERATOR: Okay.

QUESTION: Can you give us any tick-tock of how it developed?

MODERATOR: So we're going to have John. He hasn't gone yet.

QUESTION: Just, [Senior State Department Official Three] –

MODERATOR: Yeah. This is the last question.

QUESTION: Just to fulfill that checkmark box for disproving assassination – obviously a lot rests on this imminent idea.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: Right.

QUESTION: And so, as the – are the American people going to get the information about that? Is that ever going to come out?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: That's a political decision by – above my paygrade. What I can say is: whether you're going to be able to release it to the American people or not is not a criteria in that checklist. The checklist is: are you likely to see American blood if you don't act. And that checklist was met.

QUESTION: But if we just got dragged into a war, obviously the American people are going to want to know.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: We were heading towards further attacks if we did not act. That is clear to me, and I think it's clear to the other people briefing you.

QUESTION: Aren't we headed toward an even bigger attack now?

MODERATOR: I think S can answer –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: We –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: My – my own view is – as I said, that’s an answer to the question previously. It’s the same thing. You can never predict the future. It is for two reasons I have some hope. First of all, this guy was uniquely capable, and he took risks. Again, I keep coming back to Cafe Milano because it was really a ballsy plot. And while this would have been –

MODERATOR: All right. Cafe –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: There it is in the transcript. (Laughter.)

MODERATOR: Cafe Milano has to pay for all this promotion.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I know. He’s on a retainer. (Laughter.)

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: Secondly – secondly –

MODERATOR: Somebody wants free pizza.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: – this shows exactly how serious the recommendations we made and other administrations – if you go after the low-level proxies, you don’t make much of an impression on these guys.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Very true.

MODERATOR: Okay, so that’s the end.