



The Surge – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: Zalmay Khalilzad
U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, 2005-2007

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Editorial Note and Disclaimer:

This transcription has undergone a verification process for accuracy, according to the strictest practices of the academic community.



O'SULLIVAN: Do a sound check, say hello, and we'll say that we're here.

KHALILZAD: OK. I'm Zalmay Khalilzad.

SAYLE OK. This is Tim Sayle, from Southern Methodist University.

O'SULLIVAN: Meghan O'Sullivan from Harvard University.

BRANDS Hal Brands from Duke University.

O'SULLIVAN: Great, so Zal, let's get started.

KHALILZAD: Please.

O'SULLIVAN: Thank you so much for joining us, and for participating in this project. We want to start by just asking you to kind of lay out again for viewers in future times what your responsibilities were as Ambassador to Iraq in 2006, in particular, that really important relationship with MNF-I [Multi National Force – Iraq], and how that relationship between the embassy and MNFI was working in 2006.

KHALILZAD: Well the relationship between the military and the civilian, the diplomatic presence, was quite close. I had had the experience of working very closely with the military in Afghanistan before I went to Iraq. [00:01:00] And there, we had established that we will have a joint headquarters, that the military would be in the same building as the ambassador, and the military had moved the headquarters to the embassy as a matter of fact. So, we had decided that it was going to be about the mission, not about me or General Boehner, in that case. And I was happy when I got to Baghdad, that that same attitude, the same mentality, the same approach, was already in existence, between my predecessor,



said that I was the lawyer for the Sunnis, in part because they were in a weak position, in terms of numbers, given the Kurdish-Shia dominance [00:06:00] of Parliament, because in the earlier election, the Sunnis had boycotted largely the election for Parliament, and so they were underrepresented and the US encouragement formula was found to bring some more Sunnis into the process, but in fact, they were in a weak position.

The same was true of the cross-sectarian group, led by al>Allawi, which had had only 25 or so members in Parliament. He also felt in a weaker position, given the huge kind of bloc of Kurdish-Shia alliance. So, we did get ultimately an agreement on the constitution, but that wasn't sufficient to get the Sunni buy-in, because of the deadlines we had to meet, we couldn't



Then we went into the formation of government. And there was the biggest bloc in the Parliament [00:08:00] that was elected after the constitution had been ratified, went to the Shia alliance. And they had therefore the right under the new constitution, which this election was under, the right to nominate, put forward, the prime minister. And there were two names that were competing with each



the people we were dealing with had the relationship with those who controlled violence, because they were negotiating with us, and they delivered peace and quiet, I will not forget General Casey coming to my office in midday, saying there is nothing going on, we thought that this was a diffused, decentralized set of people who were involved in violence, but it seems they do coordinate, and the people that we were dealing with were in fact people who had a relationship with.

So, as I said, we were trying to bring people together. The idea of a national unity government was in the air, as the way to precede formation of the government. There is Jaafari nominated, but not broadly accepted, [00:11:00] and then comes the attack on the shrine, the 11th Imam of the Shia, Askari, and as a result of which, sectarian violence which was part of the broader violence that existed, led by former Ba'athists who were unhappy, various Islamic groups, al Qaida



together in an election that was participated much more broadly than the previous -- the first election, and a discussion of a unity government that those who didn't want this process to succeed strike [00:13:00] a religiously important symbol, and that leads to polarization and increase in violence.

O'SULLIVAN: And you've described very well the political priorities at the time, and the role that you played in really broadening the political space for people, different communities. But in that time period you were talking about, so after the bombing of the mosque in Samara, you're still working on bringing together a national unity government. I think you've articulated very clearly what the political strategy was. How did that fit with our military strategy at the time. And to what extent -- we've heard from other people, you know, that there was a sense of politics comes before military, or vice versa.

KHALILZAD: Sure.

O'SULLIVAN: And did you think this was a moment for reevaluating the strategy, or was it just another wakeup call that it's urgent, you know, to get [00:14:00] this government in place, ansa[(o)1 (f t)3 (va)-3 (l)-2 (u)-4 (w)2 (nP02 (ddf-3 (r)3 (o) (pl)-9 .e)-11 h

KHALILZAD:



only in terms of security, but the services that you can deliver, so you can do it in a sustainable way, so that you buy or get the confidence of the local population with you. And then, you move to an adjacent area, connect it to this, and therefore you expand the oil blot.

General Casey signed to it, but I think he thought, his strategy was to build up Iraqi security forces, and transfer responsibility to the Iraqi forces, but you also tried to go after the bad guy to weaken them, and help not only by training the



Steve told me that the only way that this could be done would be if it comes through the military chain. That if General Casey is supporting of the red cell, then he should send it to the chairman, and the chairman should give it to SECDEF, and then they should send it to the NSCI told them that this was really not likely to happen, that this had happened as a result of an agreement between the two teams at the lower level, which we had some of the people then from that team then went to work with General Petraeus, when he went to the War College [00:19:00] --who had worked in the red cell. And that the most I can do, given that this is outside my lane, I'm the political guy, the diplomatic guy, I'm getting involved in the military lane, it'll be hard for me, unless I leak it, which, I said, you don't want me to do, because it's a critique, and I'm not going to leak a document. I cannot get the attention of the management of the military, because they think they have the strategy, and their strategy is, which approved by the President, is to -- as we stand up, as the Iraqis stand up, we stand down, is our approach. And this adjusts that, that says part of this standing up and standing down is securing population centers.

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah. Sure, can I just follow on this?

KHALILZAD: Yeah.

O'SULLIVAN: But, so as you said, we're hoping we'll have the chance [00:20:00] to



going to be the ones that are going to be able to secure Iraq. Was this a point of difficulty in your relationship, or between the Embassy and MNF-I?

KHALILZAD: No, we --

O'SULLIVAN: Because it seems the inkblot, red cell, is very different than



from the very beginning, but I think with Askari mosque, or shrine, attack, it became largely sectarian, while other elements were still there, but they were of a lesser importance, in my view. This became the dominant factor, and therefore, he thought -- and it was, I think, a respectable theory, which is that America isn't going to solve this problem, Iraqis would have to solve this problem. [00:23:00] And that therefore, the faster we train more Iraqis, the more we transfer the responsibility to them, the better.

I had another view on this too, which -- and I used to argue and debate about, that for Iraqis to deal with it, even assuming we don't want to play a bigger role, to deal with it in a physical military sense now, was that the security institutions of Iraq had to be not only capable in terms of numbers and equipment, but it had to be trusted by all the institutions that -- and therefore, while the numbers looked good, we needed to look at the reforms also to make sure they are lead in a non-sectarian way. And that gets us into the government formation, where a lot of the time was spent trying to get everyone to agree, and I put a great deal of public and private pressure on them, that the minister of [00:24:00] interior, the minister of defense, had to be acceptable to everyone, all communities, and be people without militias. So that the reform that the institution needed to be acceptable by all communities of Iraq could be done by someone who doesn't have a militia, but someone who had a militia, like the minister in the first year, where the Badr Brigade and some other militias



infiltrated the security apparatus, it was going to be --we weren't going to have the security institution to solve the problem in the way American values would demand for it to be solved.

I used to often tell the Iraqis we didn't come here to settle tribal scores, that isn't what America is about. And I have a fiduciary responsibility, I would argue, we are spending billions of dollars and hundreds of lives, it's not because we came to install Shia sectarianism [00:25:00] over Sunni sectarianism, or bring Sunni sectarians, or people nostalgic about Saddam, back. And sometimes, it caused problems in my interactions with them, when I was emphasizing this quite forcefully. But I think we got that agreement in a unity government to have both the ministry of defense and interior non-sectarian, or at least not from groups that had their own militias.

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah. Hal, you wanted to --

BRANDS At the risk of taking us backwards just a tad, I wonder, did your red cell exercise, and your critique of the military strategy, did that intersect at all with other State Department rethinking of the US strategy in Iraq in late 2005?

KHALILZAD: Yes, there was --Condi, when she was Secretary of State, Dr. Rice, when she was Secretary of State, she had a colleague, a historian from University of Virginia -

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O'SULLIVAN: Phil Zelikow.



KHALILZAD: Phil Zelikow, yes, Dr. Zelikow. He came, and he said that he had been given a task to think about [00:26:00] the strategy. That was after the red cell. I think he came in 2006 maybe, if not late 2005. Maybe you'll have to check the dates with him, but my recollection is that he did come. And I think that as a result of his discussions and visits and deliberations in Washington, that I wasn't a participant in -- and like the Surge, where there was a broad number of people brought in to give their views, including us from Baghdad, and the -- what was it, liberate, hold, and --

O'SULLIVAN: Clear, hold, and build.

KHALILZAD: Clear, hold, and build, yes. Clear, hold, and build was a product of that activity, and you know, we came a number of times and we -- obviously the embassy helped and facilitated, and I think the military was there. Dr. Rice was not [00:27:00] perhaps happy with the strategy as she understood it, and came with the articulation of that. And I remember the military reaction was, we were doing, that's what we are doing. Which is typically, when you are responsible for something, when there is a question being raised -- having been, a couple of times a member of planning staffs -- and planners need to think about, you know, alternatives, you know, whether something is working or not, you tend to try to critique existing policy and propose alternatives, a typical response usually is, We're already doing this. So I think the reaction was that we're already doing this, it's just some new words being added to a strategy that we're already following.



O'SULLIVAN: Great. So, taking us to- you've helped bring the Iraqis together, there's a prime minister, Prime Minister Maliki, you said, so we're in June 2006, and President Bush comes out, meets with Prime Minister Maliki, they have [00:28:00] this joint session. And then, we're into the summer of 2006. And I wanted to see if you would describe how you felt the dynamics were between Washington and Baghdad. Did you have a feeling, or an expectation or a hope, that once the government was in place, we --the US was going to be able



remember, first, that meeting and, two, what did you take away from that meeting?

KHALILZAD: There are two things that happened that summer that I had remembered, this -- yeah.

O'SULLIVAN: And just for our memory, the meeting was July 22^d, 2006.

KHALILZAD: Right, thank you. But I remember two things. Steve also came for a visit.

O'SULLIVAN: Right. That was in October of 2006. [00:34:00]

KHALILZAD: Right. Yeah, I mean those things, I remember those two events. And then, I also remember, of course, a number of video conferences, the President becoming increasingly, shall we say, tougher in his questioning of the military strategy over time.

O'SULLIVAN: And you remember Operation Together Forward One and Two, which happened in the summer.

KHALILZAD: Exactly, which was supposed to deliver greater security, and did not live up to the expectations that the commanders even had. So, well, I think beginning in the summer of 2006, I felt that the President was beginning to lose confidence in the military strategy by his body language --because, you know, I'd become very familiar with his --

O'SULLIVAN: Every week.

KHALILZAD: -- [00:35:00] style by then. And with the kind of questions that he was asking, and that he was feeling a level of discomfort, you occasionally saw, earlier,



year when I got there, and then he stayed throughout with me. And we needed to have a lot of daily interaction.

Well, I didn't want to necessarily cause an internal problem between us, I was all in favor of [00:38:00] --but it wasn't until sometime, I think, in -- it may have been after the visit where, you know, his memo got leaked, that Steve Hadley's-- when I came to Washington where I had a clear discussion with Condi Rice and Steve Hadley at the Watergate Hotel as to what the issues were, and where did I stand on some of them. And about the future, including my own, to discuss with them. And that's when I got the most detailed accounting of what the range of options were, and where did I stand on them, and would I weigh in on those issues by sending a cable, that those were the issues, and I needed to weigh in on them, and I should go back and send a cable on them.

O'SULLIVAN: And that was after Steve's trip to Iraq?

KHALILZAD: After Steve's trip.

O'SULLIVAN: So that would have been sometime in November? [00:39:00]

KHALILZAD: November, I think. Yeah, I agree.

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah, yeah.

KHALILZAD: Yes.

O'SULLIVAN: And were you -- so, you'll remember the strategy review that J.Dled, and had different agencies put forward different options, strategic options for Iraq. So, they



[00:41:00] there was a substantial amount of sectarian violence, communities, innocent people were getting killed. But, the national institutions were holding. The national government was holding, no Sunni senior minister resigned over that the government is falling apart. Although some argued that the Sunnis were more victims of that violence, and in some places they were, in some places, they weren't. Because I was there, I had a much more fine grained appreciation of which neighborhood what was happening in, and we were getting involved in neighborhoods in Baghdad to mediate, to observe, to report, to find points of leverage, or points --to what we needed to influence. But that was kind of going with the media story, reacting to [00:42:00] a media accounting of what was going on in Iraq. This was a strategy appropriate to respond to the media articulation, or description of the problem, not to the real situation. I



KHALILZAD: My judgment is that it had to do with two things. One, that there were -- the institution of the State Department never bought into the Iraq project. They [00:43:00] thought this was wrong-headed to begin with, one shouldn't have gone in, and the building of democracy in the Middle East was a kind of oxymoron. They favored Sunni rule as the kind of good Arab nationalists they were. And they felt that -- I mean, this was a kind of an inherent Middle East experts of the State Department. Although there were differences, I mean I worked with some of the great ones, like Ryan Crocker, among others. So I'm not negative overall with them. But the increased violence provided, in the struggle between those who thought we have to, you know, whatever you think of whether we should have gone in or not, now we're in, we need to do the best we can to [00:44:00] make Iraq work for the Iraqis, for us, for the world. Because, you know, a lot was at stake there. I think the increased violence gave their argument greater credibility.

And I'm sorry to say that those who -- the more geopolitical and strategic perspective, kind of were put in a bit of a defensive, given the reality on the ground. And I suspect that the internal deliberation of the State Department, as always in policy making, not everyone comes to the same view immediately. There is a difference of view, deliberation, argument, and people never gave up completely on what the original position was, though that position did not prevail at that time, it's kind of a permanent struggle, policy making, where people who lost [00:45:00] at one time see the circumstances change, and strike again so to




speaking, because they lost in the last round, and I believe that they saw the increased violence to a bit of triumphalism that they had said from the beginning that we shouldn't do that. Not everyone, but I think there was a strong school of thought that felt that way. And they were settling in part scores, which is part of human nature. And partially seeing an opportunity to say, I told you so, and you know, here it is.

O'SULLIVAN: So, you're describing how your --you know, from your vantage point, you could see the institutions are holding. And that that meant you were not in accord with the State Department prescription of pulling back, and having a modest footprint there.

KHALILZAD: Right.

O'SULLIVAN: Were you advocating any change to the strategy [00:46:00] aALn1-4 71 (r)

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was thinking about. And when Steve told me that that is one of the options that he's thinking about, and this is a serious consideration issue, and I said, you can send a cable, and I said, [00:52:00] as soon as I'm back.

SAYLE Can you tell us a little about that cable? Just how that process worked? That's something that probably won't be declassified for a long time, so we just -any insights you have.

KHALILZAD: Well of course, Megan knows it far better than I do, the process in Washington. I was a participant from --

O'SULLIVAN: Well just the cable itself.

KHALILZAD: Yeah, yeah, sure. Yeah.

O'SULLIVAN: -- and building on Tim's question, so how did you -- I remember, there was some concern about how more American troops might influence the Iraqi political dynamic. And I seem to recall General Casey reporting that he had raised the possibility with Prime Minister Maliki, and Maliki had rejected the idea. So, do you remember, were there complicated dynamics about whether or not the Iraqis were going to welcome this, whether this would be a positive thing. You know, were there any nuance considerations you had to take into account before you launched a cable saying, this is going to be a positive development?

KHALILZAD: Right. Well, I had [00:53:00] known Maliki by then relatively well. And I knew that he was a serious guy, in terms of security. He wanted to secure Iraq. This was --he was confident of. In fact, he was criticizing us for how we used



there was elements of sectarianism in his complex mentality, mindset, and the circumstances, but I felt that since his background, one reason that he had a degree of appeal, was that he was serious about security, he had been dealing with security issues, and he wanted to take reslemen1/He (a)-3 (ge (a)ie)-4 (iin)-1.1 (d)-6 te red15 (



politics being a factor that he wanted to protect some areas where some of our military folks were not happy, for example, the Sadr City, when we wanted to operate in it, he would object. But, you know, ultimately he's the one who moved not only into Basra, which we know it's a very famous story, but he also moved into Sadr City himself with Iraqi forces, to clear them. [00:58:00]

I used to argue with General Casey, that I can sell this to Maliki. You give him what he wants on the forces that he has and if I tell him that even with that, that's not enough, that we can open him to doing more. But I think that Maliki was a significant improvement over Jaafari, in dealing with on security issues. I think the first several years of his term, he did many good things, and some not so good either. Many good things on the security situation. And in fact, part of the success of surge, if I had to put the Sunni militia, or groups changing sides slowly, was Maliki as leader, willing to use Iraqi forces decisively, as another factor [00:59:00] complementing the surge, enabling him to some extent to do that.

O'SULLIVAN: And do you recall, you mentioned that there were concerns, particularly on our military side, about Maliki being a sectarian actor. And so, empowering him was one thing that people were nervous about with the surge.



KHALILZAD: Well it was connected, but by then, it was known. So, [01:01:00] we had interacted enough with them that he was in the picture of what was --

O'SULLIVAN: No, he was totally in the picture.

KHALILZAD: Yeah, what was going on. But before, before he became aware of what we were thinking, as we were helping him be a better prime minister, he had a view which I was familiar with also in Afghanistan with President Karzai, which is that you don't want your base, which, in the case of Karzai, were the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan, and in this case is the Shia, especially the southwest, if we had gone after Hakim's areas, he had no problem with that. And you can attack it as hard as you want.

But Sadrists were in collusion, or in cooperation with Dawa, so if we went after Muqtada's forces, he would say, "Look I have a political issue here, Zal, you understand. And you need to tell me what you're going to do, and you need to get my [01:02:00] approval on this. And --or maybe I will find a different way of dealing with it, which I would hear from President Karzai, that he would say look, if you're going to operate in these areas, you have to negotiate a set of rules with me, that you're not going to go inside the house, blindfold men in front of their families, tie their hands behind their backs, put a hat or whatever, a cover on their head, this humiliates them, and they come to me saying what kind of a President are you, that you're allowing foreigners to come and treat our men, "our men," this way? So, it was very familiar with me when he said "When you go to the Sadrists,



Zal, I have a problem with that. You need to explain what the strategy is, what the way you're going to do it, maybe I will do it. Maybe I'll explain that your information is wrong. [01:03:00] Maybe we can go together, you and I, talk to the - - if you're going to go attack a mosque" which we, on occasion, we did. Which is, "Maybe you and I can call the mullah in, the leader of the mosque, and ask him what the heck is going on there."

So, he reacted very badly to the Saib area. We underappreciated the military security apparatus on our side, and the politics in which he was operating as we underestimated sometimes Mr. Karzai's ultimate unhappiness with the way we were conducting, because he thought we weren't taking into consideration his base, and he thought it would be much better if we enabled him to deal with those problems, rather than have us, US forces doing it. So, that's why he was demanding for more and more.

O'SULLIVAN: And [01:04:00] that speech that Malik gave in early January, you might remember he actually gave two. There was the first effort that didn't quite get over the hurdle, and then the second (inaudible).

KHALILZAD: Right. Then he had to do a second. And I remember asking him, he didn't go quite far enough, and he said, "Yeah, I will do it again." Yeah.

O'SULLIVAN: And so that was --

KHALILZAD: Because the President wanted a clear message.

O'SULLIVAN



KHALILZAD: Before he --yeah, absolutely, I remember that very well.

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah. So, excellent. What -from your perspective, what was the role of Iran and Syria in instigating the violence in Iraq? Because you'll remember around this time, there was the Baker-Hamilton Report, you gave your testimony to them, and you'll remember that the report had a heavy focus on upping diplomatic engagement with Iraq's neighbors.

KHALILZAD: Right.

O'SULLIVAN: From your perspective, w004 Tw ectZAD



because, you know, we did it for 10 years to the Soviets in Afghanistan. Very easy. It was a country that is as fragmented as Iran is, to create pressures that you are causing here to us, and that we were being a bit of a patsy to them in Iraq. Letting them kind of send weapons, direct attacks, and that our rhetoric, on the one hand, was very tough with them, that I didn't understand that we were -- you know, the President put them as part of the Axis of Evil, with Syria threatening them, putting them on notice that we were angry with them. But yet, in practical terms, we weren't doing anything. [01:07:00]

I was in favor of reassuring them, saying look, we're here, just Iraq, we had weapons of mass destruction issues, our objective is purely stabilizing Iraq, we have no plans, no ambitions about overthrowing the Iranian regime, or the Syrian regime, because I thought we were instigating them to make life difficult for us, in a sense, by preoccupying us with Iraq, because Afghanistan had gone relatively easy, they felt. Iraq had gone initially relatively easy. And I was getting intelligence when I arrived that both Syria and Iran felt, what is the American plan? Are they coming next to -- which one of us is going to be next? And we were talking as if we were, in fact, serious about doing something. But in fact, I knew that, you know, I was arguing, we say that these extremists come from airports [01:08:00] in Damascus. Isn't that right? So, why can't we say to them, if you don't stop this, that airport isn't going to be able to operate for very long. So, I mean there would have been -if we were serious about sending this kind of



KHALILZAD: I think it did send a message that a lot of them had assumed we would
[01:10:00] back down, we were defeated, we were in a quagmire, we didn't have a
way out, that this was going for success, and it increased our credibility in the eyes
of the regional players. I think they thought they had a good thing going, kind of
having us be there, but not be effective. This was kind of giving them leverage





KHALILZAD: I don't remember that. I don't remember that, whether they were supportive of the Surge, or opposed to it. Or whether I consulted with them on the Surge, or --I certainly do not -- I do not remember consulting with them on the Surge myself. If it was done, it was done out of Washington.

BRANDS So, more generally, there's obviously been a ton written on the Surge. We've asked you lots of questions about the Surge. But based on your experience, is there a piece of the story of the Surge decision that is not as well understood as it should be? Is there something that we haven't asked you about that was a key part of the story?

KHALILZAD: Sure. Well, what I think, from where I sat, which is, remember, I wasn't in Washington advising the President, and in the -- a lot of meetings in which Baghdad wasn't participating [01:15:00] in that must have occurred, inevitably.



O'SULLIVAN: Great. Thank you so much. Have we taken you back to --

KHALILZAD: Now I have to go and talk to Bahram about this, I will report this to him. I

don't know what he will say about it.

O'SULLIVAN: Thank you so much. This was great.

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