

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

5 on 45:  
On Trump and the American “deep state”

Tuesday, March 21, 2017

PARTICIPANTS:

**Host:**

ADRIANNA PITA

**Contributor:**

SHADI HAMID

Senior Fellow, Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World  
Center for Middle East Policy  
The Brookings Institution

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.

HAMID: Hi, my name is Shadi Hamid. I'm a senior fellow here at Brookings in the Center for Middle East Policy. So we're talking about the American "deep state," and whether there is one and what that means. So, last May, I wrote a long and somewhat indulgent essay in *The Atlantic*, where I allowed myself to imagine certain worst-case scenarios if Trump actually won the presidency. And I'll just, very quickly here, mention two things I wrote. First of all, it is possible to imagine a president so reckless as to activate state institutions against him or her, in a way that makes the notion of an American "deep state" more meaningful and relevant. And then also, one can easily imagine left-of-center and right-of-center civil servants in the Departments of State and Defense working against a president from within to mitigate his effectiveness and even his authority. Now that Trump is president, we are actually debating those – what I thought at the time were – worst-case scenarios. But now we're having that discussion, and I don't think any of us would have expected that.

So, as someone who has worked in the Middle East and looked at what the "deep state" means in that context, particularly in Egypt and Turkey, I would define it as a shadowy constellation of autonomous and self-perpetuating institutional networks, namely in the military and intelligence services. Now, the "deep state," essentially, in these authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts, tries to undermine democratically-elected leaders or mitigate their excesses, essentially. So for example, in the case of Egypt during the Arab Spring, elements of the "deep state" undermined the

democratically-elected Islamist government of Mohammed Morsi and made it very difficult for him to govern, and therefore ushered in a return to full-on authoritarian rule after a military coup in 2013. Now, I want to be very clear because I've been criticized recently for making this comparison, but when we talk about a "deep state" sort of thing in the U.S. context, we are talking about something very different than what we see in Egypt and Turkey, and of course it wouldn't be the same considering that we are an established democracy. But what I tried to do in a more recent piece in *The Atlantic* that revisited my essay from last year was to kind of look at this question in a kind of new sense, in light of recent events and in light of Trump's victory, and I do think the idea of a "deep state" can be useful as an analytical tool to understand how unelected or unaccountable elements in state bureaucracies can either undermine democratically-elected leaders or mitigate their effectiveness and authority. And I think that in some ways, having kind of a "deep state" confronting or challenging a government that's doing very bad things or illegal things can, in fact, be good. So theoretically, in a democracy, radical parties should have a chance of winning if they're able to attract enough support. So the fact that Trump was able to win despite having radical views shows a kind of nimbleness of the democratic system. We used to think that there were two center-right and center-left candidates and that people who were too far away from the mainstream couldn't win, but Donald Trump won. So from the perspective of a Trump voter, presumably, they would want to see Donald Trump actually implement his agenda without too much opposition internally from state institutions. And that gets, I think, to this real tension in any democratic system, where there's a question of how far should a democratically-elected president go in terms of an agenda which is very controversial

and even radical. And we can also imagine this on the left side of the spectrum if someone like Bernie Sanders was trying to implement a foreign policy which was very much outside the mainstream of the so-called bipartisan consensus.

So these are issues that I think we have to think about, especially if Donald Trump continues to do things which we would consider to be radical. And from the perspective of his voters and his supporters, they might actually want him to do that. So the answer, then, to this dilemma of the “deep state” isn’t clear-cut, and that’s precisely why it’s a dilemma.