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THE POWER OF THE PRESIDENT TO SHAPE U.S. RELATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. TORBATI: All right. Thank you, everyone, for joining us. I think we'll get started.

My name is Yeganeh Torbati. I'm a reporter for Reuters based here in D.C. where I cover the State Department, and we're gathered here today -- thank you, first of all, obviously, for joining us. Thanks very much to the Brookings Institution for hosting this event, and just to know that the event is hosted -- sorry, is funded by the Rubenstein Fund. So thanks very much for sponsoring the event.

We're here to assess how the Trump administration is approaching the Middle East and how it is finding itself constrained, both by dynamics in the region, as well as domestic political dynamics here at home. I think we saw during the campaign and the first few weeks of the administration the promise and the expectation of a fairly radical new approach to American foreign policy, and it's to sort of now about six months in check in on how that's actually going and what kind of enduring dynamics are constraining that vision for U.S. foreign policy and how it should change.

And so we have three of the top experts on both the Middle East and U.S. political dynamics here to sort of help us work through all this. So I'll just quickly introduce them. You have their bios in front of you. Shibley Telhami to my immediate left is a nonresident senior fellow in the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, as well as the Center for Middle East Policy and the Foreign Policy program here at Brookings. He has advised the State Department, Representative Lee Hamilton, as well as the U.S. mission to the United Nations throughout his long and distinguished career.

John Hudak to his immediate left, is the deputy director of the Center for Effective Public Management and a senior fellow in Governance Studies here at Brookings and he in particular examines questions of presidential power and how that interacts with the administration personnel and public policy issues.

And then lastly, but certainly not least, we have Adel Abdel Ghafar, who is a visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center, and he specializes in political economy. And so having that perspective, having just arrived from Doha, especially, a part of the world that's very much a big topic right now and a very complicated issue for the U.S. is going to be really valuable.

And so let's just get into it because there's a lot to get to.

So Shibley, I wanted to start with you. So can you sort of give us, I mean, you've had a

broad experience throughout your career of both helping to shape and also analyze U.S. policymaking when it comes to the Middle East. What actually is the power of a U.S. president or new administration to change the dynamics in the region?

MR. TELHAMI: Thanks. And thank you all for coming. I'm happy to be part of this.

Let me make three broad points about that. One is about the power of the president versus allies in the region. This president is not the only inexperienced president, and let's be fair, we don't know what the policy is. So we're speaking in general about the capacity of a president to influence events in a revolutionary matter in international politics particularly in the Middle East. And he is in inexperienced president but he's not the only one. He does have inexperienced advisors, but he's not the only one who has had inexperienced advisors.

Still there are things -- there are hypotheses that we can pull from the history on this. The more the president tries to assert independence from the national security agencies or national security bureaucracies -- State Department, Defense Department, intelligence community to put their own personal stamp on foreign policy, particularly if they're experienced, the more they are vulnerable to being manipulated by outside powers. And this I think you can broadly understand that any president, including experienced ones, are open to being manipulated by outside powers. There are a lot of reasons for it. One reason is that, frankly, even when we assert that something is a priority for us in policy terms, like ISIS or Iran, none of this is really existential for us. It's an important policy but it's not going to be something that is existential.

For the rulers of the Middle East, these policies are existential policy. They live and die by then. They know their backyard better than we could ever do. They -- every single day that's their focus. They wake up in the morning thinking about it. They go to sleep thinking about it. And it's sustained. It's not like, you know, we can have an attention span of sometimes one issue overtaken by another. It's sustained. And therefore, they have more capacity actually to define in the relationship a course that could be sustained over time and undermine what we want to do. But it's especially true when the president is inexperienced, his advisors are inexperienced, and he's trying to assert independence for bureaucracies that have a historical memory.

And so in that case, what happens? Leaders overseas read the president's

vulnerabilities. Not just his inexperience but his political vulnerabilities, and in the case of Trump, even personal vulnerabilities. And they basically make -- they make trades. They play to those. For example, just to look in a historical perspective, if you look at John Foster Dulles in the Eisenhower administration, he goes to the Middle East. Eisenhower says, "communism is a big story." The Middle East didn't see communism as the big story of the day, but they knew that's what he needed politically. So they give him what he wanted in order to get America's support. So you get the Baghdad pact, which was, for them, essentially dragging the U.S. into their own regional fight. And for him it was to score points on coalition on communism.

When George W. Bush, after he went into Iraq, discovered there were no weapons of mass destruction, it became all about democracy. It became a political issue. He needed the win. He needed to show he was doing progress. So rulers will do something -- give them a fig leaf; they will do municipal elections or whatever and he will claim that he's gotten that. And so here you have a president who goes in with the aim of going after ISIS. He knows that's a priority, at least according to public opinion polls that we conduct, priority for the American public, trade, jobs. He goes in. They understand that. They give him what he wants. They give him the trade deals. They give him the rhetoric. They give him the terrorism rhetoric, and they can define what that means for him because he's not able to define it as well. So there is that risk for sure, and I think that's part of what we're witnessing now.

The second point I want to make is that there has to be a differentiation between presidential personal priorities versus national security priorities. Now, you know, every president comes in with their own agenda and they want to define national priorities. Obviously, sometimes those are defined by where the public is. But they know that they have the power to in a way define those priorities. Now, if the president has a personal priority that is not conceptually tied to national security priorities, they're bound to fail and it's much easier for foreign actors to manipulate him on that issue. The Israel Palestine question is a very clear case where this isn't priority for the American public. It's not even a priority for the region except for the Israelis and the Palestinians. It's not a priority defined by the national security bureaucracy of the United States. The president says, "I want to do it because I want to do it." And this is his project.

MS. TORBATI: Ultimate deal.

MR. TELHAMI: Pet project. So I think he's bound to find at some point, unless he ties it to a national security priority and persuades the American public that this is really important -- I doubt that he's capable of doing that -- he's bound to fail, or at least, you know, people will exploit his political vulnerabilities on it to their advantage. Even Obama, by the way, whose administration I advised on this very issue, failed, obviously, and failed in part because, in my own opinion, Obama talked as if the Arab-Israeli issue was a priority for him. Never acted that way, and if you don't -- and never made the case to the American public it's important like he did with Iran -- with the Iran deal. And therefore, he was going to fail.

Now, a third point I want to make is about it matters where the United States and where the president is domestically. The relative power of the presidency and the relative power of the United States. Now, if you contrast where we are globally versus where we were, let's say, in 1990, after the end of the Cold War, I happened to be advising the U.S. mission at the United Nations at that time when George Bush, Sr., came to speak at the General Assembly in September of 1990. This was a coronation of the United States as a global power, as a sole power. Influence was immense. We are not there now. Now, we're a weakened nation. People are not intimidated by American power. There is a diffusion of power across the board and domestically, maybe arguably we're the most polarized we've ever been according to the polls that I have. The difference between Republicans and Democrats on some issues is 85 percentage points. It is a stunning difference, and for that reason -- so what does that entail in the ability of the president to carry out a project? It entails that a president is less able to rally people around the flag, even in crisis situations, except if those crises are enormously big, like 9/11 or Pearl Harbor. Obviously, every president would be able to do so. But many crises will not give a president the opportunity to rally people around the flag or to rally people around the world around the U.S. And that weakens his hand dramatically. We see that. Can the president, for example, drag us into a war with Syria in this polarized community when there is no certain -- no agreement on what the national security priorities are, and then use that politically to distract from other issue? I doubt it. And so therefore, my own conclusion is the president has the power to disrupt. The United States is an enormously powerful nation, still the most powerful nation on earth. Don't underestimate that. But he has the power to disrupt but not the power to write the rules.

MS. TORBATI: And so in the absence of that power, do you just see the dynamics in the Middle East staying basically as they are? The Saudi-Iran rivalry kind of continuing and deepening?

MR. TELHAMI: Well, you know, I didn't mention Iran deliberately. Obviously, that's a big issue. And I didn't mention a lot of other issues in terms of how they're defined. I think what's going on in the Middle East, of course, the Iran-Saudi strategic confrontation is a central part of the strategic game that we're being drawn into, but we've taken sides on that. So that's an easy one in a way. But there's a bigger issue that comes with the Qatar crisis that we're being dragged into. Let me tell you what that is and I think maybe we don't all fully understand it.

What's common to the four nations that have boycotted Qatar is that they all view political Islam, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, as an existential threat to them. They've declared war on it, and they want -- they don't differentiate between what we call in American moderate Islam, moderate political Islam versus militant political Islam. So there's a big divide among people who say you empower those, even those so-called moderate groups. You're going to inevitably empower the extremists. And therefore, go to war with them, kill them, dry them out, cut their lifeline, and they Qatar as their lifeline, versus people who say, no, it's exactly the opposite. If you don't allow space for political Islam, which is part of the landscape of the Middle East, what you're going to do is push people to become more militant. So we have this divide that is not just a country divide but it's an intellectual divide. It's a philosophical divide, and we're being drawn into one or the next.

And the one question that I was always asked by rulers in the Middle East right after Trump was elected, will he declare the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization? Because that was part of the vision that they saw for the Middle East. And so we're being drawn into that and it's bigger than just the Iran issue.

MS. TORBATI: So John, I want to turn to you. I mean, one question that sort of comes to mind for me is when we're talking about whether President Trump can achieve his foreign policy priorities is, what do you see are actually his foreign policy priorities? I mean, we've seen instincts. We've seen certain gestures. Obviously, there's the drive to get rid of ISIS and destroy ISIS, and possibly an antipathy or hostility towards Iran. But when it comes down to more detailed analysis of sort of what he wants to achieve, how do you read that? And we can get into sort of where that conflicts with either

Congress or the rest of the administration.

MR. HUDAK: Well, the president's foreign policy ideas or goals or true policies are evolving, I think. It's not clear from his campaign rhetoric and matching that to his behavior early on in his presidency what those goals truly are. We have some idea -- we know that he wants to defeat ISIS. That's clear. That's a goal of everyone in the world but ISIS. And so that's not outside of the norm. But the president also promised that 30 days into his presidency he would have a comprehensive plan to defeat ISIS. And so when you start to, as I said, match campaign rhetoric to actual policy action, it creates this vacuum of ideas where we don't know, first, who's in charge of the president's foreign policy. Some days it's him. Some days it's his son-in-law. Some days it's the secretary of state. Some days it's all three of those people saying different things on the same issue. And that becomes very dangerous.

MS. TORBATI: Jared Kushner doesn't say much.

MR. HUDAK: Well, that's true. Well, at least not in front of a microphone. And so it creates this other, more dangerous challenge. And that is, early on in any presidency, world powers and even non world powers try to test a new president, and they usually try to test a president to understand what his strength is. How much -- how involved he's going to be. In this case, President Trump is being tested for that purpose, but he's also being tested so that allies and opponents of the United States try to get an idea of what he wants. And I think the boycott of Qatar right now is an example of four nations trying to see where the president stands. His policy is clearly driven by economics. It's clearly driven by trade. But the drives of a policy don't necessarily tell us what the outcomes of that policy will be.

And so we have a president who has led a very unitary existence. As a businessman, he's run a company in a singular way, not answering to a board of directors. Essentially, what Trump wanted in his business career he oftentimes got without having to deal with a corporate bureaucracy. And as Shibley said, now he's in charge of the American Government, one of the most comprehensive bureaucracies in the world and he's resistant to it. He's uncomfortable by it, as anyone would be who never really dealt with a structure bureaucracy beneath them before. And so you have a president who was successful on the campaign trail by being himself and doing whatever he wanted to do, regardless of what his advisors told him, regardless of what the media said, regardless even of what custom in American politics was.

And then add to that you have a president who, as a candidate, was wildly successful because of rhetorical flourish. By saying things that were oftentimes outside of the mainstream of American politics and American political norms, and every time he did it he succeeded because of it.

Well, as president, dealing in foreign policy, that is the most dangerous thing you can do is go outside of those norms and try to disrupt too much. Disruption is a very good thing in foreign policy if used correctly, but as we've seen over the past few weeks in particular, when a president's foreign policy team is not even on the same page, our allies don't know what we're doing, the American public doesn't know what we're doing, our opponents don't know what we're doing, which in some cases has some positives, but most importantly, it appears that the president doesn't know what he's doing. That translates not just to process but it also translates to these outcomes.

So again, beyond, as Shibley said, wanting to solve Middle East peace, the ultimate deal as he called it, and defeating ISIS, it's not clear what the minutia of his goals are. And six months in, you'd think we'd have a little bit clearer of an idea but still, we just don't know on a lot of issues, and that's scary.

MS. TORBATI: So is there -- and we'll get to kind of the, when we talk to Adel about the foreign players and the U.S. allies and how they're going to step in, but is there a domestic entity -- and I hate this term, the deep state, when applied to America, because it doesn't really apply -- but is there a foreign policymaking body, a national security institution that you think would be able to step in in in the absence of a clear direction from the White House?

MR. HUDAK: Well, what we've seen in the Defense Department, at least, is the president being willing to delegate questions over troop levels to the secretary of defense. That's probably an effective goal for someone who has faith in the military institutions in government and not necessarily a ton of faith in himself in being able to make those decisions. We're not seeing that in other areas of foreign policy. So we're not seeing that in the State Department, for instance, where the president is delegating heavily to the secretary of state, because even when he is delegating to the secretary of state, other parts of his administration are undermining what the secretary of state is doing. That is not just on policy; it's on personnel. We see a State Department now that is a skeleton crew. A president who not only is having trouble getting appointees confirmed; they're having trouble getting

appointees nominated. There's reporting this week that Secretary Tillerson is irate with the Office of Presidential Personnel because his recommendations are being vetoed by the White House. That veto process with appointees happens in every presidency in every area of policy in every cabinet department. The problem is it's stacking up so heavily in the State Department, an institution where embassies go without ambassadors for extended periods of time. We now have six confirmed ambassadors and about a dozen nominated ambassadors. Many of these are in places like Belgium and New Zealand and not the real trouble areas that the president is facing.

MS. TORBATI: Qatar, for instance.

MR. HUDAK: Qatar, for instance, although that is a new vacancy.

MR. TORBATI: Yes.

MR. HUDAK: And it shows, again, a lack of appreciation for the import of the bureaucracy of any administration. Tillerson gets it. Tillerson knows he needs the staff around him. The president, his key advisors, and even the Office of Presidential Personnel doesn't seem to understand in a dangerous world with issues bubbling everywhere that having a lack of staff at the highest echelons of state is putting the president, not just his ideas at risk, putting his presidency at risk. This is a threat to the president because it means failure is more likely when you don't have the staff around you. He is creating liabilities for himself.

MS. TORBATI: All right, Adel, let's come to you. So you were just in Doha. Aside from trying to find a grocery store that actually has food in it, I'm sure you've spoken to officials there and around the region. Can you give us a sense, I mean, there was a pretty remarkable day maybe a couple weeks ago where Secretary Tillerson made a statement on the Qatar crisis that was quite diplomatic and called on all sides to sort of cut their funding or focus on cutting terrorist financing. But then also called for the blockade or the sanctions to be listed. And then just about an hour later President Trump sort of made a statement in response to a question that very much undercut that and was much harsher on Qatar. In the region, among the Qataris, or among the rest of the GCC, who do they listen to when they hear these conflicting views? Which views are they taking more seriously, and how are they kind of assessing what U.S. policy is?

MR. GHAFAR: Of course, that's the million dollar question. As people in the region look

at the U.S. position, there are a number of conflicting opinions within the administration. So it's actually been a remarkable week. We have the president tweeting against Qatar as a funder of terror and at the same time you have the Department of Defense organizing military exercises with the Qatari military. And also the sale of F-16s and other weapons that have already been signed on. And you have the State Department also saying, advocating for more dialogue and trying not to take sides and asking for the list when there was no list. And then when the list was presented, saying that the list should be more realistic. So, of course, people in the region are trying to gauge what's happening and see where actually -- where the chips will fall.

I think from my sense, it is that the position of the Department of Defense would be the most important because the DOD has longstanding ties with Qatar, and their base is actually quite important in terms of U.S. projection of power in the region in terms of Central Command. In terms of not only there but actually, the base itself in terms of its set up, in terms of its sorties to ISIS and so on. So there is a sense, perhaps, let the president tweet but let's deal with the Department of Defense and State.

MS. TORBATI: And what about the rest of the Gulf? How are they kind of reading what's --

MR. GHAFAR: Well, it seems that, of course, the Emirates and the Saudis have a direct line to the administration and are betting on continuing their escalation with Qatar because the demands have been set. The 10 days are almost about to run out and there could be a further escalation in terms of the economy, further economic embargo, or further, even down the line, a military -type of escalation.

In terms of the economy, which is my area of the political economy, the first couple of days was a bit of chaos in Doha. People scrambled to the supermarket and my supermarket ran out of chicken and milk, specifically, because those come from Saudi, but the government, the Qatari government has worked very hard to resupply and restock the supermarkets from Turkey and from Iran. But, of course, flying in fresh food is actually very costly, and the government is perhaps subsidizing the cost and doesn't want to transfer the cost onto the consumer because that would create further panic.

Another element of the crisis is the confidence in the Qatari financial system, which has taken a bit of a dent. So we have Fitch and Standard and Poor's have downgraded Qatar. We still have a very good credit rating but there's been a downgrade. So again, this undermines the confidence in the

financial system and would mean that the Qataris, if there are sudden withdrawals from the bank, that they will have to recapitalize the banks and recapitalize also foreign currency. A lot of the experts, of course, the first instance to run and try to buy U.S. dollars and try to transfer, so there was a bit of a dollar shortage, but the government has moved in to fix that shortage.

The final aspect that doesn't get focused on is aviation. So Qatar Airways is hemorrhaging money. Personally, the flight I took to New York had to fly northwards, via Iran, and then Turkey. Previously, it would have just flown over Saudi Arabia. So imagine every single flight is costing more fuel and putting pressure on the airline. And I think there is also a mini battle -- there's a battle happening at the state level, but even amongst the airlines because if you look at Etihad and Emirates, they're actually under pressure in their own way, so Etihad has both Alitalia, which has been suffering from that purchase, and of course, because all three Gulf airlines are suffering from the laptop ban, which was designed to help the U.S. airlines, I think, in my opinion, and also in terms of new aviation technology, new airlines, like the 787-10 and 8350-1000 actually have longer range now and use less fuel. So that means the GCC, the hub, the Dubai model or the Doha model of having to stop is coming increasingly under strain. So actually, all of the three airlines will be fighting for dwindling market share and the current crisis is perhaps also partially designed to clip the wings of Qatar Airways, so to speak.

MS. TORBATI: And Doha, in general, being like sort of a rising, kind of Dubai light or, you know, Dubai maybe 10 -15 years ago, it's sort of rising as a center for expats, for banking. Maybe not to speculate on maybe that being a reason but it's --

MR. GHAFAR: Yeah. The economic factors definitely seep in, and I think Qatar's neighbors see them as a bit of a rising power in terms of financial, in terms of the World Cup, in terms of this today, perhaps seeking to clip their wings in terms of their diplomacy and so on.

Qatar has, over the past two decades, been projecting soft power way behind its borders, trying to influence and support its proxies in Egypt and Libya and Turkey. So actually now, instead of projecting power outside its borders, they have to focus on defending their own borders.

MS. TORBATI: Shibley wants to --

MR. TELHAMI: Yeah. Just to follow up on the question you raised about sort of the contradictions, you know, the White House is one place the Department is in another and the Defense

Department. How does that play itself in the Qatar crises? The reality of it is that the leaders in the Middle East particularly the Saudis, have always preferred to deal directly with the president, have a personal relationship, historically. Even when, in fact, presidents did listen to bureaucracies, they preferred this align and making deals with -- personal deals with the president. In this case, they get a dream president who is, you know, who wants to be a one-man show, and they can ignore almost everything else's noise because if they think they have a deal with him they can ignore everything else's noise. And obviously, you can see how everybody else comes on board. They try to modify him a little bit to say this is what he meant, and so forth, but it doesn't really work.

Now, where then would the pressure come from? The thing that we need to keep in mind here, this is not only a crisis between Qatar's foes and Qatar. There are third parties involved. I mean, you know, we're talking economically. You're talking, you know, there's billions of dollars of trade, there are companies that are affected. You know, international companies. There are governments that are being put under strains, they're being forced to take sides in a way that they don't want to take sides because they have dealings with Qatar and Saudis, including American companies to the point that we see that, you know, Senator Corker essentially saying, you know, no arms deal unless this crisis is settled. There's a lot of pressure from third parties and that's bound to show up on Trump because the people that he deals, the business world in which he acts, and other countries, third-party countries that have interests that get kind of caught in this crises, that's more likely to put pressure on the White House than Department of State. Maybe the Department of Defense, but I would see strain particularly with Department of Defense because they can -- they're not so much affected by this crisis in the sense that they're maintaining a relationship with Qatar. Qatar doesn't really want to sever that relationship because that's an anchor for them. And so they're not directly affected. And on the margins they are, but I see more the pressure coming from third parties.

MS. TORBATI: Not to make this panel just about Qatar, although it's a really fascinating discussion, if we could maybe talk about the Arab-Israeli peace process, negotiations, whatever they sort of are at this stage.

Jason Greenblatt, the president's -- one of the president's envoys, has gotten rave reviews in terms of his engagement with all sides on the issue. But there was this meeting recently

between Jared Kushner and Mahmoud Abbas that apparently did not go very well, and sort of leading to the sort of anonymous speculation that perhaps President Trump loses interest in the issue. Do either of you sort of want to weigh in on what the Trump's administration's influence on this very long-running conflict could be?

MR. SHIBLEY: Well, first of all, what you said, if it's of course true, that is that there are reports that Greenblatt is being welcomed. People find him to be a good listener, to be a professional, to be, you know --

MS. TORBATI: Visiting with refugees. I mean --

MR. SHIBLEY: On a variety of issues he gets good reviews. Kushner has not, and certainly, the report about his contentious meeting with Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas, where he was at least the media says, he was accused of taking essentially nothing outside of the equation, it's true. I think all of that is totally irrelevant because ultimately, you've got one man who is making the decision; that is Donald Trump. And where is the pressure going to come from? So from my point of view, as I've argued here when we released a poll on where the Americans are on the Arab-Israeli issue, in the end, where is the pressure going to come in? You have a strategic situation on the Israel-Palestine question where Israel has the upper hand. They occupy the territory. They have the power. The Palestinians are weak and divided. Where the Arab States are distracted by their own priorities, where Israeli-Palestine is not a priority for Egypt, for Saudi Arabia, for the UAE for Qatar. They have multiple other priorities right now.

And so when, in fact, the Arab peace initiative was initially proposed by then-crowned prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in 2002, then adopted by the Arab League, it was thought that the Arabs would bring in leverage to weigh in on behalf of the Palestinians that would offer the Israelis -- say if you make concessions with the Palestinians, we're going to give you trade. We're going to give you full peace as an incentive to the Israelis. Not a bad idea. It was a good idea. And obviously, it wasn't adopted.

By the time Trump came to office, the idea may have been actually suggested by Benjamin Netanyahu much more than by Donald Trump as was sort of hinted at in the news conference when (inaudible) came to office, in large part because now the strategic picture has changed so

dramatically that the Arabs of the Gulf, particularly, who don't have peace with Israel, formally, have been cooperating with Israel behind the scenes strategically. Their priorities have shifted. They have a coincidence of interest over Iran and so forth, and they desperately want Trump on their side, that the Israelis think that Trump actually can get them to get the Palestinians to make concessions, not the other way around. So they are not going to weigh in to bear weight on behalf of the Palestinians.

So where is the pressure going to come from? The president himself, we know how he governs. He has been catering mostly to his base. This is his strategy. Since his inauguration speech, his base is entirely on Benjamin Netanyahu's side. I wouldn't say Israeli's side. I would say the right-wing side. In fact, in the polls that I've conducted, when you ask Americans, who among world leaders do you admire most?, in an open-ended question without reference to the Middle East, in much of the past year, Netanyahu was number one among Republicans and among Evangelicals who are the core base. And in the most recent poll, he was only second to Donald Trump. So his constituency isn't going to obviously push him to weigh in. And then the individuals who are advising him, Kushner in particular, obviously, underhand the Israeli side a lot better than they understand the Arab side. They have no experience with this at all, and to the extent that they have it is through the relationship with Israel that they've had. So where is the pressure going to come from? Where is the equalizing going to come from? How is it possible to have a fair solution that would be acceptable to the Palestinians? It's really hard to see.

When you add to this what I started with in my first remarks, which is that this is not a priority issue for Americans, it's not a priority issue for Congress, it is not a priority issue even for the Middle East, and it is a priority issue because the President of the United State said wouldn't it be nice for me to make the ultimate deal? And that's just not enough.

MR. HUDAK: And just to jump in quickly. This is, I think, the first example of the president learning just how complex foreign policy is. This is not just a two-part negotiation or if I can agree with Israel that we will get to a certain end --

MS. TORBATI: One state, two state, whatever works.

MR. HUDAK: Exactly. His campaign rhetoric was so overly simplistic on how achievable peace in that region is that it showed, I think, on the grandest of stages his amateurism. And now he's

starting to understand that if you move one item in that region, 15 other items move in response. And so you're starting to see a disintegration of the rhetoric of simplicity when it comes to this. I think the first step in that direction was the president very quietly signing a proclamation that the embassy would remain where it is in Israel. This was the easiest thing for Candidate Trump. I will become president and I will move the embassy. Functionally, it's actually pretty easy for the president to do that.

MS. TORBATI: Just put up a new sign at the consulate.

MR. HUDAK: Exactly. Yeah, screw a new sign into the brick and you have a new embassy.

But as the president came into office, as he started to actually take his national security briefings and as others in the region and others on his team weighed in, he began to realize, oh, there's a lot more than just putting a new sign up. There's a lot more than just sending my son-in-law there and having him sign a contract that everyone can agree on. It's a lot harder than building a building. And it's good that the president is learning this but it is one lesson among many that the president has to learn in this context particularly in this region that it's not -- Shibley is right. Every one of these leaders wants a one-on-one relationship with the president. That's what they're used to. That's what they thrive. And that's particularly what they want from Donald Trump, who again, has led such a unitary existence. And he's starting to realize that just getting along with Benjamin Netanyahu, or just getting along with a single leader in another country is not enough to get done what he effectively wants to get done, again, whatever that is, and what is going to be best for his base and best for our partners in the region.

MS. TORBATI: Well, so we'll get to your questions very shortly, so get those ready.

I want to ask you, John, you know, on the healthcare fight domestically, Congress has really taken the lead as opposed to the administration and sort of translating that into foreign policy. Where do you -- what issues do you see Congress sort of taking the lead on in terms of shaping U.S.? One that comes to mind for me is Iran, like new sanctions in Iran and how that might change. Whether the administration wants to keep the Iran deal or not if there are these new sanctions that were passed in the Senate bill, what that means actually for the deal and whether Iran will continue to comply. I don't know if there's something else that comes to mind or if you want to talk more about the Iran issue.

MR. HUDAK: No, it's a great question. Foreign policy in the United States is something

that is left almost exclusively to the president. Historically, that's true. It has been rue, up until this year. I think what's been most remarkable over, in particular, the past couple of weeks, is how much the Congress is taking a leadership on foreign policy in the absence of the president. So you see Iran and Russia sanctions that the president, at least on the Russia side is trying to undermine in the House, but that is something that happens sometimes when Congress is controlled by the other party. They say we disagree with what the president is doing on foreign policy. We're going to make these grand statements that will either be nonbinding or things that the president can veto. That's not odd, but when the party of the president is controlling Congress and you see this type of foreign policy activity, it's staggering. It's shocking and it shows a real discomfort in Congress with what the president is doing. You see the Congress coming out with a resolution supporting Article 5 in NATO because they didn't feel that the president did a good enough job, even after a couple of weeks of getting slammed in the press, he finally made a statement that supported this. That is not what Congress's role traditionally is. It is certainly not what a Republican Congress's role should be under a Republican president, but you see people like John McCain and Lindsey Graham, and Bob Corker and leaders in the House as well quietly throwing their hands up and saying, "If he won't do it, we will." That's transforming foreign policy, no necessarily worldwide, but in terms of the institutional governing norms that we have in the United States, because Congress feels like it needs to fill in that gap where the president has left open.

MS. TORBATI: Well, Shibley, you advised Congressman Hamilton. I think one of his issues that he's focused on quite a bit is, you know, after his political career is sort of the balance of power between the legislature and the executive. And one of the many legacies of Donald Trump's era in national politics and an office might be that you see it sort of a devolution of power back to Congress as opposed to just being so centered in the executive.

MR. TELHAMI: Yeah. I mean, it's interesting. It's interesting you mention Lee Hamilton. He was on my mind in the past week. Not so much on this issue of the balance, but more on the partisanship because one of the things that Lee Hamilton was known for was the bipartisanship issue. And obviously, a man who focused on foreign policy, even though he came just as a footnote, which is interesting, about the importance of bureaucracies. This is a man who joined Congress, when he came to Congress like most members who come from the Midwest, another part of the country, don't want

anything to do with foreign policy; they want to go into something to do with finance or something domestic they can take to constituency. He was stuck on Foreign Affairs Committee. He ended up liking it and working with it. But I asked him at one point, where do you get your queues for what is the national interest? Because, you know, we're talking here about, you know, what is the national interest? He stood up against moving the embassy to Jerusalem. Not a politically correct thing and it cost him in fundraising. And I said to him, "Where are you getting your queues for a position like that? Is this your own personal --" He said, "No, I get my queues by talking to the bureaucracies, the national security bureaucracies -- the Defense Department, the State Department, the National Security, the White House, my colleagues and I make an assessment based on the information I have and I try to make that independent. I don't know that we're there now. I don't see many people who do that at this point.

The problem right now I think is less about balance and more about partisanship. I think the problem of partisanship where you have the day -- the morning after an election is over people start preparing for the next election, which puts us on a partisan course where you can't bring people together on national security issues where bureaucracies become almost irrelevant. I want to say totally irrelevant. Obviously, they have a role to play. And Congress, you know, Congress's role is undermined. Look at what people think of Congress. They might not like Trump but they like Congress even less. So that is part of the problem that we face.

MS. TORBATI: All right. Well, I think we can open it up to some questions. We'd love to hear from you all. This gentleman here.

SPEAKER: Thanks. Shibley, the question for you. Do you think this is the hard stop for U.S. support for democracies in the Middle East? Whether it be circumstantial over there or us actually doing something about it? And a really quick question for Abdel. Does that Qatari-Turkish pipeline have any role to play in what's happening now, and particularly the relationship between Turkey and Qatar?

MR. TELHAMI: You know, let me be honest on behalf of Trump in this particular case. The U.S. never made democracy a priority in the Middle East. Never. At any point in its history. And at some level pretending like we did was self-defeating and led to contradictions. George W. Bush used it instrumentally to advance national security priorities as he defined them, particularly as he got involved in the Iraq War, the Afghan War and the War on Terrorism broadly. Our, you know, when they were putting

pressure on Mubarak to do this and that, of course, they need Mubarak for his Mahabharat, his intelligence sharing on terrorism, on passage of military to go to Iraq War, and all of the other stuff that we were doing on democracy is miniscule in comparison to all the strategic picture that we have.

So this has never been a priority. It doesn't mean that the public doesn't think that it should be, but even the public, when you ask them, you know, what should the American priorities be in the Middle East and they give you their ranking, they will give you fighting ISIS or confronting Iran, or fighting terrorism broadly or trade, or whatever it is, much more than democracy. And so the fact that Trump isn't making it a priority outwardly or not talking about it doesn't trouble me as much. I don't want to say it doesn't trouble me because I think that at some point you still have to put it out there because, you know, it's also about identity, who we are, and even if you try -- but I really don't think there was any episode in American history that I know about under any leader where you can say democracy was a top priority for American policy.

MS. TORBATI: Abel?

MR. GHAFAR: Yeah. Yeah, on the question, definitely, again, another layer to this conflict is the LNG aspect of it and the close relationship between Turkey and Qatar and Turkey sending troops and so on to help support, diplomatically at least, the Qataris. And on the other hand, we also have to look at developments in North Africa and Egypt, the Zohar gas field and in terms of the fines that are in Egypt and in Israel and in Cypress. So there's another access there developing that's seeking to get Cyprian gas to be processed in Egypt in the Idku and Damietta facilities which are currently idle. So we have a situation by which parts of the region are actually in a direct competition to supply European markets and see who gets there first and at the cheapest price.

Another further complicating matter, of course, is the relationship that Qatar has with Iran because the biggest gas fields are shared actually on the boarder, so that's why Qatar is in a catch-22 situation, having to decide to fall back into the GCC fold or continue its relationship with Iran and continue developing its relationship with Iran. So definitely, the LNG space is something to watch out. And then the next period, as the Qataris decide between perhaps having diminished part of the GCC and moving towards Iran, or falling back and falling in line with the GCC position.

MS. TORBATI: Question? Yes, sir, right here.

MR. HURWITZ: Thank you very much for a great presentation. I'm Elliott Hurwitz. I'm a retired person, former with the State Department, the World Bank, and the intelligence community.

Would anyone like to comment on the TV network in Qatar, that the GCC states so heavily oppose?

MS. TORBATI: Al-Jazeera. John?

MR. HUDAK: I'm happy to do so. I wrote about it quite a bit and I have two chapters in my most recent book on Al-Jazeera, about sort of what -- where Al-Jazeera is.

Now, let's look backwards just very quickly. That is, one reason why Al-Jazeera now is a target -- it has been a target, by the way, all the way since it started in the mid-1990s, but particularly now because of the issue that I raised earlier, which is that Egypt, the UAE particularly, but also now Saudi Arabia, see the Muslim Brotherhood particularly, but political Islam, broadly, as an existential threat of going to war with it. And there's a war of narratives underway. There's a war of narratives. You can see that in terms of how they clamp down on information. The monopoly of information, the dominant media in the region is still mostly Saudi-owned and in Egypt, obviously, mostly Egyptian-owned. And that is the big dominating narrative. And Al-Jazeera is still the deviation from that narrative. It is the one that gives a different interpretation of events that doesn't -- that clearly has some resonance across the Arab world, and therefore, it is seen as part of the problem for them.

Now, if you look back in the 1990s, in the mid-1990s, when Amir Hamad -- when Khalifa started, the father Amir, started it, he actually started it because Qatar, after he overthrew his father and became Amir himself, he was the subject of attack by the dominant Saudi media that had become transnational and the Egyptian media. And he thought that by putting out a media that is more popular, he can steal away market share. And he can afford to make it as free as he wants because Qatar wasn't a major player in politics at all, and steal away market share. They exceeded beyond their wildest imagination by early 2000s in my polling, because I've been tracing it in polls for 10 years over the market share, By the early 2000s, after 9/11, it became the number one station for viewership. That is, that 80 percent of viewers in six countries that I viewed said it's either the first or second choice for news. It's an extraordinary number of people who are watching.

Now, with the Syria crisis, and after that uprisings, its influence declined in large part

because Qatar itself became a strategic player. And so the narrative also had to be reflected on Qatar. Qatar wasn't a strategic player. Now Qatar is playing a role. And so what it said, particularly on Syria, which was related to where Qatar was as a state, undermine it because the Arab world became very divided.

So it's certainly seen by its opponent as part of the problem, and I think, you know, even if Qatar is unlike to close it, I mean, it would be like if you close it, you close your identities, become identified with it, I can't imagine it, you know, who knows, but it's a strange world, but not likely. At a minimum, I think its foes are basically trying to ask Qatar not to criticize them directly and not to put out dominant faces of the Muslin Brotherhood on Al-Jazeera. And those two request, I think, are the ones that are probably being negotiated right now.

MR. TORBATI: Abel, very quickly.

MR. GHAFAR: Just a quick addition. I also, in terms of Al-Jazeera, we look at it as an open voice but there are limitations to this. It's ultimately state owned and I think it's used also as a tool of Qatar foreign policy and has hosted a number, a lot of unsavory types from (inaudible), Syria jihadists and so on. So the Qataris have used it as a tool of foreign policy and its coverage of Egypt in particular has been very pointed and really focused on Egypt and taking sides in terms of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and so on. And also, for example, its coverage during 2011 of the protest in Bahrain where it was focused on showing the Arab uprisings erupting everywhere, but Bahrain was not part of that narrative because they were supporting their Bahrain brothers at the time. So we have to be very careful as well. Yes, they are free media, but free media has limitations. They're not allowed to criticize, for example, internal Qatari politics.

MS. TORBATI: All right.

Yes, ma'am? Here.

SPEAKER: Hi, thank you very much for your insights.

A question about where you think U.S.-Syria policy is evolving to, particularly given the current power shifts in the region? And then a second part to the question, as the Syria crisis continues, of course, the refugee crisis becomes more serious, affecting the frontline states in particular. This is one policy that seems in line with campaign promises, but how do we see this moving forward as that

challenge becomes more global? Thank you.

MS. TORBATI: On the Syria thing, I mean, something that didn't get a ton of attention as much as it should have possibly is that the U.S. shot down a Syrian jet a few weeks ago. That's a pretty major step. So who wants to address that?

MR. HUDAK: I'll touch on the last part briefly on refugee policy. I think, you're right, this is a problem that is obviously growing. It is hurting Syria's immediate neighbors the most, or they're taking on the largest burden, and it's also being politicized, as well. Obviously, around terrorism and other issues like that.

Unfortunately, I don't think it's a dominant interest of American foreign policy to deal with the refugee crisis in large part because: (a) we've never taken many refugees from Syria, despite presidential campaign rhetoric; and second, that clearly this president has a lack of interest in increasing refugee taking at all. In fact, he's interested in decreasing it.

I think our European partners are obviously -- in Jordan, are obviously takin leads on this within the region and then beside the region in a place where there's just not going to be American leadership on this. And it's a true humanitarian crisis, the refugee crisis itself. I think the secondary humanitarian crisis is actually the lack of American leadership on this. There's a lot that can be done, not necessarily even with money but just with rhetoric and with bringing people together and trying to work out some better solution. Not a solution, not the best solution, but some better solution that's there. I think there are certainly actors within the American foreign policy bureaucracy who have a real interest here, but you're not going to find it at the highest echelons of defense or state or in the White House. And so what we have now, what we had on January 20th, is likely what we're going to have for the next 3-1/2 years on that point.

MR. SHIBLEY: Well, I think, you know, on the broader policy, the president came in with an instinct that was shared by the American people, actually, according to the polls that I conducted, and that is that our priority in Syria should be about defeating ISIS, not about changing the Assad regime. And that on that issue, we should work with Russia, not against it. Those are the two things that he started with.

Now, the reality, of course, has gone a different direction, and the reason for it, of course,

his relationship with Russia has become far more complicated, in part, because of our domestic politics and accusation of interference in our own elections. And that has set him a little bit more, you know, against immediate cooperation with Russia.

Second, his applies in the Arab world and in Israel all are uncomfortable. You know, remember, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as the UAE, were part to a policy to overthrow Assad, to support the opposition against Assad. This is, you know, to varying degrees with different groups. And that was their priority. Their top priority was, in fact, the argument they were putting out there that defeating Assad is bigger than ISIS. They even argued that ISIS was an instrument of Assad. So there was a different kind of priority.

So he's getting some pushback also from his allies who don't want Assad to be a winner, but in particular, because Assad winning means to them having possibly more Iranian influence in Syria, even possible military Iranian presence in Syria. So there's pushback coming from his allies. So you can hear the people he's talking to in the Gulf, his Israeli interlocutors are giving him that message.

And then of course, there's the political story. And the political story is we know this is a president who kind of makes up his mind or, you know, in a moment, apparently on very limited information, and sometimes in a way that distracts, like what we learned about the decision to strike Syria when it was accused of using chemical weapons. It happened within 24 hours without even, you know, kind of sharing with the American national security agencies. And now, of course, the shooting of the Syrian airplane that had put Russia in the position to warn that if you do this again we're going to react, and more recently, the threat, the accusation that Syria was preparing to launch another chemical attack, which is improbable in my own calculation. In my own thinking, it's improbable. Whether, in fact, it was intended essentially to say, see, they're not doing it so my first attack worked, based on my public opinion polls, the American public doesn't see any improvement in Syria since the first strike. So it's connecting it to just the absence of use of chemical weapons. But that led to a new threat by Russia, which was yesterday, that they would have to react "out of dignity." They used the term "dignity." So there is a chance of escalation. And while I agree, you know, with John on what I think sort of the broad trend is where we might be, I see a lot of risks for escalation. I really do. Unintended escalation that could drag us into a fight in Syria that I think we don't want, and I don't think the United States national interest would

recommend, and the American public doesn't want.

MS. TORBATI: Just one more very quick question and very quick answer, if I can ask you, yes, ma'am.

MS. GAGLIANO: Karen Gagliano. I was wondering if any of you could comment on Secretary Tillerson's role in the Middle East, and in general, in Trump policies.

MR. HUDAK: Karen, thanks for your question. Obviously, the secretary is well-positioned to conduct business in the region given his private sector experience. He knows a lot of the players in the region. And so while he's fairly new to foreign policy as we traditionally understand it, dealing with Russia and dealing with the Gulf region is something he's better cut out for than dealing with Latin America or sub=Saharan Africa. And so in that sense, that's a real positive for a foreign policy newcomer. What he needs is two things, and I mentioned them briefly before. First, he needs the staff around him that he wants and he believes will help him conduct America's foreign policy. That includes ambassadors. That includes State Department staff and others. And second, he needs support from the White House for both his policy goals and even his words. Any political appointee, from the lowest level to the highest level, is damaged in immeasurable ways by a president who undercuts him or her. In Tillerson, Secretary Tillerson just seems to be on the short end of the stick continuously from the people who he should be working closest with and who should be supporting him. And so until those things fall into place, the State Department is going to be a rudderless ship with a captain at the helm who has tremendous opportunity to steer but a total inability to do so because of what is under the surface.

MS. TORBATI: We covered a lot of ground. I'm sorry we couldn't get to all the questions. We're at the end of the hour. Thank you to all so much for coming. Thank you to our panelists. I really appreciate it.

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