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The Current Situation in the Middle East:
Implications for U.S. and Chinese Foreign Policies

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Welcome all to this lecture hosted by the Brookings-Tsinghua Center. Today our topic is about the Middle East issue. The Middle East issue has been developing for quite a long time, and what has happened in the last few years has attracted a lot of attention – I think the big crowd here says everything. So it's our great pleasure today to invite Dr. Tamara Wittes to give a talk on the current situation in the Middle East and its implications for U.S. and Chinese foreign policy. Dr. Wittes has a lot of impressive experience in government, universities, and think tanks. She used to serve as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Obama administration and now she serves as the Senior Fellow and Director of the center for Middle East Policy at Brookings. So without further ado, let's welcome Dr. Wittes.

Tamara Wittes:

Thank you so much. It is a treat to be with my colleagues from the Brookings-Tsinghua Center and to be here at Tsinghua University with all of you. Thank you for coming. This is my first trip to China and a wonderful opportunity for me to learn more about Chinese policies in the Middle East, which is my subject of study. I thought I would talk to you today about Syria because it's a topic that is so much in the news and presenting tremendous challenges to regional security, to international security, and to the foreign policies of the major powers. And that can be perhaps a focal point for a broader conversation about what is taking place in the Middle East today, how we understand it, and what the role of outside powers is in stabilizing a very unstable region. So let me talk a bit about how I see this Syrian conflict, how it began, how it has evolved and what it will take to resolve it. I'll then make a couple of general points about the region, about the Middle East, and then we can open it up for a wider conversation.

We are coming up on the 5th anniversary of the beginning of what's become known as the Arab Spring, or the Arab Awakening, or the Arab Uprisings. And I think it's important as we look at the intense violence, the scale of human suffering that we see in Syria today – it's important to remember where this began. In March 2011, Syrian citizens rose up in non-violent demonstrations against their government demanding political reform, demanding human rights, demanding a voice in their government, an end to corruption, greater openness, greater protection and greater opportunities. And these peaceful demonstrations persisted in the face of a violent response from the Syrian government against its own citizens. The Syrian uprising remained mostly non-violent for almost 7 months in the face of this violent response from a government that engaged in wide-scale arrests, torture, and human rights abuses – and ultimately declared war against its own citizens. During this period of time, however, that violent response by the government created space and opportunity for violent actors against the

government. When the government no longer provides basic law and order, when the government is no longer acting to protect the security of citizens, it creates a market for others with guns to provide security. And so over time, militias began to take over this Syrian uprising.

Now when you have an environment in which the government no longer controls and the government is no longer acting to control and protect segments of the population and segments of the country; when the government is one among a group of armed actors contesting for power, that creates opening that other actors can exploit as well. And so once the Syrian uprising became a Syrian civil war, this created opportunities for some of the most extreme actors in the Middle East today to find a foothold and expand their influence. And so we saw the growth of ISIS or the Islamic State.

But I began where I began because I think that it's important to remember that the choices of leaders and governments, in facing demands from their citizens. That was the decisive factor in turning the Syrian uprising into a Syrian civil war. When we look across the Middle East, we saw uprisings in 6, 8, 10 countries across the region in 2011. Not all of those countries are now failed states. Not all of those countries are now mired in war. Syria and Libya are mired in war because those are the places where leaders responded in violence and broke their states open.

So let's begin at the beginning. Now what we have in Syria today is a conflict with multiple layers and some of those are very local, some are global. And it's important for us to unpack the different layers of this conflict to understand what's driving the violence and what it will take to end it. There is, of course, a civil conflict between Bashar Al-Assad and those in the country who are still supporting his rule, and those who are committed to the overthrow of that government and its replacement with something different – although they don't all agree with what should replace it. So there is a civil war with not two sides, but many sides. There is also a regional conflict that is being fought on Syrian battlefields - a proxy war. And this is a consequence of a broader set of events that we call the Arab uprising – the breakdown of the regional order that lasted from the end of World War 2 until 2011. And so we see that major regional actors, seeing the breakdown of that order, and shifts in the balance of power are seeking to protect their advantages or to increase their influence in this environment; this dynamic, uncertain environment. And so in the Syrian context, we have Bashar Al-Assad's government, which has a 30-year alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran. And the Islamic Republic of Iran has invested quite a bit of money and troops and advisors into the government of Bashar Al-Assad into its war, into the civil war.

On the other side, we see a number of Arab states supporting various rebel factions opposed to the government. For the first few years of the war, different Arab states were supporting different factions, competing with one another for supremacy within the group of rebel militias. Now the Arab states seem to have a somewhat more unified approach. Turkey also has played an important role as a regional actor in this conflict. And of course it has an interest not only in the outcome of the conflict for politics in Syria, and the broader regional struggle that's underway, but also a narrower interest in the sense that Syria's border with Turkey is long. Turkey has absorbed a large number of Syrian refugees from the conflict, and the Turkish government is concerned about spillover in the conflict in two forms. Number one is Islamic extremists who the Turkish government believes were behind the horrific bombing in Ankara last week that killed over 100 people. Number two is Kurdish militia groups that have been fighting against the Syrian government and against ISIS in northern Syria and who have connections to Kurdish separatists inside of Turkey. So for both very narrow national interests and for broader regional interests, Turkey is meshed in the Syrian conflict as well. So we have the civil conflict, we have the regional power game with the Sunni coalition of Arab states led by the Saudis and the Iranian government on the other side, Turkey playing a sort of third role, and we also have international involvement. And this international involvement now has become more complex with the Russian intervention into Syria.

So beginning about a year ago with the fall of Mosul in Iraq to the Islamic state, the United States and a coalition of partners embarked on a campaign of military attacks on the Islamic state in Iraq and also in Syria. And the U.S. so far has been quite disciplined and determined in using its military force against ISIS and not targeting the government of Bashar Al-Assad. Now in the last few weeks we've seen Russian military intervention as well. And the Russian government says that it too is focused on defeating ISIS, but when we look at the targeting of Russian air strikes, we see that they've targeted not only ISIS but a number of other rebel factions and civilian areas as well. And if you look at a map, and a number of good media sources have done quite well in tracking the air strikes over the past few weeks. It seems very clearly that what they're doing is softening the front line between Assad's government and a wide array of rebel forces. The news as of this morning is that Syrian forces were massing for a ground defensive behind Aleppo to follow on behind those Russian air strikes. So we have a declared Russian policy, which is at odds with what we see on the ground. How should we expect this layered conflict to proceed? And what does this Russian intervention suggest about the trajectory of the Syrian conflict?

When you look at the history of civil wars in the modern era, they tend to end in one of two ways. Either factions fight until one is victorious, and the other is, if not exterminated, one becomes so thoroughly marginalized that it gives up. The Sri Lankan conflict is a good example of one that ended that way recently. The other way that civil wars end in the modern era is in a stalemate followed by a negotiated settlement that history tells us needs to be guaranteed by an external power. The record on this is that when negotiated settlements are not guaranteed by an external power, the civil war tends to rekindle and the negotiated settlement doesn't stick, and an example of one that ended that way would be the Bosnian war of the 1990s.

If we think about how we get from where we are, this fierce civil war that has drawn in regional and international actors, how do we get it from where it is today to the end of conflict? Well, we have two paths to look at and choose from. We've already seen in the nearly 5 years of this conflict tremendous human cost – more than 200 thousand, perhaps as many as a quarter of a million people killed – the vast majority of which was killed by Bashar Al-Assad's government. Syria's population before the war was about 20 million people; at least half of them are now displaced from their homes. And more than 4 million of those that have been displaced have left the borders of Syria and sought refuge in other places. And we see now that the spillover and human cost of this challenge is not only affecting the neighboring states and the middle east, we see these desperate refugees making their way into Europe. And we've seen the cost of this conflict as well in the opportunity it has created for the most brutal kind of extremism to take hold in Syria in the form of ISIS. And so there are voices that I hear in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world who say "Well, we don't have a dog in this fight so we should stay out of it." But when we look at the human cost and the consequences for international security that that human cost imposes and implies, I don't think that that's an acceptable attitude. And I think in the 21st century, after the bloody history of the 20th century and all of the lessons that we have learned as an international community about our responsibilities to deal with these sorts of conflicts and promote international peace and security, we can't really afford to let this burn out, as some might say. That leaves the path of stalemate-negotiated compromise guaranteed by external actors.

Now I suppose in theory one could argue that this Russian intervention might advance a military stalemate. Some may argue that Assad's forces were facing tremendous challenges on the ground and the Russian intervention can restore a military balance, and that that might actually promote negotiation. I count myself skeptical because the Russian intervention, which as I said, looking at what we see on the ground, the Russian intervention is to the advantage and seems to be directed to the advantage of

Bashar Al-Assad and the restoration of government control over more Syrian territory. Now I think that it's exceedingly unlikely that Bashar Al-Assad can ever restore complete control over Syria's territory, but that doesn't mean he won't try.

But whether he can or not, that intervention has almost immediately been balanced by an escalation of support to the other side in the civil war. The Saudis and other Arab states have pledged and have begun to increase their assistance to the rebel militias that are fighting Bashar Al-Assad. And we've seen increased supply, or reports of increased supply, of anti-tank missiles, ammunition, and funding going to the rebels just in the last few weeks since the Russian intervention began. So I think what we can expect as a result of this Russian intervention is an escalation of the conflict, increased levels of violence, increased human suffering, increased flows of displaced people and refugees. And so I think that it takes us farther away from a negotiating process that could achieve an end to the civil war. I hope I'm wrong, but that's what I see so far in the dynamics on the ground since the Russian intervention began.

A number of people have asked whether it's possible for the U.S. and Russia to cooperate at a pragmatic level in attacks on ISIS and weakening ISIS in the Syrian context, given that the Russians have already decided to throw their hat in the ring so to speak. And I have to say, I'm skeptical. I have no doubt that the Russian government and President Putin are sincere in their concern about the rise of the Islamic State. It is a threat very similar to other Islamist extremist threats that Russia has suffered from on its own territory, and I have no doubt that the hostility there is quite real and quite sincere. But as I said, as we've seen so far in Russian behavior, is that they have not restricted their attacks to targeting ISIS. So I think we've seen over the last several days an intensive effort by the U.S. and Russia to coordinate carefully at just a very tactical level, such as with their air operations over Syria so that there are no unintended confrontations over fighter jets in a pretty small space, but I don't think that we should read into this. I see no evidence of any intention on either side for broader cooperation beyond just staying out of one another's way. And I think that as long as Russian objectives and U.S. objectives, with respect to the outcome of the Syrian conflict, remain opposed, it's going to be very difficult to see such cooperation emerge.

At the end of the day, to bring the fighting factions to the negotiating table, what we need to see is the fighting factions that are involved in this conflict, which includes Russia and the U.S., but it also includes Iran and Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia to decide that there is nothing to be gained on the battlefield, that the costs of continuing the conflict are too high. And that compromise, while painful, is necessary. And

unfortunately I just don't think we're there yet. In fact, I think what we see so far, especially on the Iranian side, is a willingness to increase investment, and that's very troubling.

Perhaps with that as an opener, I'll just say one more thing that takes us from the Syrian conflict to the broader conflict of the Middle East, and then open it up for conversation. The one more thing is this: going back to where I began this talk, the disorder, the chaos, the violence that we see in the Middle East, the opportunities that we see have been created for the worst of the worst in that environment – I think it's important to understand that these are not consequences of the uprisings that began in 2011. The uprisings themselves were the outgrowth of trends that were building in the Arab world over many decades. And those of us who have studied the region, those of us who lived in the region and saw those trends building, saw that Arab society was changing in a lot of ways, because of internal factors, because of globalization, and governments in the region were not responding well to those changes.

Now as I said, there are a lot of places in the region where we saw public pressures burst into the open in 2011. But it is only in the places where leaders responded with violence that we saw this kind of consequence. If we want to see this region return to a new form of stability that is sustainable, that gives the world some assurance that this region will not continue to produce challenges for international security, some form of sustainable order that gives the peoples of the region some hope for progress and prosperity, then we need to look at the underlying trends that produced both the uprisings and the violence that has resulted. And we can't simply blame the uprisings for the violence. And so I think that in the immediate sense, we have to focus on ending these civil wars because they create too much opportunity for too many bad actors. And the human suffering that they produce has broader consequences for the region and the world. But that's not enough; we have to look at the underlying issues of human development, of human rights, of the relationship of governments and their people. And this is a tremendous challenge. It's not something that can be solved in the short-term, but those underlying issues are still there, and one way or another, the region is going to have to undertake the challenge of renovating social institutions, economic institutions, and political institutions to deal with those demands. I think that outside actors have a positive role to play in encouraging that kind of change and creating an environment in which that kind of change is possible, and in which that kind of change meets with opportunity to move forward. But I think the first thing we have to do is try to end this violence. So let me stop there and open it up to all of you. Thank you.

Mei Ciqi:

Thank you very much, Dr. Wittes. Lots of information, so let's open the floor for questions.

Yu Qiao:

Okay, thank you very much. I have a couple questions. What would be policy options for improving the situation in Syria? What do you predict China's role will be?

Student 1:

Some analysts have suggested that the larger, longer-term Russian strategic aim is to build a block or quasi-block of Shiite states that would act against American intervention. Whether or not it achieves this aim, is that a credible argument?

Student 2:

I have three questions. The first one is- as you just mentioned in that region, apart from these two countries, the others in the Arab spring didn't fail. Although the states didn't collapse, I don't think their people are having a better life. Also from my interviews with people in that area, people are losing faith in protests and democracy. That's a side effect but not the main problem. What do you think?

About the different layers of conflict you just mentioned, do you think there will be a main priority problem at a certain level. At the domestic level, what is the main problem?

Given the history that the Turkish governments have treated the Kurdish minority, do you think that's a bad example for how the Turkish government now treats the over two million refugees?

Student 3:

You noted that one of the options to end the conflict is a negotiated settlement through a third party. How do we find a third party that doesn't have its own agenda? Which country do you think will be a negotiator?

Tamara Wittes:

Let me start with prospects for a negotiated settlement- what would that look like, what would the future of Syria look like under that scenario. I think that, look, obviously, the people on the ground who are doing the fighting have to be persuaded to put down their weapons. That doesn't mean that they

are the main obstacle to an effective negotiating process because they are funded by and supported diplomatically by these regional and international actors. So you have to look at the interests of the different groups. Both the ones doing the fighting on the ground and the ones that are in the ring around the conflict. And here I think it's worth noting that even within the Arab states that are opposed to Assad's continued rule, there are different views over what outcome they would like to see for Syria, and this is a challenge for an effective negotiating process. For some Arab states, maintaining the territorial integrity of the Syrian state is a very important objective. For others, the most important is getting rid of Assad and if you need to break up Syria to do it and leave him governing some rump piece of territory on the Mediterranean coast, that's fine. But I think even among those supporting the rebel militias, you have different views of the desired outcome. There are a lot of arguments that you hear these days over the origins of these state borders in Iraq and Syria and the artificiality of colonially imposed borders and end of Sykes-Picot. And I have to tell you that yes, Sykes-Picot was a colonial imposition and yes, these state borders were drawn in a very artificial manner, but that doesn't mean that they are meaningless. I think that there is sometimes a tendency to say "Well, these people are fighting and they appear to be fighting along sectarian lines or ethnic lines so let's just separate them and that will end the conflict." I think we have some good evidence that it's not quite that simple, even the independence of South Sudan has not ended the war in Sudan. And so it's not as simple as drawing different lines on a map.

At the end of the day, Sunni and Shia in the Arab world have been fighting each other on and off for 1,400 years, but they've also been living together for 1,400 years and marrying each other for 1,400 years, and so you can't simply say these are Sunni and these are Shia so they can never live together. At the end of the day, it comes down to politics and politics is about the distribution of power and resources. I don't think that the breakup of Syria is inevitable and I also would not argue that the breakup of Iraq is inevitable, but I also don't think that you can say that Iraq can necessarily remain a unified state in the same way. You have to find a way for people to feel secure and for people to feel like their interests are represented, and at the end of the day that's about politics, it's about political institutions, representation and compromise – and that's a very hard thing all over the world, and it's a hard thing in the Middle East.

Turkey and the Kurds. The Erdogan government went through a period where they really had altered their policy domestically toward the Kurdish minority inside Turkey. They had done that largely in response to pressure from the EU as part of the accession negotiation process. And they'd also had

these negotiations with the PKK; the PKK had declared a long-term cease-fire. So you know there was a period of time when Turkish-Kurdish relations had gone in a very different direction. Now we seem to see a reversal of that. Also, Turkey's relationship with the Kurdish regional government in Iraq has been relatively cooperative, economically beneficial, and a degree of trust had been built. This Syrian civil war has thrown this off balance, but I think that Turkey's relationship with the Kurdish issue, both domestically and regionally, is more nuanced and I think that we see the Turkish government today taking a very hardline stance with respect to, for example, western support or coalition support to Kurdish militants who are fighting ISIS in northern Iraq and northern Syria, but I don't think that it's inevitable that the Turkish government will remain as resolutely opposed. I think it will depend on Turkish domestic politics, and they're going to have an election on November 1st and we'll see where that goes.

Let me come back around to the role of outside actors including China and this question of 'Does Russia have a plan to develop a ring of Shia states?' I don't think that Russia has a particular fondness for Shia-run states. I think that Russia has a particular allergy to Sunni extremism for reasons I understand. And I think that Russia has a long-time investment in its Mediterranean base on Syrian territory. And I think that Russia has an opportunity here for its broader campaign of pushing against western policy preferences in areas outside its own borders and in areas it considers its near neighborhood. So that's what I think is motivating the Russians here, I don't think they have a sort-of grand strategy about how they'd like to remake the Middle East, and even if they did I think they have rather limited capacity. So I think at the end of the day, Russia's narrower interests, as I've just articulated them, can be accommodated in the context of a political settlement, but they have to decide that they want to move in that direction, but that's not where they are right now – they're going the other way. And as far as China's role, I think that the role that outside actors can play in a conflict like this is all about the relationships that they have, and different actors have different relationships and so they have different leverage and different influence. So I think that for all the P5 members who take seriously their role on the security council and the role that the UN should play in resolving international conflicts – we all have to look at the relationships we have, the leverage that we have, and how we can use our influence to advance a shift from conflict to negotiated settlement. I don't know enough about all of those Chinese relationships, but I'm confident that there are opportunities for China to play that role as well.

Student 4:

Let me go back a little bit to Russia again and their involvement. What do you think about this idea that part of the Russian strategy is to break its isolation from the West after the Ukrainian crisis?

Student 5:

What kind of suggestion can you give to us about how to deal with Xinjiang's stability due to security threats?

Student 6:

What kind of role do you think international organizations like the United Nations can play in solving the Middle East crisis?

Student 7:

There is sort of an anti-ISIS campaign going on on twitter in the United States. What practical measures has the Obama administration been doing to fight this?

Student 8:

For the United States, is it more important right now to counter the expansion of the Islamic State or the civil war in Syria?

Tamara Wittes:

Starting with Russia – is this intervention in Syria just a way of getting the engagement of the United States after its isolation due to the invasion of Ukraine? Gosh, that would be a really, if I may say so, pathetic way to get international attention, and also a very costly and risky one. I doubt that's the whole story although there's no question that the Russian intervention in Syria has changed the subject to a certain extent. Does that mean it will result in the removal or the weakening of American and Western European pressure on Russia over Ukraine? No, I don't think so. I think that the challenges to effective western engagement with Russia over Ukraine are significant. They were before and they haven't changed so we have to deal with those. More broadly, Russia was already a player in Syria. It was already providing financial support to Bashar Al-Assad. It was already providing military advice. It was already resupplying the Assad's government's military equipment and ammunition and stocks. So this is an escalation of involvement. It's not new involvement. I think we have to understand it in that context.

I would not presume to advise the Chinese government on how to deal with the security threats it faces in Xinjiang province, but what I would say is the challenge of the metastasis of the ISIS ideology is a challenge that is faced by the entire world, and the nature of this ideology is something we have to take seriously. These people believe that the end of the world is coming soon and as a result, this justifies, in their eyes, a tremendous level of brutality that you and I think of as completely irrational. And there are some who look at the ideology and behavior of the Islamic state and say that it is so brutal and it's rule is so harsh that it limits its own appeal. It's losing hearts and minds. It's self-limiting. I don't think we can take that premise so easily because we see that this ideology and vision of the end of days is appealing to people from an incredibly wide array of circumstances. Not only desperate people, not only people who are poor and marginalized, but also people from developed countries, people from a wide variety of circumstances are seduced by this set of ideas and inspired to do horrific things. And so to combat this, and this goes to the question about social media as well, it's not enough to expose their brutality – they're doing that already. They think it works to their advantage. And I think there's some evidence to suggest that they're right. When they capture a town full of people and carry out horrific violence and terrify people, it works for them. It works for them because it quickly intimidates any opposition, any descent. It quickly induces compliance because the alternative is death. And so it's working for them on the ground in Iraq and Syria. It's allowing them to establish something that they can call a caliphate and then they can say to their followers "Look, our tactics are succeeding. We're building the Islamic State. It's coming. The end of days is coming. The great battle is coming. Come and be a part of it." And that is something we have to take seriously. We have to figure out how to counteract that ideology. I think that's a challenge that we all have to work on together and I think it will take a lot of effort. Not only in social media, but also in the real world and in a lot of face-to-face engagements.

Finally, what's the role of international organizations like the UN in dealing in crises in the Middle East and how do we think about the priority of ending the civil war versus combating ISIS, which is a very good question. From my own perspective, as I suggested in my talk, the growth of Islamic State is a symptom, and it is also a terrible disease. It is a symptom of an underlying problem, which is the breakdown of the state society relationship in the Arab world. It created openings within these societies, which ISIS is entering into. In my mind, we have to deal with the civil conflicts; we have to deal with the underlying challenges to strengthen these societies so that the environment for a group like ISIS is more hostile. That's my own analysis. That's where we put our priority. And yes, we have to work militarily to combat this ISIS movement. We have to work militarily to try to prevent it from carrying out campaigns of extermination against minorities and slavery of women of girls and the other crimes it's committing.

But we have to understand that to ultimately defeat this movement, it's not enough to defeat them militarily on the ground, you have to deal with the environment.

And so what's the role of international organizations like the UN? You know, we've seen in Syria and Libya and Yemen, a succession of international mediators working with sponsorship of the UN and the Arab league with very limited success on a whole. And the one who has had success, Bernardino Leon, has had success because he has engaged a much wider range of Libyan factions in the negotiating process and ultimately I think the Libyan conflict is less a subject to some of these regional proxy wars, less than Syria, and less than Yemen. And so that's given him a little more room to work. But Bernardino Leon came up with an agreement and a proposed transitional government that he announced the other day, and where's the international community backing him up with support for this government that he's proposing to put together? Where is the international community promising Libyans that if they embrace this agreement, they will have hope of a better future? We're orphaning this peace process. So we have a very important role to play and it's not enough to appoint a mediator and let him go do his thing. We have to appoint him and then we have to back him up.

Student 9:

In the past couple of years as America's become more self sufficient, China has moved in and is now taking more and more Saudi Arabian imports. They are investing more and more in the new Silk Road economic belt. As China becomes a bigger economic act in the Middle East, while America plays a bigger political role, how is that situation going to play out?

Student 10:

My question is about the policy change versus regime change debate. I find it interesting, the difference between your opinion and Mearsheimer's opinion. His opinion focuses on a policy change, but you focus on the regime change. I wonder what your response is.

Student 11:

With the oil market dynamics here, there is potential that the U.S. might lift the ban on oil exports. What are the potential implications for the oil market in the entire Middle East in our efforts against ISIS?

Student 12:

At the beginning of the century when 9-11 occurred, the U.S. was facing a great threat and ISIS is a threat of the whole world. Do you think that the U.S. is facing a smaller threat than Al Qaeda now?

Mei Ciqi:

I want to hear comments from you about the refugee problem. Will that make the situation in so-called Islamic Europe even worse?

Student 13:

Why is the U.S. getting involved in the Middle East? Is it to stabilize the security of the Middle East?

Tamara Wittes:

Let me start with the energy market question, and then we can take this to the broader issue about what is the U.S. interest and purpose here. Historically, from the time the U.S. took on this role in the Middle East or guaranteeing the flow of energy to global markets, which it really took on after the Suez War in 1956, from 1956 until at least 1911, the U.S. goal in the Middle East has been preserving a certain status quo of relationships between the states and the region; of the way business got done. And it worked together with a coalition of actors in the region – primarily Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel were the partners of the U.S. in protecting the regional balance of power – and the U.S. acted on behalf of protecting the flow of energy to global markets, protecting the freedom of navigation and the freedom of commerce through the gulf in the Suez, and protecting the security of America and its partners in the region. So the U.S. was playing defense basically for a half century and the region was fairly stable during that period of time. There had been a set of civil wars and revolutions in the 1950s and 1960s but particularly after President Carter negotiated the Egypt-Israel peace treaty that ended this era of major Arab-Israeli wars, the U.S. and its regional partners wanted things to stay the same. They liked it the way it was. It worked for them. The problem is that underneath that regional balance of power, there were changes going on within societies and that is what produced the upheaval that we saw in 2011. And I think you can argue that the U.S. decision to invade Iraq in 2003 contributed to that, but I don't think it generated that. I think that was a piece of the puzzle.

If we look at the American role in the region in that context, I mean yes, the U.S. was buying more Middle Eastern oil then but for a long time the majority of American energy supplies came from Mexico and Venezuela and Canada, not from the Middle East. So the U.S. has been playing this security

guarantor role for global markets for a while. Now you pointed out that there are other major countries whose demand for Middle Eastern energy is increasing and doesn't that create a free-rider problem? Well yes, of course it creates a free-rider problem, but that's the nature of world politics. So until somebody else is willing to step up and contribute, the U.S. faces the choice of either continuing to play that role of security guarantor for global energy supplies out of the gulf, or having nobody play that role. And so far no one else is volunteering. And to be honest, I don't know if the United States would be happy to see another power take on that role or whether the United States prefers to bear the cost because it also gets the predominant influence. But yes, it's a free-rider problem. That's international politics.

Coming back around to the refugees and the issue of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State – Europe's challenge with respect to Muslim immigration is a long-term challenge that's been there for a long time. The relative increase in prominence of some right-wing nationalist parties in Europe is a common response when you have new trends in immigration. It's something the Europeans have to work out. But I think that the German response here is very interesting, which is that they understand that it's in their long-term interest as a society – it's good for their economic development, it's good for their dynamism, to absorb this immigration. And let's realize too that the refugees who make it from Afghanistan and North Africa and Syria into Europe are the ones with more resources and more skills. These are great immigrants for a society if you see immigration as a source of economic growth and dynamism. I think Angela Merkel is showing a lot of strategic thinking here in embracing and absorbing these refugees. So yes, sure, it will change Europe, but that's what immigration does. I'm coming from a country that within another few decades will be a majority of minorities, but we're a nation of immigrants so we have a very different attitude towards these questions than a lot of other countries.

Is the Islamic State less of a threat to the United States than Al Qaeda? Well, look, we can say so far that the Islamic State, and there's a reason why the U.S. government and other governments in the region don't call it the Islamic State, because it claims to be acting in the name of a vision of Islam, but this is a vision that is rejected by the vast majority of Muslims in the world. It's true that this Daesh has not so far focused its attention on targeting the West or targeting the United States in the way that Al Qaeda made an ideology about targeting the United States. Its focus has been on establishing a territory that it can claim as the nucleus of the caliphate so that it can demonstrate the success of its vision. But that doesn't mean that it's going to remain focused in that way. Ideologies evolve and so I don't think that the United States looks at the Islamic State and says, "We don't have to worry about this because they're not trying

to kill us.” Also I think that we have the lone wolf problem, we have the problem of long distance radicalization over social media and we’ve already seen attacks inspired by Islamist extremists, by individuals or small groups that were radicalized online and so we have to worry about it.

Student 14:

Do you think that in the Middle East the inability to find a leading nation is what is causing so many problems? Because in other areas of the world, there is typically a country that takes this role, like the U.S. or Germany in Europe or China in Asia, but in the Middle East we cannot find a country to take this responsibility, so is that causing a problem?

Tamara Wittes:

I think this is probably President Putin’s theory of how you deal with social conflict is by having a strong man in charge. But I don’t think that deals with social conflict, I think that suppresses social conflict. And Gaddafi is a perfect example of this – you have a charismatic leader who, under the formal government structure of Libya, had no official position and yet he controlled everything in the country. And in 42 years of charismatic, strong man leadership in Libya, he managed to destroy every political institution, every social institution in this country. So when his people rose up against him and he was finally thrown out and killed, they didn’t have the ingredients in their own society left to build a functioning political system. So do we blame the demand for democracy? Do we blame the fact that Libya is a tribal society? Or do we blame Gaddafi who for 42 years destroyed Libya and left behind a mess? To me it’s pretty clear where the responsibility lies. And that doesn’t mean that Libya is destined to be mired in conflict forever, it means that Libyans have to work harder than other societies who haven’t suffered 42 years of charismatic rule by a strong man if they’re going to build successful political and social institutions and find compromises that work. Societies that have functioning institutions are blessed – you can reform them if you need to – you have something to work with. But I think it’s important that we recognize that the challenges that societies like Syria and Libya are going to face in the post-conflict environment, these are not challenges that were created by the uprisings and they’re not all challenges that are created by the civil war. They are also challenges that are created by the legacy of authoritarian rule. And I think putting a lid on something doesn’t make it go away. It’s like playing hide and seek with a young kid and they put their hands over their eyes and they think that you can’t see them.

Student 15:

In terms of your view, what is your recommendation in terms of bettering the different beliefs in the Middle East? When we compare the world in Yemen, there is a conflict between ISIS and other Muslims. People believe those with their religion are their friends and people against their religious beliefs are their enemies. So what is your recommendation in terms of international cooperation to fight the war against ISIS? Is there any future in the Middle East where people of different religions can live in a safe way?

Tamara Wittes:

I started out as a scholar in my academic career studying ethnic conflict and the relationship between identity and conflict, and what we see is that most societies are not homogenous, most societies don't have people who all believe the same thing or all come from the same background. Most societies have a lot of different components and conflict doesn't emerge simply because difference exists. Conflict emerges when difference is not managed peacefully, and that's true whether the difference is religious difference, ethnic difference, economic class difference, or social difference. We have to learn how to manage our differences peacefully – that's what we do as humans. When we have political and social institutions that let us manage our differences peacefully, we don't fight. When those institutions break down or when those institutions become partisan and take one side, then we have conflict and leaders who see an advantage in using that conflict to gain power for themselves. I'm a political scientist, that's my bias, but at the end of the day, I don't think it's about the color of your skin or what god you worship. I think it's about politics and power.

Mei Ciqi:

Thank you very much.

Tamara Wittes:

Thank you all. This was a great discussion.