Thank you so much, Congressman Israel and Congressman

Bishop, for helping to organize this Special Order tonight. I think the

American people expect this much of us, that they like to see this type

of civil, controlled dialogue where we are trying to rally around, I

think, some shared principles that we can pretty much agree to, that we

are talking about this in a proper tone, keeping the temperature down,

so to speak. And I think that that is what the public expects instead

of all the sometimes hot air and noise and at times excessive

partisanship that seems to be the public perception of how this

institution operates far too often.

And I just want to take a couple of moments to commend you,

Congressman Israel, on something that you have shared with many of us

who participate in the Center Aisle Caucus, and that is the idea of a

Status of Forces Agreement and how such an agreement might be of

benefit to us in Iraq.

And for purposes of this discussion, that Status of Forces Agreement

is an agreement that is worked out between our government and the

foreign country that delineates the legal partnership between the

troops who are deployed to that country and the host government. And

that is a very significant issue.

In the civil side of the law, for example, a Status of Forces

Agreement can spell out proceedings under which nationals of the host

country may file claims against the United States for damage to

property of these nationals that has been inadvertently caused by the

United States Armed Forces. An agreement is also important because it

can be used to spell out jurisdictional issues with regard to criminal

offenses. For example, these agreements are often used to make sure

that American service members who commit offenses overseas and are tried

by U.S. military courts-martial rather than local courts. They can also

delineate the conditions under which U.S. service members charged with

crimes within the boundaries of the host country are treated. A Status

of Forces Agreement can specify, for example, that a service member

accused of a crime in violation of local laws must be detained on board

a ship or some other U.S. installation rather than await trial in a

local jail.

We have never had a Status of Forces Agreement with the Iraqi

government. I know that is something that you have been strongly

advocating, and I believe it is high time that we implement one for a

few reasons. First, a Status of Forces Agreement is an agreement

between two sovereign nations. By executing such an agreement, we would

be affirming sovereignty of the Maliki government and the right, as

well as the obligation, of that government to exercise control over its

own territory.

Second, a Status of Forces Agreement would send a clear message both

to the Iraqis and to other countries in the region that we do not

intend to establish permanent bases in Iraq, I think something that

many of us on both sides of the aisle agree. And this agreement is

usually negotiated for a fixed period of time, and it can be renewed or

not, as was the case with the old Subic Bay naval base in the Republic

of the Philippines.

The Philippines example is instructive, I think, in this instance.

There

the Aquino government asserted its sovereign rights over Subic Bay by

refusing to renew a prior agreement and other related treaties with our

government in 1992. Thus the world was made to know that even though

the U.S. had a presence in Subic Bay and a neighboring city for more

than 90 years prior to that time, that presence was not permanent and

was subject to an agreement that had to be agreed to by both

nations. And third, as described a few moments ago, this agreement, if

properly negotiated, can protect U.S. forces from being tried by

foreign courts or prevent them from being detained in Iraqi facilities

if charged with a crime under foreign law. This kind of measure is

necessary to make sure that Americans operating overseas have the

fullest protections afforded to them by Federal jurisprudence.

I also really want to thank you again for organizing this, and I

think these shared principles you have outlined here are really a basis

upon which we can have further dialogue. And a little later in this

Special Order, I might want to talk about the Iraq Study Group

recommendations, the Baker-Hamilton report, that I think many of us on

both sides of the aisle have a good feeling about, and there is

legislation that has been proposed and recently introduced, and I will

get into that a little later.

At this time I would like to yield to one of our other colleagues,

the distinguished gentleman from Connecticut (Mr. Shays), who has been

to Iraq 17 times now.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to endorse the gentleman from

Connecticut's idea about reconstituting the Iraq Study Group and

sending them back over to Iraq at some point to help give us an update

of this very useful report. I think we all can agree that many of us in

this country, and I suspect in Iraq too, are frustrated by this slow

pace of reconciliation that is ongoing in Iraq.

But, again, another point about this report, and I think this

gathering tonight, I think this helps us as Americans try to reconcile

our differences. We talk about Iraqi reconciliation, but I think in

many respects we need a little reconciliation of our own.

Well, it is a very fair point in many respects. I just want

to point out something. When I first read this report back in December

when it was first released, I had some concerns too, like many people,

about some of the recommendations, particularly the recommendation

about directly engaging Iran, for all the reasons we have identified.

Ahmadinejad is a virulent anti-Semite. He has made such inflammatory

comments. I think we all agree he is a menace.

After listening to Jim Baker and Lee Hamilton talk about the issue, I

don't think any of us expect there to be any real process in a dialogue

with Iran at a sub-cabinet level, but I think we also realize that you

need to have that kind of a conversation initially and let the Iranians

be an obstruction themselves, so we can then isolate them

internationally and also perhaps drive a wedge between the Iranian

Government and the Syrian Government.

I think it makes absolutely no sense for the Syrians to be engaged in

destructive behavior in Iraq, given the fact that they have more than 1

million refugees, primarily Sunni, who are in Syria. Of course, Syria

is ruled by Allawites, who represent about 10 percent of that country.

So it is clearly not in Syria's interest to have protracted instability

in Iraq.

So, again, I just wanted to thank the gentleman from Connecticut for

his thoughtful idea about getting the Iraq Study Group back over there,

perhaps hearing what General Petraeus says and make some

recommendations on what he has said, and maybe give us a bipartisan way

for us to move forward.

I think Americans want a solution. They don't want an issue in Iraq,

but they want a solution. I think that is one of the great things about

this dialogue tonight.

I yield back to the gentleman from New York.

I too want to commend the gentleman from New York for

organizing this event tonight, this special order. We need to see a

little bit more of this type of activity in this Congress, and I hope

the American people who are watching this exercise tonight maybe find

this a little bit different or maybe a little bit more refreshing than

what they are accustomed to during special orders. I just want to thank

you for putting this together.

One final point. I think Mr. Gilchrest made the point about

interaction with Syria on a commercial basis in this country. A

constituent called just the other day who imports various food products

from Syria, because I have a large Middle Eastern community in my

district. And just some of the challenges, they just want to go about

life as they normally would.

I thought it was interesting. It kind of brings back home the point

that people want to coexist peacefully. That the challenges and the

stakes are very high in Iraq, and I think all of us want to make sure

that whatever policy is pursued, particularly after September, it is

one that is responsible and one that will make us all safer and

hopefully the region more stable.

So, again, thank you, Mr. Israel, for putting this on. It is much

appreciated.