



REAGAN NATIONAL DEFENSE FORUM

PEACE THROUGH STRENGTH IN AN ERA OF COMPETITION

NOVEMBER 30 - DECEMBER 1, 2018
THE RONALD REAGAN PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY
SIMI VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

DECEMBER 1, 2018
2:00 PM – 2:45 PM

PANEL 8
IRAN, SYRIA, AND ISIS: DOES THE MILITARY
HAVE THE RIGHT FOOTPRINT IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

Panelists:

- Senator Joni Ernst, U.S. Senate, Iowa
- The Honorable Kathleen Hicks, Director, International Security Program, CSIS
- Senator Jeanne Shaheen, U.S. Senator, New Hampshire

Moderator: Ms. Jennifer Griffin, *Fox News*

Video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kyppZ4JuI&list=PLHNOi2zcxo7sBxM7HfhmB_tf6QXeqj48K&index=12&t=0s

Griffin: Well welcome. I think it's amazing that we're here, panel eight of Iran, Syria, and ISIS, Does the Military Have the Right Footprint in the Middle East? I can't think of a more fitting day to be discussing the Middle East, given that President Bush passed away, and given his legacy in the Middle East. I think that it will shape our discussion today.

Griffin: I'm pleased to welcome our distinguished panel. I would like to first introduce Senator Jeanne Shaheen, who needs very little introduction, from the great state of New Hampshire, the first woman in U.S. history to be elected both governor and senator. She's served since 2009 on the Armed Services Committee, as well as the Foreign Relations Committee. What's interesting is you helped secure the New Start Treaty, which allowed the U.S. to resume critical inspections of Russia's nuclear arsenal. That is particularly relevant.

Shaheen: Thank you.

Griffin: Then of course, Senator Joni Ernst of Iowa, she served in the military for over 23 years and became, in 2014, the first woman combat veteran to be elected to the senate, so that's extraordinary. You were in the ROTC in Iowa before serving for those 23 years, and welcome.

Ernst: Thank you.

Griffin: Kathleen Hicks, of course, who served under the Obama Administration, and you served as the Principal Deputy under Secretary of Defense, so we welcome, we welcome all three of you today.

Hicks: Thank you.

Griffin: Before we start, I just wanted to talk a little bit about, when I think about the Middle East, I often think back to the quote from Michael Corleone in Godfather III, when he's trying to get out of the mafia. He says, "They keep pulling me back in." For the last decade or so, President after President has tried to pull out of the Middle East, and focus on Asia and elsewhere. It doesn't tend to go very well, because it's very unpredictable.

Griffin: What's interesting about this Reagan forum is that, for the first time there was a national defense survey, that had some surprising results, from my point of view. We found that Americans were less concerned about terror attacks than ever before. Half of those surveyed think the U.S. has failed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Two thirds think that Iraq is our enemy, and a half think that Saudi Arabia is our enemy. I'd like to discuss some of that.

Griffin: There was a briefing at the Pentagon earlier this week, in which we were told that there are still 2000 ISIS fighters in Syria. Two percent of the country is still controlled by ISIS, despite a year of intensive campaign against ISIS. That's exactly the same as a year ago.

Griffin: Then CSIS, where Kathleen Hicks is serving, just put out an incredible survey that suggests that there are four times more Jihadists now around the world, than after 9/11, so after 17 years of war, that number has quadrupled.

Griffin: Before we get started, I would like my panelists to just reflect for a moment on President Bush, his impact on you and on the Middle East in particular. Senator Shaheen, would you like to start?

Shaheen: I will. I remember in the first Gulf War, one of the things that I thought was most impressive about what President Bush did was to build an international coalition in support of that war. As we think about the challenges that we're facing, having those allies is really critical, and certainly Secretary Mattis said that.

Shaheen: But for me personally, the last time I had a chance to meet President Bush was when he was, he and President Clinton, were both at the University of New Hampshire giving a joint commencement address. One of the things they talked about was the importance of working together, of bipartisan cooperation, of public service. I think that legacy of public service, and being willing to work with anybody, work across the aisle, is probably one of the most important legacies that the President has given us.

Griffin: Absolutely. Senator Ernst.

Ernst: Thank you. This is a great opportunity for all of us to express our condolences to the Bush family. What we have with President Bush is a legacy that teaches us that relationships do matter.

- Ernst: I experienced that first hand when I deployed for Operation Iraqi Freedom. The overwhelming welcome that the Kuwaitis gave us, so that we could use Kuwait as that power projection platform, moving up into Iraq, they welcomed us with open arms. They were very supportive of our forces. What I heard time, and time again, from the Kuwaiti nationals, the Kuwaiti policemen was, how important President Bush was in Desert Shield, Desert Storm. They viewed him as their savior. They could not thank us enough for what we did. As America, we delivered the nation from a brutal regime, and they did not forget that.
- Ernst: It was important. We have a strong alliance with Kuwait, and I credit that to President Bush, and the fact that he did reach out to so many local community members, allies. Relationships do matter.
- Hicks: I'm really struck by the quiet brilliance of what President Bush was able to do in the Middle East, at a time when Americans in the world weren't quite sure what would come next. The end of the Soviet Union had occurred. The United States was figuring out its role in the world. Our debates in Washington were about pulling back and having a peace dividend, and then, of course, the invasion of Kuwait.
- Hicks: What he did was, not only build that incredible international coalition, he brought domestic consensus. Politically, on Capitol Hill, he brought the public behind the troops. That strength of diplomacy, that strength of character, and the vision of what America could do when it pulled together, and brought others around the world with it, really endures.
- Griffin: Absolutely. Let me ask all three of you, why don't Americans feel that U.S. efforts in the Middle East have been worth it? That's a really tough thing to come out of this survey after 17 years of war. What do you think?
- Shaheen: Well I think probably because it's 17 years of war. We've continued to deploy people, to lose soldiers this week. We lost five Americans again. I think people haven't seen the return on that commitment.
- Shaheen: One of the things that I sometimes hear from constituents in New Hampshire is that, we've given money to build schools in Afghanistan, and we need schools in our communities at home. You can talk about hospitals, or whatever the investment is that we've made, in Afghanistan.
- Shaheen: But I will say, the one thing, the one positive comment that I hear frequently from people is about the commitment to women and girls in Afghanistan. There is real concern that if we pull out of Afghanistan without having some sort of a peace agreement, that there will be a circumstance where women and girls will be once again subjugated to all kinds of rules that the Taliban have imposed. I think when you talk about specifics of what we've accomplished, like with getting girls in school, and liberating women, there is a real support for that, because that's consistent with American values.
- Shaheen: But, when you talk about the amount of money that's been spent, the amount of time that we've been there, then I think people say, when is it going to end? What's been the value of this investment?

- Ernst: That is a very difficult question Jennifer, because I would agree with Senator Shaheen in that, we have been engaged in the Middle East, especially in Iraq for a very long time. We get a little weary of that, but at the same time, we are engaged in a much different fight now than when we initially went into Iraq in 2003.
- Ernst: Right now we continue to fight ISIS, and violent extremist organizations. We have to really understand what the American public is experiencing. They're war-weary, but we need to emphasize that it is a different fight. We have downsized the number of troops that we have in the Middle East, whether it's in Iraq, whether it's in Syria, but there is still a fight. Even though ISIS, the caliphate is nearly gone, the physical caliphate, but they still do exist. We need to continue to make sure that we're defeating those organizations, like ISIS and others that exist out there.
- Ernst: We need to project that to the American people so they understand there is still a value in being there. Even though the national defense strategy is shifting us to that great power competition, we still have a role to play in ridding world of those violent, extreme organizations.
- Hicks: Jennifer, you started out by, and I'll paraphrase it by pointing out that, the adage that many of us have to live with, which is woe to the strategists who choose to ignore the Middle East. It's happened numerous times in the past. That's because if left to its own devices, left without a U.S. role, others step in. Right now, of course, we have Russia and Iran significantly, threats worsen. But even with us engaged, the kinds of measures of success feel very dissatisfying to Americans. There isn't peace breaking out in the streets. It's challenging.
- Hicks: I liken it to Scotty on the Enterprise, down there in the engine room. Every day up comes Captain Kirk asking for another small miracle to get out of something. That's what it's like in the Middle East. It's about the hard, often very unsatisfying step-by-step efforts on U.S. foreign policy, and it's hard to gauge that success in even years.
- Hicks: The real point we have to, I think, be able to make to the American people is that, we are careful in the risk of cost in dollars and lives, but that no role there would worsen those outcomes. We've certainly seen that happen as well.
- Griffin: Kath, let me just follow-up by asking, how do we explain that there are four times the number of Jihadis now, 17 years after 9/11? Is there something to our presence there causing the ... We are engaged in bombing seven different countries. The military is spread out across North Africa now. Do we need to ask whether our presence may be generating recruits for these Jihadist networks?
- Hicks: Well there's not doubt, historically and today, the physical presence of U.S. and western military forces is something that Jihadists can use a recruitment tool, if you will. We have to be very careful about that. That is why we have had, particularly in the last five years or so, relatively lighter footprint. Part of the reasoning is that we want the footprint to reflect that recognition of the challenge. That was true, by the way, in the time of George W. Bush as well, in terms of coming out after the Gulf War. I think that's part of the equation.
- Hicks: At the same time, again, we don't know what the alternative universe would look like where the U.S. wasn't engaged at all, and what those numbers would be, and perhaps

more importantly, how much of those numbers of Jihadists would be out beyond the bounds, if you will, of the Middle East into other regions of the world that are, today, their presence is smaller. Part of it's a containment challenge.

Hicks: But I do think, to your basic point, as we think about U.S. force presence, we should be thinking about what's that careful line of, what is strategic over-watch versus negligence? What is strategic over-watch versus over-investment, that can just drive that snowball effect toward getting less rather than more out of our presence.

Griffin: What do you see as the most destabilizing influence in the Middle East right now? Where is the destabilization coming from?

Ernst: Iran.

Griffin: What makes you say Iran?

Ernst: I think their continued engagement with those violent extremist organizations. We see it throughout the Middle East. Well, for heaven's sakes, we just saw a missile launched by Iran. They will do whatever they can to destabilize the Middle East. It puts them in a position of power. They will continue to mettle, and of course bring in Russia as well. Any number of state actors can be through the Middle East.

PART 1 OF 3 ENDS [00:14:04]

Ernst: ... any number of state actors can be through the Middle East, but I would say that that is in my estimation one of the number one destabilizing factors in the Middle East right now. We just have to keep a continuous eye on Iran.

Shaheen: I certainly agree that Iran is a big contributor to terrorist activities in Yemen, in Syria, across the Middle East, but I think it's more complex than just that. If we look at the civil war in Syria that has contributed in the last five years or so to so much of the conflict there ... Iran and Russia have come in to take advantage of that, but we certainly left the door open. We've not had a strategy for Syria. We didn't have one under the Obama administration, we don't have one under the Trump administration. At least we had a designated strategy for Afghanistan and Iraq. We said this is what we're trying to do. We have nothing in Syria.

Shaheen: I had the opportunity to visit there in July with Senator Graham, and we wanted to see the foreign fighters who are being detained in Syria, but I came back feeling very different about what's going on there than when I left because we visited the north east corner: Manbij, Kobani, Ayn Issa, where our efforts there working with the Syrian Democratic Forces have stabilized the region. What we heard from the Syrians we met whether they were Arab, or Kurds was, "Please don't leave us. It's really important that the Americans stay here," for a very little amount of money ... I think about 200 million in stabilization funds we've got a peaceful section of Syria where we influence on where we can counterbalance what's going on with Assad, with the Russians, with the Iranians, and so we've got to look at those opportunities, and think about each country and the complexities there, and not assume we can paint with one brush what's going on across the Middle East.

Griffin: It's almost a peace keeping force that you're describing. Something that maybe the UN has failed to provide, the US is finding that it's moving in to having these quiet outposts where they keep things from bubbling up to a point where there has to be full scale conflict. Kath, what do you think is the most destabilizing influence in the Middle East right now?

Hicks: I think Iran as an actor is the single most destabilizing factor, but I would agree, I think with Senator Shaheen, that I think what has happened in Syria over the past seven to eight years, which has many fathers of failure: Iran being one of them, Russia, the United States, Turkey, the gulf states, Assad primarily. The ramifications of what's happened in Syria in the next 10 years, today and the next 10 years, are the most profound. They've affected Europe fundamentally. They've affected us domestically in terms of how we think about issues from immigration to counter terrorism, and they also have put at risk for example the entire investment we had in Iraq. Now we've, I think, done a very good job of coming back in at the end of the Obama administration and then in to the Trump administration to shore up Iraq, but that is a fundamental continuing importance to us. Iraq's security, Turkey, Israel, Jordan, these countries that have stood with us, we're going to need to keep working on that. I think Syria, probably we have to be able to contain that crisis.

Griffin: Well we talked about how there's maybe ... We're constantly hearing, and I've heard it through three, four presidencies that we don't have a strategy for the Middle East. We did hear recently President Trump talk about wanting to pull troops out of Syria, and you hear the Defense Department say that the role of those troops in Syria is only to fight ISIS, and then you heard the National Security Advisor John Bolton say that US troops will stay to counter Iran's influence. What is our strategy in Syria?

Shaheen: Well that's the problem as I said. One of the pieces of legislation that we just passed was a Syria study group that's modeled on the 2006 Iraq study group that came out with a strategy on Iraq that mirrored to a great extent the surge and some of our efforts there. I'm hopeful that we will see some recommendations come out of that, that might help us as we're thinking about how to respond, but Kathleen is absolutely right. What we don't want to do is to when we've got something that's working, as we have in north east Syria, we don't want to pull everybody out of there, and risk what happened in Iraq where we saw the terrorists come back. We know ISIS is still there. We know that they've gone underground in lots of villages in Syria and Iraq, and we want to make sure that we've got some oversight there so that they don't come back. We leave, and they come back.

Griffin: It seems like a common theme are the existence of failed states, the vacuums that are created, but the question is, is it the US military that should be filling the role?

Ernst: Jennifer if I could address that, and I'll go back to the previous question as well where the president has made statements about pulling troops out, and I would agree, we don't want to leave that vacuum. However, our role, and what's covered by the AUMF that's currently in place, the 2001 AUMF allows us to pursue those that are engaged in terrorist activities. Now if we are leaving troops in Syria for other activities I think congress then needs to address a new AUMF. I firmly believe that, so if we continue to go after terrorist organizations, wonderful, I'm glad we're doing that, but we do have to think about it, and that comes in to play with the Syria strategy. We have downsized. I think that's important. We continue to acknowledge we don't have as many troops

through the Middle East as we have had in the past, but we do need to rely on those relationships. [SOFF 00:20:39] has done a wonderful job in advising and assisting many of our partner nations as well as indigenous forces, but what we can do is further look at our partners. Are they able to step in whether it's the Saudis, whether it's Jordanians, whether it's the Emirates. Who is it that can fill the gap? Can they fill the gap? We're not sure.

Griffin: If they fill the gap are they going to be lowering the tensions or contributing to the tensions. We see in Yemen a situation that obviously has to be resolved. What is stopping an AUMF from being considered by Democrats and Republicans? Does the Defense Department want an AUMF? Does the president want a new AUMF, and would the AUMF have to cover different countries? Do you need one for Somalia? Do you need one for Yemen? Do you need one for Syria, or is it just an overarching one that is needed, and did we just see the first steps towards that with the vote in terms of curtailing the war powers in Yemen.

Ernst: I think you just answered the question by asking all of those: when does it end, is there a time certain to an AUMF, what countries does it cover, who does it cover. There are so many things, and we all have very different ideas on where that needs to go, what the end goal would be, and that's where we as congress need to start having those discussions, and identify what are our common goals, and where can we go with a new AUMF.

Griffin: Do you think there's new momentum? Do you think there's bipartisan support for this?

Shaheen: I don't. Not at this point.

Griffin: No? Okay, why not?

Shaheen: There has been support for some language within the foreign relations committee for a new AUMF, but I think given recent events in Yemen, given where we are almost at the end of this congress, we're talking about a whole new effort starting with the new congress. I think as Joni said so well, the challenges have been we haven't been able to get something we can agree to. Without that it's really hard to get a commitment to take it up on the floor of the senate.

Griffin: Let's take a look at the national defense survey that I believe ... Oops, I did that too quickly. Americans see the biggest regional threats in the Middle East and East Asia. Now that's interesting because one of the other questions had suggested that Americans feel that after 17 years of war that we had failed in Iraq and Afghanistan, but yet they still see the biggest regional threats in the Middle East, and yet if you look at the active duty households, the military households, they see East Asia as a greater threat. How do we explain this discrepancy, or this poll finding?

Hicks: Well I would just go back first on the Middle East being at the top. That's the experience that Americans have had in this generation. They've experienced their loved ones going in to conflict in the Middle East. The nightly news, if you will, to the extent that it's about foreign policy is often about Middle East engagements and, or counter terrorism in general. I think we have another slide related to terrorism, so that's not surprising, and the active duty household piece also is not surprising for the reasons we talked about before which is they have felt the relative futility, if you will, of seeing it easily

change all the aspects of how the Middle East is going to operate, and the degree to which it's going to easily turn toward alignment with US security interests. So, there's nothing in that that surprises me.

Hicks: I did want to raise one thing that's kind of come up on the margins, which is we so tend to focus on the military piece for the US, and I'm sure this is something everyone on the panel would agree to, but I think it's important to explicitly say we almost never talk about the other instruments that need to be engaged both internationally, but in the US government to reach success. The biggest problems in the Middle East are, if you will, governance related, there are generational challenges around unemployment, other related issues that are societal, women and girls, health, and we have a lot of tools both in the private sector and in the government that we could be leveraging. That would allow us over time to leverage the military instrument less.

Shaheen: That's a really good point. One of the things we saw when we were visiting Syria, in Manbij we met with the ... They had reconstituted their town governing council. They had representatives from the various ethnic groups in the town, they really were talking about how to govern themselves in a way that was very impressive. We need to help support those efforts as well.

Griffin: Senator Shaheen you said that you went in to that trip with different expectations. What did you think you were going to find, and what was the stark contrast?

Shaheen: I expected to come away thinking as soon as the fight against ISIS is over we should pull out all of our troops. Obviously they were there because of the fight against ISIS, but just driving along the wrong and seeing Syrian children flash a V sign for victory at our military because they saw them as being liberators really. When they said to us, "Don't let the Turks come in. Don't let Assad come back. Don't let ..." You know, you name the country that's there. It was very clear that what they were interested in was not just the fact that we were there to help liberate them from ISIS, but we brought with us our values, and our commitment to human rights, our commitment to an inclusive participation in governance. That's ... When the migrants were fleeing Syria they weren't fleeing to Russia, they weren't fleeing to Iran, they were fleeing to Europe. They wanted to get to the United States, and we have to remind people that's one of the strengths that we bring to conflicts in the Middle East or anywhere else.

Griffin: I'd like to push back a little bit on what has become I think a presumption in the last two years that Iran is the greatest threat in the Middle East. While Iran is a threat, is it possible that we're over correcting after having, essentially, through our involvement in Iraq ... Having created what some have described as a Shia crescent from Iraq to Syria to Lebanon, and are we now trying to adjust for that to such a degree that we are blaming Iran for everything, and in the process creating an imbalance that could cause other problems by ignoring the role of Saudi Arabia, of Qatar, of the gulf states?

Ernst: Well I would say I'm happy blaming Iran for everything, but certainly there are other factors there, but I would say that they are such a large enabler of discord through the Middle East that we do have to keep our eye-

Ernst: [inaudible 00:28:00] through the Middle East, that we do have to keep our eye on them, understanding that there are other factors that exist in the Middle East. I'll continue to blame them, but we need to keep our eyes on some of the other factors that we see.

Griffin: But isn't it risky? What we've seen lately is that we have given Saudi Arabia almost a blank check in Yemen.

Ernst: We should not give them a pass in Yemen. That's why I think, and there are many different discussions that exist out there, and understanding we don't all agree on this issue. But having American involvement through targeting, I think we have been able to save lives by minimizing the collateral damage that you will see. The refueling operations, we have ceased those. I think that was important. We have signaled to them that we're not going to continue to enable you to just blanket bomb communities, go after innocents and civilians. We can't give them a free pass. I am hopeful that with the peace talks that are coming forward this next week, that maybe we will see some progress in that area. We will have to address the Saudi issue at some point. But what we don't wanna do is jeopardize what could be a fruitful discussion this next week, between the Houthi's and Saudi.

Griffin: Kath, your thoughts?

Hicks: Yeah, I mean I agree with the premise of your question. I think as we said, Iran is the most destabilizing actor in the region, has invested itself significantly in destabilizing activities, proxies, et cetera. That's a worry. I was a fan of the nuclear deal, the JCPOA. I don't think we have an Iran strategy exactly at the moment, except maybe to pressure them back to the table. I'm not sure that it was worth giving up some level of assurance that we could see what they were doing for several years at least, to forestall if not prevent, the growth of a new nuclear Iran. Which is extremely frightening to me and should be to the Gulf states and to Israel.

Hicks: But that said, it's not the only issue, not the only actor. It is not behind every column, under every hill, and there are a lot of other challenges in the region. The internecine warfare if you will, not literally warfare, but in-fighting within the GCC, certainly Saudi Arabia itself and how it's evolving with the war in Yemen, being an early indicator. The Khashoggi killing being a more recent indicator that we have some problems with MBS and the degree to which he's actually shifting the country in a way that is toward reform. More aligned to our values and can be seen as aligned with our interests. I'm very concerned about that.

Hicks: But again, that's one of a number of challenges. I think for the United States, as I tried to say at the beginning, we have to be careful here that we are looking out for our interests. Those don't align probably with any single actor. Whether that's Israel, or Saudi, or certainly not Iran, we have to be thinking very clear eyed about where our interests align. What we wanna make sure we can secure and protect, and what piece of that is about military capability.

Griffin: What would happen if the U.S. pulled out of the Middle East altogether?

Hicks: Others would move in.

Ernst: Yes, that void.

Griffin: Right.

Shaheen: I think one of the reasons, and I don't know how the question was phrased about where are you most concerned about the threat. But one of the reasons I think Americans are concerned about the threat from the Middle East, is because that's where so much of the terrorist activity that has attacked the West has generated from. One challenge that we've got there that we need to engage particularly our European partners on, are those foreign fighters and what happens to them. Right now in Syria there are, depending upon what numbers you listen to, there are probably between 700 and 1,000 foreign fighters who are not from the United States, not from the Middle East, but from someplace in Europe. We need to figure out what to do with them. Because if they're in the custody of the Syrian Democratic Forces and if they fall, if something changes with their alignment, then those 700 to 1,000 people are probably gonna be released and who knows where they're gonna wind up. I think that's a very real issue that we've not even begun to figure out how we're gonna deal with.

Griffin: I seem to remember in Yemen there was a prison that was bombed and Al Qaeda, hundreds of Al Qaeda went free from that bombing. So yes, stabilizing prisoners, what to do with extreme Jihadists who are unreformable once they're caught, I don't think anyone has an answer to that.

Ernst: I do wanna go back to the void as well. We saw this and that's where the rise of Isis, we saw that not all that long ago. Because we withdrew before we had stabilized government and government capabilities in Iraq. We have been absent for a while. And let me explain this. By not having additional troops in the Middle East, if we think back, we've had a presence in Saudi, we've had a presence in a number of these places. But we've had smaller amounts of terrorist activities and a number of us can remember the U.S.S. Cole. A number of us can remember the Khobar Tower bombings. These extreme organizations, whether they're coming from a state actor that's supporting them, or they're just growing on their own, they don't appreciate Western civilization. Whether we are there or not, we can make that choice, but understanding that there is a population out there that wishes us ill no matter what.

Ernst: I feel it's better to have a presence where we can tamp down on them, rather than create that void which allows them to operate with freedom of movement around the globe. Which puts our citizens in danger. I would prefer to have that presence until we can rely on others to fill that gap for us.

Griffin: Good. Let's just go to the last slide that we have from the survey. See if that comes up. Americans are less concerned about terrorist attacks, interestingly enough, than they are about I believe it's cyber attacks on their personal computers. How do we explain this finding?

Hicks: Well it's actually a very logical finding. 'Cause they're far more likely to get a cyber attack on their person if you will, on their computer, than they are to be personally affected by terrorism. I think that actually shows you the degree to which daily, saliency matters in terms of how many Americans process foreign policy challenges. Maybe I would turn it the other way around, which is terrorism still ranks very high for many Americans above let's say, the rise of China or concern about other actors in the world. Maybe less concern about what the Russians are doing in the Baltics. We shouldn't be surprised by that, we shouldn't be hostage to it, this is where leadership matters. So that those who

understand foreign policy and are working hard on it can help explain why we have to have investments, prioritize the way we do.

Hicks: But I think actually that shows you a very logical American population response. Which is, they're gonna have more trouble online shopping being challenged, than they are to be a victim of a terrorist attack.

Griffin: Having their credit card information stolen, which is real this time of year. But also, really it shows the success of 17 years of war. Which perhaps we are not explaining well enough to the American public. Because the chances of dying in a terror attack is actually probably at an all time low since 9/11. And it is because we have forward deployed troops.

Shaheen: Can I respond? Terms of what an individual sees and worrying about hacking in their own computers, I think is important. But as we heard at breakfast and I think several times throughout the day, cyber issues are a huge problem for the United States. The National Defense Strategy Commission recommended a whole separate commission just to address cyber issues. Because right now we don't have anyone in charge, we don't have a body of laws to determine how we're gonna respond to cyber, and we don't have a positive response to how we're gonna deal with those kinds of threats. So it's not just worrying about our personal computers, it's also worrying about the potential for cyber attacks to affect our national security.

Griffin: Well, there are reports that the Russians did actually enter the power grid, and they did actually cause two blackouts in Ukraine. So these threats to the power grid are an even greater national security threat. You hate to scare people, but they are real.

Griffin: We have just two minutes left, so I'll just ask; the budget fight that is inevitably going to come up in Washington. How do you see that impacting the fore-structure in the Middle East, how should it ... Should it be immune from discussions of money for the military? Should defense budgets be off the table? Where do you see this fight heading? And how will it impact our presence in the Middle East?

Shaheen: Well, we've gotta deal with our budget challenge. Not just in terms of getting a budget that's done on time and an appropriations bill, but also in terms of dealing with the budget caps that are gonna come back in '20 and '21. One of the things I said last year at this event, when we were talking about this challenge, is that we might all like to think that we could get a budget for defense separate from anything else that's going on within the government. But I don't believe that's gonna happen, and I think there's even less reason to think it's gonna happen in this new Congress than that it would happen in the last Congress.

Shaheen: I think we have to deal with this issue. We have to work together, but we have to understand that we're not just talking about the defense budget, we're talking about the whole of government.

Ernst: Absolutely. And I'd like to think of it as a challenge, maybe not a fight. But a challenge and every time we're presented with a challenge we have an opportunity to do better. What we have to do is think of the end user and that's our young man and woman in uniform, that we are forward deploying. And making sure that we are manning, training,

and equipping our units so that when we engage them, they are able to come home safely after completing their mission.

Griffin: In fact you were just with the Navy Seals at a graduation ceremony.

Ernst: I was.

Griffin: What did you hear from them? Do they need anything right now?

Ernst: Well, they were so pumped up about finishing, it didn't get into much policy discussion. But truly, again I'll go back to SOF because that's what I know and understand. But we invest a lot of dollars in our special operators and most often they are the ones that we have out on the ground, especially in Iraq and Syria. We invest in them, but we invest in them because we want to know that they know how to complete a mission. Do it safely, do it in a way that they are protecting those innocent civilians out there. They are those liberators, those defenders of freedom. So we have to think about them when Congress is arguing over the nit nad daily activities in the budget process, we need to think do we want those men and women to be properly trained, manned, and equipped, bring them home safely to their families?

Griffin: Thank you. Kath, I'll give you the last word. We're out of time, but-

Hicks: Well, yes to everything that has been said. I would just say in addition to the budget challenge, which is significant, it's real. As a member of the National Defense Strategy Commission, one thing we really tried to emphasize was it's not just about the budget. And actually a lot of our challenges, and we were so quick to move to the how much, too much, too little, instead of the for what and how. We need a lot more, if we're gonna deal with an era of competition against powers like China at the same time that we're trying to manage the challenges in places like the Middle East. We're gonna have to get a lot smarter about how we do this. We're gonna have to pull a lot more tools of power together beyond just the military piece. And we're gonna have to figure out how to do things smarter and faster than our adversaries.

Hicks: That will take budget, but it will take a lot more in cultural change.

Griffin: Well, I wanna thank you all for joining us. Thank you for joining us this afternoon.

PART 3 OF 3 ENDS [00:41:39]