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5 on 45:

On the Yemen raid and counter-terrorism strategy

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network: analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

(Music)

BYMAN: My name is Daniel Byman. I'm a senior fellow in the Middle East Center at the Brookings Institution and I am a professor at Georgetown University. One thing that may have gotten lost in the headlines, given President Trump's many other controversial measures, was a raid in Yemen that was done against Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. This was a branch of Al-Qaida that has been one of the few branches that has aggressively targeted both the United States and the West in general. This branch was linked to the Charlie Hebdo attack in the beginning of 2015 that went after French cartoonists, and this group tried to do attacks on commercial and cargo aircraft in the United States several years ago.

And, as a result, this group has been aggressively targeted under the Obama administration. And with this raid, and a previous attack in Yemen, it looks like the Trump administration also is going to prioritize going after this group. Now, unfortunately and sadly, this raid seems to have gone awry. You had a U.S. Navy Seal who was killed in the operation, and in addition, there were many civilian casualties, including children. So, by any measure, a very, very sad event. It did net significant intelligence, at least according to newspaper reports, and in addition it was something that may have killed several terrorists, so not a complete loss, but nevertheless I'll say it has been criticized by many people.

And what this raid shows is that at least at the start, the Trump administration is probably going to be very aggressive going after suspected terrorists. The Obama administration was, in general, reluctant to use special operations forces in Yemen, preferring to rely on drone strikes. And doing such a raid early on may signal—may—that the Trump administration will use special operations forces more aggressively. Unfortunately, this raid was immediately politicized. After things went south, people in the Trump administration immediately pointed the finger at the Obama administration, saying that they were the ones that teed it up and the Trump folks were simply carrying out their policy. And then of course, the Obama administration people pointed back and said “No, no. We had made up our mind, we left it to you and you did not do the careful, deliberate process we used and as a result we had this tragic outcome.” Then the Trump folks fired back with spokesman Sean Spicer saying that this was a success and criticizing people like Senator McCain who called it a failure.

That sort of politicized process is, to me, a real danger and a real cost of this kind of raid. This raid, in my mind, at least, clearly failed. But there are going to be failures. We cannot expect perfection for any government policy, but especially for counterterrorism. At times, U.S. forces are going to die, at times innocent people are going to die, and you want procedures that make sure that the risk to U.S. forces and to innocents is carefully calibrated. But you have to recognize that this is going to be a very dangerous business, and in fact we want to accept some degree of risk, we want to be able to go aggressively after people who are trying to kill us.

And if we're going to do that, what we're really saying is, we're going to put people in dangerous places and dangerous situations; and if we're going to put people

in dangerous places and dangerous situations, some of them are going to die. A comparison for me during the Obama administration, to me, was what happened in Libya with the Benghazi attack, where Ambassador Chris Stevens, an incredibly smart, knowledgeable person about Libya, put himself in harm's way, in part in the name of counterterrorism. He knew what he was doing, he knew the risks he was running, and he was killed, and it was horrible and it makes Ambassador Stevens heroic, but we want our diplomats to be out there in dangerous places, as well as safe places, and we especially want that for our military. And what we don't want to do is hamstring the military and only focus on operations that have 100% chance of succeeding because we're going to miss opportunities to disrupt terrorists. We're also going to miss opportunities to capture intelligence.

Now, my expectation, based on rhetoric at least, is that the Trump administration is going to continue to be aggressive on this. This is something that I would hope many Democrats would actually support, in that there are many legitimate criticisms of Trump's counterterrorism approach in my mind, but using special operations forces for raids should not be one of them. There should be careful processes in place and those should be on the political and military level, but as long as these are there then these raids, these operations are things that we are going to see more of and we should see more of.

(Music)