Transcript of Episode 9, “U.S. Electoral Constraints, Military Strategy, and the Iraq War”

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[Note: This is a rough transcript of the audio recording, based on digital transcription and human review.]

[00:00:00] One, two, three go.

Morgan: [00:00:18] Hello, and welcome to *International Security*’s Off the Page. On today's episode, we are talking about U.S. electoral constraints and military strategy. I'm Morgan Kaplan, the Executive Editor of *International Security*. And we will be speaking with Andrew Payne, author of the recent *International* Security article, “Presidents, Politics, and Military Strategy: Electoral Constraints during the Iraq War.”

And a little later, we'll go off the page with Emma Sky, who served as an advisor to the commanding general of U.S. forces in Iraq from 2007 to 2010.

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Morgan: [00:01:10] Andrew Payne is the Hedley Bull Research Fellow in International Relations at the University of Oxford.

Joining us now, we have Andrew Payne, who's written for *International Security* a fascinating article called “Presidents, Politics, and Military Strategy: Electoral Constraints during the Iraq War.” Andy, thank you so much for joining us.

Andy: Thanks for having me here.

Morgan: So tell us a little bit about the argument you're presenting here in this paper.

Andy: [00:01:33] So the article looks at the impact of electoral politics on presidential decision-making in war, and the starting premise of it is quite simple. When presidents assess alternative military strategies in a war, they have dual responsibilities. On one hand, they’re commander in chief, so they're responsible for pursuing a course of action which they deem strategically optimal. And on the other hand, they're an elected office holder, so they have to ensure that any option they choose carries minimal political risk. [00:02:00] And so I think while we all have some intuitive sense that electoral considerations matter in some way, exactly how, when, and why is much less understood. So that's where I come in. I propose a couple of mechanisms and trace that through the Iraq War.

Morgan: [00:02:14] What are these two constraints? What are the mechanisms by which U.S. electoral politics can influence military strategy?

Andy: [00:02:20] I offer two mechanisms. The first mechanism is what I call the “delay mechanism.” And this is where a president, when he's facing a need to change strategy in ways which are likely to incur political risk, particularly in the lead up to an election, his first instinct is to kick this decision into long grass, to put it on the shelf. While the decision might be deemed strategically necessary, the timing of it could be flexible, so he's going to weigh up the relative political risk of doing it against the strategic cost of not doing it. And if the balance favors a delay, he'll shelf the decision until this moment of greatest political sensitivity has past.

The second mechanism [00:03:00] is the “dampening mechanism.” This is where, you know, if the president can't delay, for some reason, if the relative strategic cost of postponing is too high or there's some other fixed timetable or deadline, which means he needs to make a decision, then he'll still pay attention to electoral considerations, specifically by trying to water down the more politically noisy aspects of the proposed course of action.

And in practice, this means he'll screen proposals for political acceptability, trying to balance the strategic and political risks at stake.

Morgan: [00:03:29] We know from the existing literature that there's a good amount of discussion on how electoral politics influence military decision making across a wide spectrum of decisions, whether it's from onset of conflict, to conclusion of conflict, to general behavior within it. How do your particular argument and insights fit within that broader canon?

Andy: [00:03:51] So I situate my argument within this broad literature on democratic constraint. The core idea here is that wars are costly; the public bear the brunt [00:04:00] of these human or financial costs, whether that's measured in blood and treasure; and elections in a democracy provide a means of rewarding or punishing leaders for their performance. Presidents wants to be reelected, so they're incentivized to act with a degree of caution. And I think there's various different nuances in this literature on how presidents can mitigate that, but there's still limits to that. So what I try and do is unpack what that means for wartime decision-making in the broader context of the electoral cycle.

There are three specific gaps which I think I fill. First is that most of the existing literature looks at the initial decisions to use force conflict initiation. I think that's important, but it's not the whole story. The course and outcome of war is not predetermined at the moment of intervention, and electoral pressures don't just dissipate after the Rubicon has been crossed, so I look at decisions during an ongoing war. The second problem or gap is that most of this literature is quantitative, which is great establishing patterns and correlations between the electoral cycle and foreign policy, [00:05:00] but statistics can't give us this in-depth account of specific causal mechanisms, the real granular level of decision making that I offer. And finally, the timeframe of the existing analysis. Much of the existing work focuses just on an election year, a presidential election year, or the height of a campaign season. And I think that's somewhat arbitrary, and I argue that electoral considerations can manifest at other periods of the cycles. The anticipation of a future campaign season can have as much of an impact as being in the midst of one. And also, congressional elections, I would argue, may have some influence as well.

Morgan: [00:05:33] So I'd love to hear more about how this actually works in practice. It would be great if you could tell us how these mechanisms actually operated in more fine-grained detail during the Iraq War.

Andy: [00:05:44] I split the analysis into two episodes, two big ticket decisions. The first is the surge decision in early 2007, and the second is the decision to withdraw troops in 2011. So on the first side, the surge, [00:06:00] obviously in early 2007, President Bush announces that he's going to send over 20,000 additional troops to Iraq and revise counter-insurgency strategy. And I argue that this is a good illustration of the delay mechanism. Beginning in 2005, you get doubts within the administration about whether the existing transition strategy is really working. These build over time. Eventually, the president is told that it's hell in Iraq, his advisors are seething with frustration. Even President Bush counts himself among the doubters, but a real kind of a strategy review to fix this problem is consistently put off until after the midterm elections in 2006.

President Bush knows that admitting the existing strategy is failing at this kind of time of high political sensitivity is not a good idea. It's politically costly. And in particular, switching to a casualty intensive alternative at a time of growing public disillusionment with the war is even less palatable.

So he [00:07:00] kicks us into the long grass. After the 2006 midterms, you finally get this full NSC review. And in the minutes, you see President Bush talking about all the bold, radical steps. He overrules his entire chain of command to go with the surge and opt for this most unpopular decision of his presidency, as he puts it.

On the other side, the decision to go to zero, the 2011 decision to withdraw troops from Iraq under President Obama, I think is a good illustration primarily of the dampening mechanism. After the 2010 midterms, Obama has an initial appetite for keeping some residual troops on, arguably as a kind of insurance policy against things going south in Iraq before the 2012 election. But as his reelection campaign approaches, you see him steadily kind of reject proposals from the military on the size of that residual force until finally in October 2011, he decides that it's not worth the political risk, having promised to bring troops home from Iraq.

Morgan: [00:07:58] This raises an [00:08:00] interesting question about civil-military relations. Is it a good or a bad thing that U.S. electoral politics can have such an important constraining and dampening effect on military strategy abroad? I mean, right, because you could see both sides of this. On one hand, this is an emphasis on democratic considerations and public opinion. On the other hand, you could also see how, if this is affecting potential for military success, which we imagine is influenced by important political decisions, then it's having a negative effect. So how are we supposed to think about this tension?

Andy: [00:08:35] So I think you do a great job there of summarizing the two sides of this debate, which is fundamentally a normative and somewhat philosophical question. On one hand, you're right. Responsiveness to voters, I think, is a cornerstone of democracy, and it's precisely because wars affect the lives of voters that decisions about how they're fought should to some degree take public attitudes into account.

But yeah, [00:09:00] certainly on the other side, we need to think about the strategic cost associated with these. I think you can make a case that the strategic cost of delaying a decision, which most people think was successful at least to some degree in the surge, may be a negative policy outcome. And I think there is a case for that, although you can certainly debate that.

I'm going to sit on the fence a little bit more on that question, because that just assumes that the president's strategic preference and what the president thinks is strategically optimal actually is strategically optimal. So, you know, if the president and his military advisors, to take a really extreme example, suddenly came out today and said, we think it's in the national interest to start preemptive war with China or something like that, then maybe some dampening effect would be a good thing right now. So I don't know. It's a philosophical question about democratic principles on a strategic question, which varies depending on the specific circumstances of each.

Morgan: It ties directly into discussing the importance of [00:10:00] democracy and accountability in your argument. It raises the question of whether we can expect to see similar dynamics play out in authoritarian regimes or for maybe not fully democratized governments, right? Can we expect similar, either if they're not electoral constraints, other forms of public accountability constraints operating in similar ways on military strategies?

Andy: [00:10:23] This is a really interesting question. I think there has been some literature recently on how authoritarian regimes actually do suffer audience costs, or in other words, the domestic constraints, domestic political punishment for decisions which are perceived to be negative in some way. Even authoritarian leaders are accountable to some other group, whether it's an oligarchy of elites, whether it's the military elites, there's still some group to which leaders are ultimately accountable. So I do think you could see similar dynamics broadly in terms of constraints.

The key missing factor here is the [00:11:00] temporal one associated with a specific election, right, a moment in time when that accountability can be exercised. So I think, you know, there certainly is point for comparison there, but the thing that I had before I got to that stage, I would probably compare this an interesting way to compare this is with other democracies that don't have fixed electoral cycles, like the UK, for instance. That introduces all sorts of different dynamics as well. I think there is a broader applicability, and the thing about the U.S. case, which is nice is that it's fixed.

Morgan: [00:11:31] What is the scope of military strategy that is going to be affected by this?

Andy: [00:11:35] So I define the scope and restrict the scope by the actors, or the actor in this case. So I'm looking specifically at presidential decision-making. The type of decisions that I'm interested in are the ones that reach the president's desk. There's an obvious reason for that: Presidents are the ones that are directly accountable through elections, so it makes sense to focus on them as actors. That necessarily weights the analysis towards [00:12:00] not necessarily certain types of decisions, but decisions which are broadly salient to the public that have at least some potential for electoral significance. In practice, they’re big ticket items, the big changes to strategy which are likely to incur casualties or which are likely to incur high financial costs, which are going to be felt by voters.

So those are the kinds of decisions and ways that I see it affecting military strategy.

Morgan: [00:12:26] Fantastic. Well, Andy, I only have one more question for you and that is, are you ready?

Andy: Am I ready for what?

Morgan: To go off the page?

Andy: Absolutely.

Morgan: If you enjoy listening to Off the Page, you'll enjoy reading our quarterly journal, *International Security*, which is edited and sponsored by the Belfer Center at the Harvard Kennedy School and published by the MIT Press. To learn more about the journal, please check out our website at belfercenter.org/is.

Emma Sky is the director of [00:13:00] Yale World Fellows and a Senior Fellow at Yale University's Jackson Institute. Sky served as the Governorate Co-ordinator of Kirkuk for the Coalition Provisional Authority from 2003 to 2004, as well as an advisor to the commanding general of U.S. forces in Iraq from 2007 to 2010.

We're very lucky now to have Emma Sky with us. Emma, welcome to the show.

Emma: [00:13:23] Thank you very much.

Morgan: [00:13:25] Emma, you've had an expansive and eclectic career in working on the political and military side during the Iraq War. Can you tell us how you became involved in operations in Iraq, and what was the extent of your roles?

Emma: [00:13:38] Well, back in 2003, after the invasion, the British government sent out an email around the civil service, asking for volunteers to go out to Iraq to administer the country for three months before we handed it back to Iraqis. And at that stage, I was working for the British Council, which is kind of at arm's length from the government, but somebody forwarded me the email [00:14:00] and said, "You might be interested in it."

And so I said, "Yes, that's something that I would like to do." I was very much against the war, but I'd got a decade of experience working in Israel/Palestine, so I thought I had something useful to offer. So I said, "I will go," but I didn't know what my job description was going to be. I thought I'd just go to Iraq, help the Iraqis get their country back and running, and apologize to them for the war.

And the British government didn't give me any briefing before I went out. They just said, "Find your way to RAF Brize Norton, get on a military plane, and get to Basra, and when you arrive, you'll be met by someone holding a sign with their name on it and take you into the nearest hotel." Well, it was the British government, so I assume they knew what they were doing.

So I followed those instructions. I managed to find Brize Norton, got on a plane, got to Basra, and that's where the instructions broke down because there was nobody expecting me, nobody waiting there for me with the sign with my name on it. And after a [00:15:00] night sleeping in the airport, I decided I would make my way to Baghdad, so I took a C-130 flight that was going to Baghdad. From Baghdad airport, I made my way to the Republican Palace and I knew that was the headquarters of the coalition. I just turned up and said, "Hi, I'm Emma from England and I've come to volunteer." And they said, "Great." I spent a week at the palace finding out what on earth was happening.

And they said, "We've got enough people in the palace, but we don't have enough people in the north. Go north, but they didn't say where, so I got on a C-130 going up to Mosul. I got to Mosul, and they said, "We're fine here. Keep going." So I kept going until I got to Kirkuk. And in Kirkuk, they said, "Great. You're now the senior civilian in charge of the province. And you report directly to Ambassador [Paul] Bremer, who is the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority." So that's how I got there.

As I said, I really went out thinking I was going to apologize to the [00:16:00] Iraqis, help set up some organizations and leave. I didn't expect to be put in the position, which was quite similar to a colonial administrator in charge of a province. I realized that Iraqis took my role quite seriously because in my first week on the job, insurgents came to the house where I was living and fired rockets directly into it. And I was very fortunate to survive that, but it made me find out quite quickly who the U.S. military was in the province because I needed to move out of the house. The house was in pretty bad shape after that attack. And I wanted to move on to the military base, which was on the Kirkuk airfield. So I found out it was the 173rd Airborne Brigade, and it was headed by a guy called Colonel Mabel. So that was my first interaction with the U.S. military, going to him and basically saying, "Have you got a tent on your airfield?"

Morgan: [00:16:54] And so from that point, how do you become an advisor to the Commanding [00:17:00] General of U.S. Forces? Can you tell us a little bit about what that role was like?

Emma: [00:17:04] General [Raymond] Odierno in 2003 and 2004 was the general who was responsible for a number of provinces in the north, including Kirkuk, so he used to come for regular visits to Kirkuk, and whenever he met the colonel, I was invited into those meetings by the colonel.

And Odierno just saw the rapport that I had with the colonel, that I was very direct in my feedback, didn't put the military on a pedestal, very much prepared to tell them what they were doing wrong and to help them understand the Iraqi perspective. When General Odierno a few years later was put in charge of all the forces for the surge as the operational commander, he got in contact with me and he said, "Look, I saw you operating in Kirkuk in '03 and '04. Will you come and be my political advisor?"

And he said, "I want you to come with me to every meeting, whether it's with the Iraqi political leaders or the American [00:18:00] political leaders or the frontline with troops. And I want you to give me honest feedback and to tell me when I'm screwing up." So that was quite extraordinary direction to be given by him. And he was a guy who I respected, who I trusted, and I thought if I could help him do his job better, then I will try.

Morgan: [00:18:21] That's why we're very lucky to have you here in this conversation with Andy on his article, on how politics influences military strategy, in particular in the Iraq War, because you very much are a person who is on the transmission belt of politics to military strategy, being a political advisor to a military officer at a time when all this was happening. What was your impression of the article? Did it ring true? Did it correlate well with your experience in Iraq?

Emma: [00:18:49] You know, when you're on the ground in Iraq, your focus really is Iraq. I was a political advisor, but my role was mainly helping the commanding general [00:19:00] understand the Iraqis. Certainly in ’03, ’04, I had very little contact back with Washington. In ’07, there was some contact. There would be people from Washington who would come out, would ask questions. Our main concern then was it wouldn't believe the surge was working, so how could we convince them by September that we were seeing positive signs? On the whole, I think that the main concern when General [David] Petraeus and Ambassador [Ryan] Crocker went back to testify in September 2007, was that Washington would say, “It's not working. You've got to withdraw.” For us, mostly, we were very concerned with what was going on the ground, and we weren't really following what was happening back in Washington that closely, particularly not in 2007.

Morgan: [00:19:50] And so that brings up the question of how information travels from Iraq back to Washington. If Washington's voice wasn't being heard so well on the [00:20:00] ground in Iraq, to what extent do you feel like the commanding general of U.S. forces in Iraq in your kind of role were able to communicate back to Washington?

Emma: [00:20:10] You think in an ideal world, there's people in Washington who create policy, and they give the instructions down to the country, who takes those instructions and implements. But that's kind of not really how it happens. When you think back to that period of 2007, President Bush had [not just] given the implementation to the generals on the ground, he'd actually given the policy [to the generals]. You saw General Petraeus was the one articulating the policy, going back to present the policy. It was very much military, the people on the ground, who were directing and who were leading what was happening.

I think things changed when President Obama came in because he wanted to restore what would be thought of as a more normal civil-military relationship. He didn't expect to have direct communication with his generals. [00:21:00] He wanted to have a more normal chain of command where he would speak to the Secretary of Defense and it would then go down that way, and he wouldn’t be speaking directly to the Iraqi politicians. Under President Bush, he had a weekly video conference with Prime Minister [Nouri] al-Maliki. That certainly didn't happen under President Obama. There was a change in the dynamic when President Obama took office.

Andy: [00:21:25] So I think that the civil-military side of this is an important kind of subplot of the article. I think in both cases, in the surge decision making process and also under Obama, although both presidents had different levels of kind of interests and engagement with the war, both displayed at various points real reticence to overrule the top generals. The surge was 180 degrees opposed to the preferences of the commander on the ground at the time, General Casey, as well as the CENTCOM commander and most of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

And during their withdrawal decision, you have the Joint Chiefs offer this kind of rare memorandum saying, if [00:22:00] you go below 10,000 troops, the mission you've assigned can't be achieved. And so I think it's interesting, Admiral [Michael] Mullen [Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff] was quite explicit on this in both cases, that he really sensed that the president was really concerned about needing to pull the chiefs through the knothole and fearing a political backlash.

And I think this raises all sorts of important implications about the role of the military in national security decision making, so how senior military advisors remain apolitical in a ridiculously political world when the public lionizes the military and it's hard for presidents to overrule them remains a real question.

Morgan: [00:22:35] So Emma, and during your time in Iraq, how often would you feel, or would General Odierno feel, political pressure from Washington to influence elements of military strategy? Was it something that was felt? Was it direct, indirect? And if you have any examples that would be interesting to hear.

Emma: [00:22:56] You know, the general always felt that he was able to give [00:23:00] his best military advice. Whether Washington took it or not was up to them. Every week, he would write a report to the Secretary of Defense and that would go back. Petraeus did it when he was the commanding general, and then Odierno did it when he was the force commander, So there was that weekly report that went back. The military was always looking at conditions. Everything should be conditions based. There wasn't this sense of interference, if you like, on a day to day basis, but I think you have to look at different times during the war because there were different things going on at different times. With President Bush, the decision to do the surge, yes, it did go against the advice of many of those around him, but there were people like General Petraeus, General Odierno, and advisors within the White House who did believe that the surge was the right way to go. The situation in Iraq at the end of 2006 was an [00:24:00] absolute disaster, and President Bush calculated that if he withdrew the U.S. military, then the impact of the Iraqi Civil War would affect the neighboring countries, and it would really tarnish the reputation of the U.S. military. So he took a gamble to surge.

But that said, there was no directions given to the generals on the ground [about] what that actually meant. We knew there'd be 20,000 extra forces coming, but it was up to General Petraeus, General Odierno, to draw up a strategy for how to use those forces. And it really wasn't, you know, the difference wasn't made by the numbers. It was the psychological impact, when the Americans said, “We're not leaving. We are going to say. We are going to fix the problem. We are going to push our troops back out and live among the Iraqi people. We're going to protect them from the insurgents.” So this was the first time that instead of referring to everybody's the enemy, they started to find out who were these different groups, why were they fighting, and what do they [00:25:00] want? And by deciding that the new strategy would focus on protecting the population, this created a very different dynamic with the Iraqi people, and it led to the Iraqi people giving the military much better information on who the bad guys were.

Now, one of the problems I have with Andy's article, which is a very, very good article, but one of the problems I have is it seems that everything that happens in Iraq is due to the U.S. and due to the U.S. military. Little consideration is given to the Iraqis and what was going on in Iraqi politics, because I think most things that actually happen in Iraq are really about Iraqis. They're not about us.

Andy: [00:25:40] I'm really sympathetic to the idea that a lot of what actually happened in terms of the trajectory and the course and conduct of the war depends as much, if not more on the, kind of the Iraqi political situation. I think the emphasis of the article is more on the US decision-making side, and how that translates into outcomes obviously then gets refracted through the [00:26:00] complex dynamics on the ground.

I think that's absolutely right. The other point I wanted to mention was, Emma mentioned that, you know, these pressures varied over time and there were different contexts. And I think that's right. And one of the things that also varies over time is the electoral context, right? So Bush, when he's in 2000 and 2008, and Emma describes the relative latitude President Bush gives Petraeus and Odierno in devising this policy. This makes sense because Bush is a lame duck then; electoral constraints in the final stage of his tenure as president would naturally you would expect be weaker than when he's facing an upcoming election, you know, to the extent that there are political constraints that Bush might be thinking about, they're more to do with his legacy. Iraq is his signature policy. Everything's on the line. And so when he's released from these electoral constraints that I described up to 2006, late 2006, he's free to double down. He throws a hail Mary pass here when he doesn't even know if he's got a receiver downfield, and he just hopes that Petraeus and Odierno can catch it and [00:27:00] make good of what he's trying to do. So I think that really kind of reinforces that variation over time.

Morgan: [00:27:05] So what about Iraqi electoral politics? Something that's interesting about your article, Andy, is that it does discuss presidential electoral politics, but of course, thinking in other electoral contexts that could have an influence on military strategies and outcomes, you know, we can think, as Emma's mentioned about the Iraqi context, and of course there was a major pivotal election in Iraq in 2010, parliamentary elections. So I'm curious. How can we describe the ways that Iraqi domestic electoral politics affected certain decisions on the ground in fighting the counter-insurgency or maintaining stability operations?

Emma: [00:27:45] Well, it’s interesting that you mentioned the 2010 elections in Iraq, because 2010 was also the year in which there was a midterm election in the U.S. That was the year, the only [00:28:00] time when I was in Iraq, where I actually heard the U.S. elections being referred to directly relating to the war. The Iraqis had had a very closely contested election in 2010, an election which left the incumbent, Nouri al-Maliki, with 89 seats, and Ayad Allawi, who led a block called Iraqiya, with 91. It was a very closely contested election, and the incumbent lost. There was this period after this election where the winning bloc was supposed to be given the right to have first go at forming the new government. And there were lots of disagreements, lots of disputes.

In the end, we heard from Joe Biden, who was Obama's vice president and the point man on Iraq. Joe Biden said to us, “Look, U.S. policy is to keep Maliki in place because we need a government in Iraq in place before the U.S. midterm elections [00:29:00] in November. Iraq policy at the moment is going really well. It's very popular, the most popular foreign policy item at the moment with the Obama administration, so we need to keep incumbent in place.” And he said, “Look, Nouri al-Maliki is our friend, he’s an Iraqi nationalist, and he will give us a follow-on agreement to keep some troops in Iraq after 2011, when the existing security agreement expires.” That was the only time that I heard the U.S. elections referred to.

And so the U.S. took a decision to try and keep Maliki in power. But those groups in Iraq who were seen as more pro-U.S. were adamant that Maliki had to go because they saw Maliki as frightening, that Maliki was becoming more and more authoritarian. In the end, this was when the Iranians saw an opportunity. Qassim Soleimani, the Iranian general, helped broker a deal between Muqtada [00:30:00] al-Sadr, who was a Shia cleric, and Maliki. And the agreement was that all U.S. forces will be withdrawn from Iraq at the end of 2011. And that's how Maliki got his second term as prime minister in Iraq, despite not winning the elections.

Andy: [00:30:16] I think this is a really important, powerful kind of example, to some extent, of the broader applicability of the kind of argument I'm making. The argument I'm making focuses in the article on just military strategy, but there's a broader applicability to diplomatic strategy or diplomatic engagement if you'd like as well. And I think 2010 is really good example that sets the foundations for what then follows, as Emma describes, of how electoral deadlines can be more important than diplomatic red lines, if you like. And I think even if you go back to the original Status of Forces Agreement in 2008, there's an electoral story to be told there, in terms of how Bush is approaching the end of his term, he only has a certain number of months left, and that encourages him to roll back on some of his previous red [00:31:00] lines into various different legal jurisdictions and also the withdrawal date, which becomes so important under Obama. And so I do think the electoral calendar has kind of this broader importance beyond military strategy.

Morgan: [00:31:12] And we have an election coming up and this may be a good opportunity to talk about how electoral politics today may affect the current situation in Iraq.

Obviously, things are very different from the time period in which the article engages with and the time period in which Emma was involved. Since then, we've had the withdrawal itself. We've had the rise of the Islamic State and their subsequent defeat and counterinsurgency. We've had an independence vote by the Iraqi Kurds. We've had all kinds of changes on the ground, but nonetheless, Iraq remains an important element of U.S. foreign policy. It seems like years ago, but there was, you know, recently kinetic exchanges between the United States [00:32:00] and Iranian-backed forces in Iraq. How can we anticipate this upcoming electoral cycle affecting potential politics in Iraq and in the Middle East more broadly?

Emma: [00:32:12] I think President Trump has made no secret of his desire to remove U.S. forces from the Middle East to try and draw down as much as possible. His maximum pressure strategy on Iran didn't, or so far hasn't, had the impact that he hoped in terms of either regime change or forcing Iran back to the negotiation table.

While Iran escalated its attacks, whether it was on the Saudi oil fields or on shipping or its proxies attacking coalition and U.S. forces inside Iraq, that policy is not yet having the impact that President Trump hoped for. I don't think President Trump really has an Iraq policy. He has an Iran policy and only sees Iraq [00:33:00] through the lens of Iran.

I don't think in the next election in the U.S. that Iraq is going to be a big issue at all. You could argue that it's mostly going to be about domestic policy, and if there's a foreign policy element, it's more to do with China than it is to do with the Middle East. And I don't think Joe Biden will really make foreign policy a big issue.

Andy: [00:33:24] So I would add just a couple of points on that, and I'm sympathetic to most of what Emma just said there. The first is that, with the situation in Iraq, there are a lot of similarities, right? You have an election year. You've got the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq again under question. You have a president running for election, having promised to end the forever wars and bring U.S. forces home.

There are some important differences. Obviously, Iran was an important piece of the Iraq War, but Trump's policy has been far more confrontational than the Obama or Bush administration, at least rhetorically, but also in practice with the Soleimani strike, placing sanctions on them during a global pandemic, and now threatening to shoot down flying boats, so there's lots of [00:34:00] potential for miscalculation and different things to happen.

But I think there are a couple of comparisons that might be useful. And if we go back to in the article, I talk about this logic of democratic constraint, basically incentivizing the president to avoid putting troops in harm's way when there's an upcoming election. I mean, Trump fits this pattern quite well. Yes, he's done a lot of saber rattling. Yes, he's done targeted strikes, but when push came to shove, he's stepped back down the ladder of escalation. You think in January, when we thought we were on the brink of war and suddenly he, he pulled back and took the off ramp or in, even in 2019, when Iran was attacking tankers in the Persian Gulf, and apparently because Tucker Carlson told Trump that this would hurt his reelection chances, Trump decided essentially not to respond.

So I think Emma's right, that the withdrawal of troops from Iraq probably is in Trump's instinctive interest. I don't think it's going to be a major feature of the campaign. I don't know whether we'll see it because of the Iran factor, and I think it would be seen to him as losing face because this is exactly what Iran wants. You've also seen calls from Iraqi [00:35:00] officials for this as well. So in a sense, it's kind of the opposite pressure to what faced Obama in late 2011, but there are some synergies.

And just on Biden, I think it's interesting that Biden is also, if you look at some of the stuff that his campaigners puts out, he's promised to end the forever wars as well, but he's got an asterisk there, which is, there's a difference between large scale commitment of troops and on the other hand, the use of special forces and intelligence assets to support local partners. And he explicitly says these latter things are sustainable militarily, politically, and economically, you know, the special forces essentially becoming the Swiss Army knife for the U.S. military. And I think it's interesting, and this is just speculation, but the Biden campaign has many of those same advisors who staffed the administration under President Obama, who were also disappointed with the withdrawal decision in 2011 in Iraq. So I wonder if this kind of phrasing is an attempt to carve out more political space for kind of continued residual counter-terrorism force, or at least having the option of it [00:36:00] and avoiding the problem that Obama faced of kind of being entrapped by his campaign rhetoric.

Emma: [00:36:05] I think it's really important to understand local dynamics. Iraqis are caught between Iran and the U.S. Iran is their neighbor, the U.S. is a country they want to have, most of them want to have, as some form of ally, and it's a difficult game that they're caught in between. Too often, the Trump administration demands Iraq to be anti-Iranian, when Iraq really wants to try and stay neutral between the two countries. It needs Iran. It needs Iran's supply for its electricity. It needs Iran for trade. And of course, there are lots of cultural and religious linkages.

Morgan: [00:36:43] So this is a great place also to pick up on contemporary politics in Iraq, right? Thinking about how certain precarious political situations can affect the security situation. And of course, for all of us following Iraqi politics, the big thing is the protests that have been [00:37:00] going on within Iraq for reformation of government and for an end to corruption. So how do you see the future of Iraqi security in light of the protests, in light of the current back and forth between the United States and Iran using Iraqi soil? And of course, you know, we are in a corona world right now. I'm curious what you think the future has in store.

Emma: [00:37:26] Since October, we have seen these young Iraqis out in the streets, protesting, protesting the bad governance, the corruption, calling to be treated with respect, calling for jobs, calling for opportunities. But we've also seen an Iraqi government that's not been capable of reforming. It's led to the resignation of Adil Abdul-Mahdi as the prime minister. But the big reforms that are required to be made are by the same people who benefit from the status quo.

And this is what it makes really difficult because these young [00:38:00] people who are protesting are not looking to form political parties to compete for power in the elections. They're hoping a pressure will lead those in power to reform. And it's having to deal with COVID-19, and it's got the backdrop of the U.S.-Iran struggles that go on inside Iraq. When you think of all of these issues, Iraq is just struggling to muddle through. It's going to be really difficult. And it's going to take a long time.

Morgan: [00:38:27] Well, Emma, we have a tradition here on the show when we wrap up a discussion with our special policy guest, which is to ask them what advice they would give to younger folks who are beginning their careers, whether it's in public service, foreign service, academia, the military, international aid?

Emma: [00:38:49] I think it’s important to recognize that foreign policy has been the remit of a small group of elites. And the Iraq War, along with the [00:39:00] financial crisis, has contributed to public perception that elites and experts don't know what they're doing. And there's no longer this gap between what's foreign policy and what's domestic policy. The modern technologies, all of that, have fundamentally changed the relationship between state and citizens and foreign and domestic.

So my advice would be to really spend time working in local politics, work in local governance, put your efforts into making America a better place, a model for other countries to emulate. And I think in, so doing, you will learn a lot about negotiations, about compromise. And that will mean you've actually got some real lived experience to share with people overseas.

And the second piece of advice is, learn about how others see America. Learn about their lives, their struggles, and to do that. You need to get outside America. You need to travel.

Morgan: [00:39:53] Emma, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to Andy and [me] today. Andy, Emma, thank you so much for joining the [00:40:00] show.

Emma: Thank you.

Andy: Thanks very much.

[00:40:07] **Julie Balise:** Off the Page is a production of *International Security*, a quarterly journal edited and sponsored by the Belfer Center at Harvard Kennedy School and published by the MIT Press. Our program is produced and edited by Morgan Kaplan, the Executive Editor of *International Security*. The associate producer and technical director is Benn Craig; digital communications by me, Julie Balise; production support by Carly Demetre.

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