**Beirut Institute e-Policy Circle 40 unofficial transcript - 28 July 2021**

**Raghida Dergham:** Good morning Massachusetts. Michael Knights welcome to you from Massachusetts. Good afternoon to Burton on Trent in England where the Rt Hon. Tobias Ellwood is joining us from. He had some technical issues but he is with us for the whole hour. And then we have good afternoon to Erbil, Hoshyar Zebari my old friend, Hoshyar Zebari you will always be Iraq's foreign minister to many of us whether you are on duty or you're not. And good afternoon Jeddah, where HRH Prince Turki al-Faisal, co-chair of Beirut Institute, is joining us from. I want to start if you permit me with a personal note. Next Wednesday will mark the first anniversary of the Beirut Blast, a crime against humanity. The blast was personal. An atomic bomb, literally, came into my living room and devastated my whole home. Everything is gone. It's been devastating to too many people. I want to thank the people of the village where I now live and the beautiful town of Batroun. I want to thank the Khoury family who welcomed me as family, in the family hotel where these e-Policy Circles have been coming from. I want to thank God for keeping me sane and for giving me energy to go forward. [audio unclear] international help to accomplish accountability not immunity, ending impunity, not only for those behind the blast itself but for the whole political cartel destroying the Lebanese people and such a beautiful country. [audio unclear] Thank you for tolerating my personal note here and I wanna go back to the e-Policy Circle. I'm very proud to have such a fantastic cast. This is our 40th e-Policy Circle over a year. We hosted 133 policymakers from 33 countries, presidents, generals, ministers, innovators, think tankers, economists, designers, you name it. We thank God succeeded in expanding the family of Beirut Institute Summit in Abu Dhabi. We were able to convene the best minds to contemplate creativity and [audio unclear] constructively on the theme of the 4th edition of Beirut Institute Summit in Abu Dhabi, "Stability Redefined: Who Authors the Future?" This geopolitical conversation, both at the actual summit and online, would not have been possible without the support of the host country, the UAE and without you Prince Turki al-Faisal. The 40th e-Policy Circle concludes the spring/summer season. We will, God willing, resume the e-Policy Circles, our conversation, in mid-September. But our target is to convene in Abu Dhabi on March 12 and 13 for our 4th edition of the Summit. To our online community, thank you for your incredible support. To the host country, grateful that you stayed with us through thick and thin, thank you. And to you [audio unclear] believer in the mission of this indigenous think tank I say proudly, together we made it. We are now a global brand. Beirut Institute is now highly respected and influential as a global think tank, thanks in no small measure to Abu Dhabi and to you dear Prince Turki. So now over to you, you get 5 minutes, one as co-chair as Beirut Institute Summit in Abu Dhabi, and then to our distinguished other guests, they all get 4 strict minutes to open another fabulous conversation. Prince Turki.

**HRH Prince Turki al-Faisal:** Thank you very much Raghida. Well first of all we're all heartbroken by what's happening in Lebanon. My late father used to call Lebanon the lungs of the Arab world. Unfortunately those lungs have contracted Corona now. And it is a pity and condolences to all Lebanese for what is happening there and the suffering that they are going through. On other issues, Afghanistan of course is in the news now and the people are saying, why is Biden leaving Afghanistan the way it is, others are saying, get out, get out, so there are conflicting views on what is happening there. There have been many chances for the US and other players to withdraw from Afghanistan long before we are here today. Unfortunately those opportunities were not taken. I will just mention a couple of them. One of them was when the US was chasing Bin Laden in the Tora Bora mountains, and had they continued the chase and captured him then and/or done away with him at that time I think that would have been a perfect time for them to shout victory and leave. Unfortunately they chose to invade another country which was Iraq at that time and withdrew their chase of Bin Laden. Another opportunity I think that was missed was when Bin Laden himself was killed by Mr Obama a few years back and it was then [audio unclear] to declare victory on the war on terror and not precipitously leave but at least leave in an orderly manner. The withdrawal should be no surprise to anybody because Mr Trump had announced it before Mr Biden did. And Mr Biden is simply following on Mr Trump's original intentions that he announced at the end of his presidency. Another thing, one more comment on Afghanistan is the US also declared when they were going to withdraw, giving date and time and minute and second of their withdrawal, therefore the Taliban feel that they have succeeded in their attempts to drive the Americans out and other forces from there. So the climate for negotiations changed dramatically once the Taliban have known when the US is leaving and what they intend to do after that. So that is something that has to be taken into account. On Palestine for me is an issue that has never dies in spite of comments by other people on its viability and things like that. Though I just don't understand why for example European countries have not yet recognized the State of Palestine that was initially demanded by the partition resolution in 1948. I think that would level the playing field more fairly in Palestine and allow for negotiations to continue. **The other thing of course we have in our midst is Iran. The JCPOA as we've seen I don't know if it's going to come through natural birth or Cesarean operation but definitely from a Saudi point of view it is going to be whatever comes out, is going to be malformed and missing important elements from it which is Iran's conduct in our midst and also Iran's extraterritorial ambitions, not just on the Arab world but also as we've seen now they've announced that they're establishing Hashd al Shaabi in Afghanistan.** So these are things I think that deserve attention. On terrorism in general I think that is an issue that will continue with us unfortunately because that is the nature of the beast as it were, we have to continue to be on our toes and on our guard to prevent the terrorists from reclaiming or achieving any of their intentions and so on. And as we continue to talk of course I'm sure others will contribute and I will come back to some of these points if you don't mind. One thing, Tunis also in the news these days. I'm not surprised of what has happened in Tunis. There are 2 directions in Tunis at the moment. One is gearing towards Muslim Brotherhood authority and the other one is gearing towards Tunis as we know it, as being inclusive and a Mediterranean country with people who are very sound and contributive, not only to their people but also to humanity. So I think that's where the Kingdom stands in support of Tunis. I hope I kept to my 4 minutes.

**Dergham:** Thank you very much prince Turki al-Faisal, you did you still have one minute for Beirut Institute as co-chair if you wanna use it now or later it's up to you.

**al-Faisal:** I'll take it later.

**Dergham:** Ok very good. And also later on Prince Turki al-Faisal we wanna hear more about what's going on in the conversation or the lack thereof between Saudi Arabia and Iran. And definitely we'll speak a lot about Iraq. But for now on I wanna give the four minutes to Tobias Ellwood. Hello Tobias and thank you for moving quickly to join us. I know it's been technically a bit challenging. But you look good from wherever you are. Here's 4 minutes to you.

**Tobias Ellwood:** Well thank you so much it's a pleasure to join this distinguished panel and I apologize for my location. [audio unclear] A real pleasure to follow HRH Prince Turki. I pose a question to everybody. Do you think the world will be more stable or less stable over the next 5 years? It's a question that I posed to my own Prime Minister, to our national security advisor, to our defence secretary and the answer is consistent. Everybody is concerned about where our world is going. There's a rise of big authoritarian power. Countries are rearming themselves. There's a 1930s feel to the world as we see it today. And not only that, we have climate change and all the challenges that that poses, and on top of that **we have the West as a collective identity becoming too risk-averse, losing what we believe in, what we stand for, what we're willing to defend and if ever there was an example of that, it's in Afghanistan.** **20 years we now depart effectively stealing the country handing it back to the very insurgency that we went in to defeat in the first place. What does victory look like? What was it supposed to look like? It was never really clear. What's clear to me is that you can never beat an insurgency by military means alone.** We learned that in Northern Ireland and what we see in Afghanistan is a litany of failures which the West must learn. Not only the West must learn but must seek advice from our Muslim friends as to how to manage what we saw in Afghanistan, which are very much tied out to religious ethos, develop a better understanding of how we can move a nation forward. There are some schoolboy errors as to why Afghanistan went wrong. I offer 3. Firstly is the fact that we denied the Taliban a place at the table back in 2001. They asked to joined the [audio unclear] discussions and it was Donald Rumsfeld that said no, we're the winners you guys stay out. Now perhaps it's because of who the Taliban were that we said no thank you. Imagine how different life would have been had they been at the table back in those early days.The second is that we didn't build an indigenous security force for 5 years, from 2001 to 2005 very little happened. [audio unclear] build their own security and then start building their own governance. We introduced Western structures. The idea that you can have parliamentarians and so forth. The parliamentarians that I met who represented [audio unclear] never went there because they didn't feel secure enough. We didn't understand the identity of what Afghanistan is about. The tribal constructs, the history itself. Britain of all countries should have appreciated that. And the 3rd issue is that the West got too confident, cocky and HRH Prince Turki touched on it. In 2003, just 2 years into Afghanistan, the West, US, went into Iraq. Quite unnecessarily. And they too went from being liberators to becoming occupiers there. We were simply overstretched. The UK abandoned Iraq eventually to focus on Afghanistan and now we've abandoned Afghanistan as well. And I think what's happened with Afghanistan the fact that we are departing, retreating in this way, it's killing off the assumption that the West military might, led by the US as an alliance, can actually intervene in any country under the case for common good. I don't think that will happen. [audio unclear] My concern is that we did not have the right policy, we allowed the military to advance too quickly, and I give the example of Germany after WWII. We didn't just depart after the war was ended and leave it to the fate of what would obviously be [audio unclear] moving far more to the West, bumping into France. We stayed committed and we have troops there today. Now look what's gonna happen to Afghanistan now. Its neighbors, Iran, Pakistan, India, Russia, and China. This is a big, busy part of real estate of the world and that is a question for the West as to what happens next.

**Dergham:** [audio unclear] for the discussion thank you so much Tobias Ellwood. We're gonna go to Hoshyar Zebari for 4 minutes. Please Hoshyar Zebari the floor is yours.

**Hoshyar Zebari:** Well very pleased to join this distinguished panel and my warm greetings to you Raghida. HRH Prince Turki al Faisal and to the Rt Hon Tobias Ellwood we worked some years ago together on Iraqi issues and to my dear friend Michael Knights, he hasn't been to Iraq or Kurdistan for a long time but he's been [audio unclear] Iraqi issues very closely. And he's an authority actually on Iraq today for this administration and the previous administration. We're amongst friends here. I don't know where to start but really we live an inter-independent war. Issues and cases are similar and we feel it wherever we are. Just like the Covid pandemic brought us together the whole world. So this geopolitical challenge whether in Afghanistan, in Iran, in the Gulf, in Tunisia, or in Iraq also [audio unclear] closer. I'll start from Iraq actually because most politics are local rather than **international. I think we're going though still a transitional period. This transitional period has not settled yet. For** many years not since 2003 even before during the Iraq-Iran war to the Kowaiti invasion, the 2003 war, these people have suffered a great deal and actually you can only admire their resilience, you see how they manage even today with the lack of electricity, the hospitals, militias roaming in the streets and also the security challenges. It's a difficult time really. And although we don't have a crystal ball to read the future for the next 5 years as the Rt Hon asked the panel it's really difficult but really **the signs are not positive in terms of the issues that we have mentioned, the authoritarianisms also the lack of international actors engagement to bring some stability or some order. Everybody's disengaging and the fear is that with covid they will be more inward-looking [**audio unclear] I think this is what we read it. And climate change as we have said, here Iraq this year has been astronomical you see over 52-53 degrees in some parts of the country, with the scarcity of water also is another challenge to us. **Recently we have conducted a strategic dialogue with the US, the aim was really to redefine the mission of the US forces whom we have invited to help us to fight against Daesh or Isis. Isis is not a local phenomenon, as Taliban actually is more confined to geographic territory. Isis was an international challenge not only to Iraq but to the world.** We've seen them in many European capitals trying to undermine security even in the US not to mention Saudi Arabia and the Gulf and other countries as a whole. But **we believe still there is a need for continued engagement. That has been our message to the Biden administration, to himself and his team**. Who are very familiar, who worked on Iraqi, Middle Eastern issues for many years. During Obama, Biden was the key figure who handled Iraq apart from the State department and others, and most other members of his team. **But I think the final communique that they have reached was acceptable, agreeable. There wouldn't be much change in military, security engagement especially that we have this long-term strategic framework with the US that is really not for a specific time. What we hear from them and from our team when we were negotiating is that there was commitment that the administration will not abandon its allies and friends and will stand by them.** This was a positive encouragement but we have to wait to see the reaction of the militias. [audio unclear] what has been achieved so far.

**Dergham:** Alright thank you so very much. This is gonna be discussed in the next hour in a bit more thorough manner but first I wanna go to Michael Knights. Four minutes to you Michael Knights please.

**Michael Knights:** Thanks so much. Thank you very much to the Institute, Raghida, HRH Prince Turki, Tobias Ellwood and my dear friend Hoshyar. It's really nice to be here today. The last few days were extremely busy. I just came back from Washington DC where [audio unclear] sort of working within the strategic dialogue. I saw PM Kadhimi. Many US officials. So I can sort of give you a little bit of an inside view of how the visit went. First of all and I'll end with this point as well. It's an amazing thing that an Iraqi PM has visited the Oval Office twice in 2 years with 2 different presidents. This strategic dialogue does give us a regular set of events on which to build a better and closer relationship. And it is working that way. Something like strategic dialogue sounds very boring when you explain it. It's not a flashy policy option. It doesn't work very quickly. But what it does do is provide everything with a skeleton, a framework to build on. And that's kind of important because it's easy for US to simply check out of Iraq for a while, this draws us back to Iraq constantly but in a way that the US government is quite happy to do. You know the [audio unclear] is in the middle of the global posture review, which means they are trying to work out how to focus their military efforts in the places that matter most to america's future. **And this administration is extraordinarily pragmatic so much so it can be [audio unclear] focus on the Middle East**. **We are just being practical about that. We are going to put more time into China, modernization, all sorts of different things. That means that they are accepting some risk in the ME. And when you say to them, don't you think this will open up ground for negative actors like Iran? They say, yes, it will, but you know we have to try to minimize the negative effects because that is just something we have to do**. We have to reassess what we're doing in the ME. What I like about the process so far is that Iraq has come out relatively well. **There will be no US military withdrawal from Iraq. It's good that the phrase has been used so much because everybody's mirroring it on Afghanistan but it doesn't really mean anything. It is a recategorization of the role of US forces in Iraq from combat to non-combat. And the fact is they are already non-combat**. If it helps to underline this every 6 months then it starts to slowly change the narrative in DC, it's not a forever war anymore, it's just support to a country like we would give support to Korea or Japan or Germany, and it changes the narrative slowly inside Iraq. And it's very clear the militias in Iraq they need to have US enemy. So they're not gonna give up, they're not going to stop attacking we know that. But what they can do is to attack less often or less deadly. So they're getting a hook to come off. I'll just finish by saying that it has been quite an encouraging reaction from Iraq. [audio unclear] strategic dialogue, so did many of the other moderate blocks, the Kurds, even the [audio unclear] coalitions closest to Iran. So it sort of isolates the militias. They will keep armed rockets and drones at US in Iraq, the Iraqi government, at Saudi Arabia from Iraq, but they are getting increasingly isolated. Whereas the US-Iraq relationship is continuing I think to get stronger. The Biden people like this mission in Iraq and they like Iraq because they know Iraq so well and they started this military engagement with Iraq. Not George Bush but them back in 2014. **So I'll end there but I'll say the ME might have lost a bit in this US rebalancing but Iraq hasn't. Iraq has actually done pretty well.**

**Dergham:** Let's unpack this a little bit. Let's see if they really haven't lost or they have. Right now the news of the day anyway is the Hashd al Shaabi wants to withdraw confidence from PM Kadhimi in order to impact the elections and [audio unclear] promises to many PMs to be part of the establishment as was supposed to be the case. Mr Kadhimi has just come back from DC, he was in a gathering saluting the Hashd al Shaabi, embracing one of the leaders. Who's playing whose game and what is it? It seems like Iran is a winner in Iraq at this point. And it also looks like ISIS might also become a winner. And we know what happens when they both checked each other out. So let me just go backward now and start with probably Hoshyar since this is your thing and then I'll go to the others. Hoshyar Zebari please.

**Zebari:** ReallyRaghida I think you always ask provocative questions, you see that's your nature which is admirable to draw people more into discussion and to give you more information or secrets. I think the main winner in this discussion is Iraq and US relations. **there was a reaffirmation of a commitment, not only on the military side but on many other aspects.** This strategic framework agreement which I have the honor to have negotiated with the Bush administration in 2008 is a very wide-ranging and unfortunately Iraq has not benefited from all the opportunities that the US has offered Iraq at the time. But still it is there, it has been revived. I agree that everything Mike has said actually about the significance of this and the timing. But the main winner is Iraq actually. Iran has an influence. Iran has an interest. Iran doesn't hide it at all that they have a vested interest in Iraq and if they could they would make it part of the Islamic republic. So nobody [audio unclear] has illusions about that and I have done a great deal of work over the years in order to help [audio unclear] state apparatus, security, economy [audio unclear] But there is also resistance. Iraqi nationalist resistance [audio unclear] not to Iran. We see an ongoing struggle. But still it is not settled. Of course the Iranians watch Iraq like they watch Afghanistan. The developments in Afghanistan is not happy news to them actually. recently I was in Iran not a long time ago and it was very clear they are nervous, they are not comfortable about the US leaving Afghanistan and Taliban taking over their border. As Prince Turki mentioned actually a very important development that already started establishing Hashd al Shaabi there. This is an indication that they are not comfortable with this development and so on.

[audio unclear]

**Dergham:** Is this going to impact [audio unclear] Iran especially during the presidency of Raisi? Would this influence their aid, their support, their embrace of Hashd al Shaab al Iraqi? The fact that they have to look to Taliban in Afghanistan? Address this issue [audio unclear] Are they stronger now with the Americans going out or weaker?

**Zebari:** Michael is the expert on the Hashd al Shaabi to be honest Raghida. He has the best data, information and they're trying to undermine Kadhimi and the Iraqi government and to create a parallel security or a parallel state, or a state within a state. Not only the military field, the economic field, in trade, in business everything you feel. All the areas. But still they haven't had complete control over the state. **Kadhimi's trying to have a more independent policy. Yes he attended their parade but they have attacked him twice. They invaded the green zone twice in order to target him personally. So he's trying to balance his act in fact and also to see what he has achieved in DC, at least I have a timeline for the redeployment or transition of the US forces.** Many people believe this will [audio unclear] because they are not independent of their actions so you have to watch their controllers, what will be their position, there are for stability or they are for escalation. We will know that very closely after Kadhimi comes back.

**Dergham:** We'll go back to Hashd el Shaabi and the impact of the election and the balancing act of PM Kadhimi which could be unbalancing if he goes on this way it seems to many observers. But let's go back to Prince Turki al-Faisal, first get a word from Tobias. Do you worry - you've been critical of this pack up and go in a clumsy way - are you worried Hashd al Shaabi will gain control and strengthen the role of Iran via Hashd al Shaabi in Iraq? Or do you feel that Iraq is out of the woods now, is able to really start independence in a solid manner?

**Ellwood:** I'm not so close to Iraqi affairs as some of our other distinguished guests but from where I see it it's another example of the West advancement and civilization and not completing the job. They took on Daesh, we did put boots on the ground, many of the hardline fighters were behind barbed wire in pretty poor camps in the north west of Syria, guarded by Kurds who've asked for international help to support them. they cannot process these people. They cannot put them through any kind of judicial reform. And they can't put them in prison either, and they don't wanna kill them. So the ultimate thing is that they can let them go. And it's an indication of the West lacking the commitment and [audio unclear] to see an intervention through. And that's exactly what we saw in Afgnhanisatn. It's a bit like a baseball game, you either win or lose, but either way whatever the result let's just go home afterwards. On realizing the consequences of leaving that vacuum there**. And when you leave a vacuum whether it's in a place like Northern Syria, parts of Iraq, Afghanistan or indeed Somalia it gets filled by extremists who take advantage of poor governance, of lack of security itself quite interesting hearing the discussions about the global posture review by the US. The US is waking up.** I said what's gonna happen over the next 5 years. Is it gonna get more dangerous or less? **I pose the thought that if we don't get our act in order, if the West doesn't stand for what we do stand for, what we believe, what we're willing to defend, afraid another rising power will take advantage of our weak international institutions, reinterpreting the international rules-based order and fill the vacuum that we are leaving behind. China is taking full advantage of this left right and center**. Even in places like Lebanon where they’re gifting military equipment. So there's a [audio unclear] war looming between China - whom we hope will mature into an international global citizen. It's important that US recognizes that it cannot fix these problems alone. We need a proper strategy and that means working with our allies in completing the job, whether it be in Iraq or in Afghanistan. Let's just take Yemen, I'll just end with this. Let's say there's a political solution in Yemen. We manage to get people around the table, put their heads together. Who would participate in a stabilization force? Would Britain put its hand up, put boots on the ground? We need to be more committed, more robust, not be scared to actually stay the course to advance some form of support of governance which takes a decade. We talk about this forever war, it was called a good war at one point. But this was the West's fault. And until you learn the lessons of the West, there's been no review of the US, no review of the lessons learned in the UK either. We can't repeat the mistakes when we're tested again in the near future.

**Dergham:** Thank you very much. Michael give me a little time and I'll come back to you because I wanna benefit from your wisdom and knowledge. On Hashd al Shaabi, Iran and the Biden administration's thinking involving Iraq and Afghanistan. But I want to go to Prince Turki al-Faisal. Now you put it to the table that the Iranians are interested in mixing Hashd al Shaabi in Afghanistan. You are an authority on Afghanistan for many reasons and you are of course interested in Iraq for multiple reasons. Address this point if you would that I put to you, that Iran can do much better in Iraq than in Afghanistan with its programs, its projects particularly that the negotiations in Vienna regarding the JCPOA have not addressed the issue of Iran's regional behavior. So what do you see now happening in terms of Hashd al Shaabi in Iraq, and beyond, and connect it kindly to what you said about Afghanistan. Turki al-Faisal.

**al-Faisal:** Thank you for giving me a few minutes to talk about this huge subject. **Hashd al Shaabi of course is a tool, as is Hezbollah, as are the Houthis for Iran's ambitions not just in our part of the world but I think everywhere.** Just as an example, drug smuggling: Hezbollah is bringing drugs from Latin America not only to America and Europe but also to the ME. So that's how far the Iranians are using the tools that they set up in countries. **As far as Iraq is concerned of course we all want al Kadhimi to succeed. Unfortunately the Hashd al Shaabi continues to launch missiles at the protected areas of Bagdad, the US embassy, whatever you want. So he still has not managed to make it into an Iraq component of the security forces although officially it is part of the Iraqi security forces.** And this is what happens with every tool that Iran uses. **The Hashd al Shaabi in Afghanistan is not going to be under the control either of the Taliban if they ever succeed in controlling Kabul or any form of government that succeeds the Americans and other withdrawals from Kabul.** So we have to keep that in mind. As far as the Kingdom is concerned of course it's not only the Houthis that we face with missiles [audio unclear] and drones, but there are also intelligence reports, as Mr Knights referred to, that from Iraq also there were attacks on Saudi Rabia. So this is how Iran operates and for the life of me I don't understand not just the West but the rest of us, the whole world doesn't take them into account for that. It's not just the West, it's the Russians and the Chinese. **They're in cahoots with reestablishing Iran as a legitimate player in our part of the world when everything it does in our part of the world is illegitimate. It doesn't deal with governments, it deals with paramilitary groups that are outside the control of governments**. It encourages drug smuggling etc. This is something that the Kingdom is very much aware of and tries to marshal support for those who oppose that. And last thing about the Rt Hon. Ellwood's question about what the world will be like in 5 years. I remember there was a quote by a US historian who wrote a multivolume history of the world back in the early 20th century When he published it he was asked what his views were, what he gained from this huge amount of work on the history of the world. His reply was, well, to the reporter, well son it's one damn thing after another. I think that expressed what we have to face. It might be comical to think it now but unfortunately this is how the world is going and I agree with Mr Ellwood about the abandonment by the West of their own interests, let alone their own principles in meeting these challenges.

**Dergham:** Prince Turki al Faisal, it was in Iraq that a couple of rounds of Saudi-Iranian discussions, negotiations, whatever you wanna call them took place. You remember it was the president of Iraq who told us that during one of the e-Policy Circles, that yes more than one round was held in Iraq, of Saudi-Iranian talks President Raisi of Iran has been speaking enthusiastically maybe about the importance of the continuation of this dialogue. He seems to be very confident it's gonna happen and [audio unclear] wants it to lead to. What can you say about this? It's a very important issue and is it doable, or do you think it's over-enthusiastic?

**al-Faisal:** I'm not in the government loop, I don't know what is happening there. What I can reflect to you is what I see happening in the press. And the press have said and there have been official statements by Saudi officials that there have been talks with the Iranians. **Mr Raisi of course has said that under the impression that within the next couple of weeks or so relations are going to be restored, the whole world will be hunkydory and we're gonna embrace each other and so on. What separates us from the Iranians is a huge history of factual implementation of Iranian ambitions in our part of the world that respectfully I would say, my personal opinion, is that it isn't going to happen soon. If it ever does**. Because one example: the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the consulate. The Iranians have not even offered an apology for that. That is just one small thing let alone the lobbying of missiles to Saudi targets, civilian targets, not military. And including the whole city of Mecca. This is not something that Saudi Arabia can simply discard and believe someone like Raisi who, if you look at his history in the Iranian make-up, is one of the most extreme of extremes in the kaleidoscope of Iranian direction under the so-called Islamic revolution. So I don't think there is going to be much going forward, unless as our foreign minister says, unless Iran changes the way it does things. And we have seen no evidence of that.

**Dergham:** Thank you Prince Turki al-Faisal. Michael Knights I'm coming back to you with a bunch of questions. Remember the Hashd al Shaabi is still for you on the table to address. I'd like to understand why is the Biden administration not hearing that point of view, of Prince Turki al Faisal and many others, thinking that, well the good thing to do is to just get out and leave behind a stronger, richer Iran and enabling the Hashd al Shaabi to do more in countries struggling with sovereignty, like Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen? And secondly I would like you to address what Tobias Ellwood has said when he spoke of the possibility of the benefits to China and others from the withdrawal from Afghanistan. It's true that wherever the Americans are withdrawing, Russia and China are benefitting. Do you fear that when it comes to Afghanistan, the Russians are worried that now they have to fight the fight against Al Qaeda, ISIS, the newcomers that will reinvent themselves? China maybe is worried about someone is getting the idea to confront them about how they've been confronting Muslims in China. So, Michael Knights.

**Knights:** So I'm going to just talk about the stuff I know about. And I'll start with the issue of militias in Iraq in the region. So I'll never say Hashd al Shaabi because I don't think everybody in the popular moibilization forces is running bets. There are many elements that are not. And what we don't wanna do is push them all together. So I'll say fasal (?) groups or muqawama instead. The same way that I don't say Iranians when I'm talking about the actions of the revolutionary guards. I say Pasdaran. Because those people know that we are the friends of the majority of the people in these countries. they're not our enemies.

**Dergham:** Michael please first of all I wanna say to you that with reference to the Iranians of course no one is speaking about the Iranian people. I just wanna make sure that we clarify this and nobody here spoke against the Iranian people.

**Knights:** Of course. It's important in my view to be precise about that stuff because what we're aiming to do across the region is to create alliances against this revolutionary guard / militia nexus and to splinter this nexus. And on that front look, you know, when you see an enemy being more aggressive that doesn't always mean that's because they're growing stronger. The moment I was the most scared of the Iran-backed militias in Iraq was September 2019 when the protests began. At that point they didn't really have to kill anyone. They controlled the PM of Iraq. They were extremely comfortable. Since then it's all been much more difficult. Since October 2019 protests in Iraq and subsequently the killing of Suleimani and Mahandes they have had to work for it, they have had to fight every day to try and maintain the level of control they've had and they've slowly begun to lose that. Now as a result they're getting more erratic, they're getting more aggressive, they all keep on making more mistakes as well and they're splintering more. A lot of the hardcore muqawama groups will reject that and will attack US bases. That's a 100% certainty. **What matters is that Moqtada al Sadr, the Kurds, the Sunnis, the moderates in Iraq and even some elements of the Iran dialogue say, we accept what just happened in DC while the others are getting more isolated. So, look, this is a very slow process. But everybody is being very pragmatic.** I'll just say a word about my interactions with the Iraqi government's last visit to DC. They know what they're thinking. And that was very reassuring. Before I never heard them be so solid about their thinking. Yes there are some risks you are gonna take. But they have a plan for how to move forward in the next 4-5 years. It's a big decisive step against militias.

**Dergham:** Mike quick question, very quickly about the elections. Do you think there will be a postponement, elimination, something to overthrow the elections?

**Knights:** No I think it's going forward. Muqtada al Sadr will go through one cycle of saying he's gonna withdraw then everybody tells him to come back in, everybody tones down their attacks on him and things continue as before I believe.

**Dergham:** So now I'm gonna be running out of time, so here's what I'm gonna be doing. We have 5 minutes left and I have practically 1 minute for each of you because I would lose electricity unfortunately and I would be in the dark. By the way if this happens please keep on talking until I come back. So in case there's no electricity save the day and I'll be back. You're in control Prince Turki al-Faisal if that happens. So let me go to Hoshyar Zebari because we have been talking about Iraq and tell me very quickly whatever you want to say concluding. Obviously what points you differ on with Prince Turki al-Faisal about the role of Iran in Iraq.

**Zebari:** I agree with prince Turki that we are closer to Iran than him, you see sometimes [audio unclear] drones attacks, daily threats and so on. I really agree with Prince Turki and his perspective on the regional role of Iran in the region as such. But I think there are internal developments in Iran [audio unclear] are really genuine. This is a factor. Also the development in Afghanistan. Also your outreach to see them in Baghdad, this has happened, this is not press media, I have it from people who are talking that there has been the beginning of some talks hosted by Mustafa al Kadhimi in Baghadad. But they are over-optimistic. Definitely the situation is not straightforward. There are certain things that they need to show genuine seriousness towards - for the kingdom, for the region and towards us also. Now the message that we're hearing from them is reassuring, really they are trying to get this nuclear deal. **Raisi wants that deal, he will run the government, so he needs the sanctions to be eased or lifted, this is the message that we are hearing from them. How much will they implement it? We don't know, that's an open question**.

**Dergham:** Thank you very much Hoshyar Zebari for joining us. Stay with me. Tobias I need 40 seconds from you.

**Ellwood:** I wanna come back to something Michael Knights said, he said I only wanna talk about things I know about. I think that was probably directed at me being a politician, when too many of us talk about things when we haven't got a clue. I fully understand that. My big message is the West needs to wake up. Britain needs to wake up. We are not working together to put out small fires to challenge the old fires that have been simmering for some time and the world is just getting too complicated for us to deal with things on so many fronts. In Iraq, we just touched on some of these issues, in Afghanistan, there's a myriad of issues there, the West needs to reassert itself and focus in the same direction. There are too many competing agendas. And it's covid, the distraction of covid, that has seen us see the fault lines exposed as to where the world is currently going, allowing predators to take advantage of that. Britain is in first-second gear. We need to move to fourth-five gear. We were distracted by Brexit and all these issues. There is world leadership required, damage done by Trump, Biden is an opportunity. Let's regroup.

**Dergham:** Thank you very much Tobias Ellwood. Sorry Michael I can't I'm gonna have to steal away your opportunity. I gotta go to Prince Turki al-Faisal. You've got the last word, Prince Turki. He's the co-chair of the summit and he must say something about that.

**al-Faisal:** Certain privileges you can't ignore. On Afghanistan [audio unclear] when the Soviets withdrew everybody expected the government to fall immediately. They lasted for I think 2.5 or maybe 3 years. And **I think given the fact that if the Kabul government can get Western in particular US support in their opposition to the Taliban they can last and negotiate from stronger point that they seem to be able to now. But that is a big if.** And on Iraq Hoshyar and I never disagree on anything since I've known him. But we all want to do the best for Iraq. And the Kingdom has been in the forefront of these attempts to come together with the Iraqi people in general. We don't differentiate between Shia, Sunni, Yazidi, Christian or whatever. We want all Iraqis to be Iraqis and not Hashd al Shaabi or you know Hezbollah or whatever you want. Other things of course Raghida you will have to invite us again to talk about the other things. Raghida you're gone. Well you want me to take over. In Raghida's name I say thank you as co-chair of the Beirut Institute Summit in Abu Dhabi, you've been most generous with your time and with your thoughts and hopefully we'll meet in person next March inch Allah in Abu Dhabi I’m looking forward to that. Thank you very much.