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Brookings Cafeteria Podcast
"Is the Israeli-Palestinian peace process dead?"
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(MUSIC)

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

On today's episode, an interview with Khaled Elgindy, author of a new book from the Brookings Institution Press, *Blind Spot: America and the Palestinians, from Balfour to Trump*. Elgindy is a nonresident fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings and previously served as an advisor to the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah on permanent status negotiations with Israel from 2004 to 2009 and was a key participant in the Annapolis negotiations throughout 2008.

Conducting the interview is Tamara Cofman Wittes. Senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy, she served as deputy assistant secretary of state for near eastern affairs from 2009 into 2012. Also, on today's show, Wessel's Economic Update. Today, Senior Fellow David Wessel, offers three reasons why we don't necessarily have to address the rising U.S. budget deficit through increased taxes and cutting spending right now.

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(MUSIC)

“The Mueller Report probably isn’t the ‘total exoneration’ the President claims it to be.”

“Hundreds of thousands of people are pouring into the streets of Venezuela to protest against the administration of Nicolas Maduro.”

“The Republican Party will soon be known as the party of health care.”

“Everything’s automated, so now you’ve took my above-the-poverty-line job, and I say, ‘well I’m going to go work at a burger joint’ and that’s automated, too.”

“But we can and must find the compromises that will deliver what the British people voted for.”

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And now, here's Tamara Wittes with Khaled Elgindy.

WITTES: Thanks, Fred. Khaled, it's great to be with you today.

ELGINDY: Thanks, it's good to be with you.

WITTES: And I'm really delighted to have a chance to talk to you about this book because we've talked so many times as you've been working on it over the years. And to see it here in print and to read it as a finished product is really exciting. I want to start in a very book interview-ish way with the title. Blind Spot. Which it seems to me is really a double reference in a way. That there's a blind spot, as you explain, in American policy thinking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a blind spot, when it comes to Palestinian politics, a blind spot when it comes to Palestinian agency and the role of Palestinians in the conflict. But there's also a blind spot in the literature, right? Once you started working on this, you realized that this issue of the American relationship with the Palestinians is not something that has gotten a lot of attention. Can you talk a little bit

about those two blind spots?

ELGINDY: Yeah. I mean, I guess it probably makes sense to define the Blind Spot and what I was thinking that led me to that title and that concept. The Blind Spot refers to a basic American blindness to two very important areas of diplomacy, politics and power in very generic terms. Specifically, when it comes to Palestinian politics and Israeli power. So, what I mean by that is there is a tenancy on the part of U.S. policymakers to downplay both Palestinian politics and Israeli power and how those two relate to the conflict and hence to a negotiated solution or a peace process.

So, the tendency is for American policymakers to treat Israelis and Palestinians as though they were co-equal parties in a conflict like say Egypt and Israel in 1979 or when the U.S. was trying to mediate between Israel and Syria in 2000. These are sovereign states. There is, of course, a power differential, that's one reason why there is a conflict.

WITTES: But there's a basic symmetry.

ELGINDY: But there's a basic, right, there's parody on some level. That's clearly not the case with the Palestinians who are not only a non-state actor but also a population and a government that is under Israeli rule, that is under Israeli occupation. And so, that concept and how it affects the diplomatic process and how it affects the conflicts sort of gets downplayed and sort of filtered out. So, that's one component of the Blind Spot.

The other component is really the flip side of this same idea. We all understand that when you're in a negotiation, you're negotiating not just with the folks on the other side of the table but with their political opponents, with their public opinion. They

themselves are negotiating with those domestic political actors and they bring that into the negotiating process. There is an enormous amount of deference in terms of Israeli politics and the position of an Israeli prime minister, vis a vie the stability of his coalition, what sort of mandate does he have. If you push too hard on say Israeli settlements will that bring down the coalition and therefore complicate the process further. So, there's a lot of sensitivity to that on the Israeli side.

There is close to zero sensitivity to Palestinian internal political realities on the part of U.S. policymakers. And just to give an example on one experience that I lived through and that sort of became the seedling for this book project was during the Annapolis negotiations or I should say the process that led to the Annapolis negotiations.

WITTES: Right and you were actually an advisor to the Palestinian negotiating team at that point.

ELGINDY: Right and that was kind of a clarifying moment because it was in that moment in the middle of 2007 when President Bush announced that we were going to hold final status negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians and that they would convene a big international conference to do that. President Mahmoud Abbas had been pressing for exactly that since he came to power two and a half years earlier. And, of course, in that two-and-a-half-year period a lot happened. Two Palestinian elections, Hamas winning an election and Hamas's forceable takeover of the Gaza Strip.

WITTES: Well, and there was Sharon's unilateral withdraw from the Gaza Strip.

ELGINDY: Right and the withdraw from the Gaza Strip, exactly. So, a lot happened during that period but specifically, it's really struck me because this was a

moment not only that Abbas had been waiting for but it was just a few weeks after Mahmoud Abbas had lost the civil war. And a year and a half earlier, his party had lost an election to their political rivals Hamas.

And so, it seemed a very odd moment to start a negotiation since this was –

WITTES: You mean that the American's should have seen that the Palestinian leader was at his weakest point in years.

ELGINDY: His absolutely weakest, right. And he was at his absolute weakest and if one is overly cynical, you might conclude that it's precisely because he was at his absolutely weakest. And maybe that's a little bit too cynical but I think there is also that trend in American politics. Going back to Kissinger, that viewed Palestinian politics and the Palestinian issue as a political one as something to be avoided as a pathology as something to be treated, cured, quarantined and not something to be dealt with head on, at least without a lot of filters and a lot of conditions.

WITTES: So, I think that helps to explain a point you make early in the book in which you say contrary to the views of many U.S. policymakers, the experiences of the last half century have shown that a weak, dependent or fragmented Palestinian political leadership is not an asset to the peace process but a major liability. But I also want to make clear and I think you do make clear in the book that this is not a book about Palestinian politics. This is about how the United States has tried to mediate between Israeli's and Palestinians and why the United States hasn't been as effective as a mediator in this conflict as it has in perhaps other conflicts.

ELGINDY: Right.

WITTES: Let's go back to the origins of American policy and one of the strengths

of this book is how comprehensive it is in looking at a history that hasn't really been looked at through this lens of the U.S. relationship with Palestinians. And in the origins of the relationship in the American response to the Balfour Declaration and the question of the findings of various commissions that eventually proposed two states, an Arab State and a Jewish State in Mandatory Palestine. Tell us a little bit about how in those early years, American administrations viewed the prospect of an independent Palestinian state alongside what, at that point, did not exist a Jewish state.

ELGINDY: Yeah, I think the only way I can really describe that at how American policymakers in that historical period viewed a Palestinian State would be as, at best, ambivalent. I think even when it came to the 1947 partition plan which, of course, the United States and the Soviet Union and at least the majority of the UN commission that was set up to look at it, adopted. It was in the end, even though partition would have created an Arab Palestinian State and a Jewish State, at the end of the day the Arab part of that equation was expendable. It wasn't something that was seen as absolutely necessary.

A partition was first and foremost a way to create a Jewish State. What happened to the Arab State of that resolution, I think, was less important to American policymakers and at the end of the day, they ended up endorsing the British trans-Jordan annexation of what would have been the Arab State but all that was left of it was the West Bank.

WITTES: And part of the story that you tell there is that the surrounding Arab States actually sort of took advantage of Western ambivalence about this UN proposal and took advantage of Western ambivalence about the idea of creating a separate

Palestinian Arab State and sort of took the territory for themselves.

ELGINDY: Specifically, the Hashemite rulers of Jordan did and I think Jordan stood out among Arab States as one that had territorial designs on the territory of the former mandate of Palestine in ways that say the Egyptians or the Syrians or other parties to the conflict or at least those who were militarily involved on the ground didn't. And so, for example, after Jordan occupied what became the West Bank in 1948, '49 they annexed it. They moved pretty quickly to annex it and it became part of what was then renamed to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

The Egyptians, on the other hand, ruled over the Gaza Strip as an occupying power. They had no intention of annexing the Gaza Strip and they ruled it as a foreign occupying military. So, I think that specifically relates to the case of the Jordanians. Because of the confluence of interest between Jordan, the Zionist movement and eventually the newly created government of Israel after 1948, Jordan became the logical address from the standpoint of U.S. policy for dealing with the Palestinian issue, for dealing with the future of the West Bank. And that remained U.S. policy for a good 40 years right up until 1988 when Jordan finally relinquished claims to the West Bank.

WITTES: Right and I think one of the interesting features of that sort of first section of the book that carries us through those decades is the way in which you see formal American policy as looking to Jordan. And seeing the Palestinian issue either through the humanitarian lens of Palestinian refugees or as a sort of subsidiary question to Israeli, Jordanian engagement.

But then at the same time, well, not at the same time but beginning in 1970 or so after the PLO has become an independent entity not just a creature of the Arab States,

after Yasser Arafat has taken over the PLO essentially. Almost immediately after that, you have the beginnings of a U.S. PLO channel. And to me, it was one of the fascinating stories that you uncovered in your research into American policy is that this channel started very quickly after the PLO emerged as an independent entity. It was in the midst of quite a bit of Palestinian terrorism. It continued on and off for many years into the Reagan administration. And it had independent value, pretty tactical value but independent value for the Americans aside from the issue of mediating an Israeli-Palestinian conflict or an Israeli-Arab conflict.

And so, in your analysis at least as I understood it, the terrorism part of the PLO was never actually in practice an obstacle to U.S.-PLO engagement. Can you talk about that a little bit?

ELGINDY: Yeah, I mean, the terrorism was a doubled edge sword. Because on the one hand, it was precisely because of the violence, because of sometimes very horrific acts of terrorism that forced American policymakers, certainly Israelis but the international community in general to pay attention to the Palestinian issue. So, in that sense, it worked, terrorism is designed to get people's attention and it worked. And it did actually get American policymakers to start thinking, this is not at the decision-making level but say the State Department, the intelligence community, to start thinking about how do we deal with the Palestinian issue under the umbrella of a peace process.

The other side of it is that you would have expected to see, for example, when Kissinger and Israel negotiated this memorandum of agreement in 1975 which committed the United States to not deal with the PLO unless it accepted two conditions. One was UN Resolution 242 which was basis for peace process and the other was to

recognize Israel's right to exist. And so, until the time that the PLO accepted those two conditions, there would be no dialogue, there would be no incorporation of the PLO into the peace process.

What was very glaringly missing from that formula was any mention of terrorism even though in the early 1970s, as you said, we saw the Munich massacre in 1972, we saw civil war in Jordan involving the PLO and the Hashemite rulers.

WITTES: Multiple hijackings.

ELGINDY: And multiple hijackings and we even saw a PLO involvement in the murder of American diplomats in Khartoum. And so, those were not enough. Those were sort of, not that they weren't important, they clearly mattered but they didn't matter to the point that it became a condition. The fact that the condition of renouncing terrorism was added a decade later, I think, speaks to the role that terrorism played and didn't play. Because, I think, there is a sense out there that well, of course, we didn't talk to the PLO because they were terrorists. Well, if that were primarily the case then that would have been the first condition.

So, the argument that I'm making is essentially that the exclusion of the PLO was always political. It was always political in the sense of because it's what Israel preferred and also because it was in line with the pressures of domestic U.S. politics.

WITTES: So, what was it that the United States got out of its engagement with the PLO in the 1970s and early 1980s? What role did that channel play for the U.S.?

ELGINDY: Specifically, for Kissinger who authorized it, who was aware of the dialogue between the CIA and the PLO, I think for him it was a way to neutralize the PLO. Because he saw the PLO as a disruptive force, as something that could infect

Arab public opinion and constrain Arab leaders in their ability to deal with Israel, for example.

So, he wanted to neutralize the influence of the PLO. If that meant leading the PLO on, hinting at the possibility of a relationship or hinting at the possibility of the PLO's incorporation in a peace process or that the United States would take up the Palestinian issue on some level on the agenda, then so be it, he was prepared to do that. But for Kissinger especially, it was a way to neutralize and marginalize the PLO because he saw the PLO, it's involvement would essentially tie the hands of Arab leaders and therefore the peace process would fail.

WITTES: In a way we see a similar dynamic today whereby there are a bunch of Arab governments that seem very willing to enhance their relationships with Israel but they are holding back from that because Israel is not willing to engage with the Palestinians. Or at least not willing to move forward on its relationship with the Palestinians.

ELGINDY: Right in terms of a –

WITTES: A negotiated resolution.

ELGINDY: – a negotiated resolution of the conflict, yeah.

WITTES: But at the same time that Kissinger was trying to keep the PLO out of the peace process, the U.S. was getting some pretty concrete cooperation out of the PLO. Intelligence information, right, especially as the United States was getting more deeply involved in the Lebanese civil war and then after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, in particular. But during the 1970s, the PLO was also, did I read this right, providing security protection for American officials in Beirut?

ELGINDY: Absolutely, yeah, it was. And it was part of Yasser Arafat's strategy to endear himself to the United States in the hope that this would eventually force them to include the PLO in a diplomatic process. The United States had an obvious interest in anything that would provide safety and security for its diplomats on the ground in Lebanon.

WITTES: In the midst of a really messy war.

ELGINDY: In the midst of a horrible civil war in which alliances were constantly shifting and so on between these various Lebanese and Palestinian factions as well as Syrian forces and other actors. So, there was a tactical interest. But what's interesting about that security relationship, the security intelligence relationship was the original U.S. PLO relationship.

And what's really striking is that if you fast forward to today when the Trump administration has essentially removed all the layers of U.S.-Palestinian relations that had been built up over the Oslo period, the aid to the PA, humanitarian assistance and so on. And it's basically been reduced now to its primordial origin of even though there is no political contact between the Palestinian leadership and the Trump administration there is still an intelligence relationship between the PLO and the CIA.

WITTES: Wow.

ELGINDY: And so, we've kind of come full circle in that sense.

WITTES: Fascinating. Another interesting thing in this period is that our Arafat, it turns out, was toying with the idea and discussing with Americans with Kissinger, later with the Ford administration and then the Carter administration discussing recognizing Israel's right to exist, accepting Israel very, very early. He ultimately didn't sort of speak

the words in public until 1989 and some would say he didn't really explicitly accept Israel's existence until the Oslo Declaration. But he was clearly thinking about this as an inevitable necessity for many, many years. Did that surprise you?

ELGINDY: I think the thing that surprised me was how early on really in the early 1970s, maybe even '69 or '70 that the PLO began sending signals to the Americans that we are willing to live in peace with Israel, we are not seeking to destroy Israel or to negate its existence. All we want is a state, what they called a mini state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

And so, even though that was not yet the consensus within the PLO, the Fatah leadership and Arafat in particular had been toying with that idea and was sending signals. And so, I hadn't realized how early on this idea which we now call the two-state solution was being floated by the PLO in the early 1970s.

He, of course for his own domestic political reasons, strong opposition to the idea of a two-state solution giving up on the historic Palestine and so on inside the PLO. And so, he was always reticent to say that publicly and it took really until the late 1980s before he could say the magic words in a way that satisfied U.S. leaders as well as in a way that wouldn't upset his domestic constituency.

WITTES: And then at the end of the day, the Carter administration ended up pursuing a bilateral Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty that sort of cut the PLO out again. And had some provisions for Palestinian autonomy that the Egyptians essentially were meant to negotiate implementation of on behalf of the Palestinians, is that right?

ELGINDY: Yeah but even before that, before Sadat's kind of very dramatic visit to Jerusalem, the Carter administration had been working on trying to bring the PLO into

the what was then the Geneva Peace Process. There were plans for a new Geneva conference in which all the parties would participate, Egypt, Syria, Jordon. And Carter tried to find a formula to bring in the PLO or some PLO surrogate perhaps under a joint delegation with the Jordanians or some formula.

When Sadat made his gesture towards the Israelis, that changed everything. This was the big catch for American diplomacy. If you can take Egypt out of the equation well then you no longer really have an Arab Israeli conflict, at least in a regional sense. So, that became the priority and at that point, Carter essentially abandoned that Palestinian strategy as did Sadat.

But yes, after Camp David and this was a provision for Sadat to be able to sign a separate peace with Israel, he had to show something on the Palestinian issue. And so, part of that framework was this autonomy package for the West Bank and Gaza which ironically enough later became more or less the same framework that was adopted in the Oslo Accords.

DEWS: Let’s take a quick break now for Wessel's Economic Update with Senior Fellow David Wessel, who directs the Hutchins Center on Fiscal and Monetary Policy here at Brookings.

WESSEL: I'm David Wessel and this is my economic update. In my 30 plus years in Washington, I've noticed how hard it is for people to change their views when the world around them changes. Like other folks on the economic speed, I had a pretty simple view of government budget deficits. We should increase them when we're in a recession as we did in 2008 and 2009 and we should shrink them when the economy is healthy as it is now. And I believe that since politicians are so reluctant to raise taxes or

cut spending, journalists and think tank scholars should always keep the pressure on.

But times change and after listening to some smart economists, Doug Elmendorf, the former congressional budget office director, Larry Summers, the former Treasury Secretary, Olivia Blanchard, the former chief economist at the International Monetary Fund, my views have changed too. To be sure, today's budget deficit is large by historical standards and it would be imprudent to increase it unless we were going to use the money for investments likely to pay off in high returns in the future.

And as economists like to say, there is no free lunch. Some day we are going to have to increase taxes and cut spending, primarily on health and retirement benefits but we don't have to do it now. How come? One, something unusual and troubling is happening to interest rates. They are surprisingly low. Financial markets expect interest rates to stay close to 2.5 percent over the next decade, barely above zero if you adjust for inflation. And interest rates are low around the world and they've been trending down for three decades.

As my colleague, Louise Sheiner and Doug Elmendorf have written, persistently low interest rates represent a sea change for federal budget policy. They mean there is less urgency to put the federal debt on a sustainable path today than most experts would have argued several years ago. Larry Summers observes, you can afford to buy a more expensive house when mortgage rates are low. The same applies to the government. Whatever you thought was a safe level of federal debt when interest rates were at 5 percent, you have to believe that safe level is higher if rates are stuck at 2.5 percent.

Two. The economy is doing pretty well now. Unemployment at a 50-year low and

all of that and that's and argument for budget belt tightening today. To switch metaphors, fix the roof while the sun is shining. But something unanticipated is happening. The quote the always quotable Larry Summers again, interest rates have been much lower that what have been imaginable just a few years ago. Budget deficits have been much higher, so the accelerator has been much closer to the floor. And yet, the vehicle of the industrialized economy has moved forward much more slowly than anticipated and the rate of inflation has been much lower than anticipated.

So, when you have much more fuel and a much heavier foot on the accelerator and the car goes slower than you expected, you should think that maybe something is different about the car. His point, maybe we need big budget deficits today to keep the economy near full employment. Three. The economy seems to be slowing a bit and there certainly are a lot of downside risks. Raising taxes or cutting spending now to reduce the deficit would slow the economy in the short run. But unlike the past, the Fed doesn't have nearly as much room to offset that by lowering interest rates as it did back in 1993 and 1997 when we had significant deficit reduction.

So, I know it sounds like I'm preaching complacency, I'm not. We are going to have to do something to bring taxes up and spending down eventually. And if I had my druthers, Congress and the President would today launch a big public investment program. Bridges and broadband and education and health for poor kids even if the government had to borrow to pay for it. But I would also enact some long-term changes, particularly to healthcare spending to reduce spending in the future. But that's not going to happen in today's polarized Washington.

So, when it comes to the size of the budget deficit, it turns out that this time of

gridlock, while far from ideal, is not a big problem.

DEWS: And now, back to the interview between Tamara Wittes and Khaled Elgindy. First, a note of context for this next part of their discussion. As Wittes explained before, Arafat's magic words uttered in December 1988, that is, his explicit recognition of Israel's right to exist and his renunciation of terrorism, unlocked U.S. willingness to open direct talks with the PLO. But the short-lived U.S.-PLO dialogue was interrupted by the end of the Cold War, which Wittes says left Arafat weaker, and Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Gulf War in 1991.

Following the success of the U.S. led coalition to oust Iraq from Kuwait, U.S. President George H.W. Bush announced his intention to reconvene an international peace conference in Madrid. And U.S. Secretary of State James Baker began working toward finding a procedural formula acceptable to all sides. Elgindy picks the story back up here.

ELGINDY: Well, I think very much to his credit, Secretary of State Jim Baker saw an opportunity and sort of grabbed it by the horns and ran with it. He saw a shifted balance of power in the region that created conditions for a peace process. There had been plans in the past for this kind of regional conference and now there was an opportunity to bring Arab's and Israeli's around the peace table for the first time since Camp David. And he was very successful in twisting arms, Israeli arms, Syrian arms and also found a way to bring the Palestinians into the peace process even though it wasn't the PLO officially. It was unofficially everyone knew that the PLO was there. So, I think that was a brilliant episode in American diplomacy.

WITTES: It was a brilliant moment for American diplomacy and yet the PLO was

still outside the door, right, kind of knocking on the door trying to get in. And ultimately, the Palestinians who were involved in the Madrid process saw their role as trying to bring the PLO in. And at the same time, Arafat was pursuing his own now direct channel with the Israelis behinds the scenes.

ELGINDY: Yeah, I think, what is most striking about that moment is the pretense. Because the PLO was at Madrid, they were in the same hotel, they just weren't officially recognized as such. And everyone knew that. The Israeli delegation knew that, the Americans certainly knew that and that there was nothing that could be done. Everyone knew that the minute that Hanan Ashrawi and Faisal Husseini left the peace table, they went and briefed Yasser Arafat and his deputies on precisely what took place and took instructions from them.

And that was okay. It was okay to maintain that pretense of non-PLO involvement even though everyone knew that they were involved. And we saw elements of that throughout the 1980s. Officially, we're not allowed to talk to the PLO because of U.S. policy and U.S. law but everyone knows we're talking to them indirectly, they were talking to them before and after the Lebanon war, for example. And so, that pretense, I think, is a common feature of U.S. policy and it persists right through the Madrid process in which everyone pretended that the PLO wasn't there when, in fact, they were.

And it's true, yes, the PLO wanted a formal role and it was one reason why Arafat eventually kind of torpedoed the Madrid/Washington talks that came out a couple of years afterward before Madrid he was feeling left out. He was feeling, even though this was a delegation that was reporting to him, he wanted to be the official address. And so,

part of his strategy was to delay and bog down those peace talks while at the same time, as we later discovered, he was pursuing this secret track with the Israelis that started in late 1992 at the very same moment that these Palestinian and Israeli negotiators were meeting in Washington.

The irony of that moment was the PLO leadership had always seen the United States as their ticket to get to the Israeli's. And here was a moment, Oslo, where that formula was essentially reversed, it was flipped. Israel and the PLO were talking directly without the United States' knowledge until very late into the process.

And so, that basic premise of the PLO strategy to focus on the United States because Washington is the key to a future Palestinian state was from the very get go, shown to be invalid. And for me, that's the main takeaway of the Oslo process.

WITTES: I want to skip ahead a bit, not because the Oslo process isn't meaningful. As you've written in this book and elsewhere, in many ways it structures the boundaries of Palestinian political life today. And structures certainly the possibilities for what comes next, both in the things that it created and, in the places where it fell down.

But I want to skip ahead if I can to the George W. Bush administration. Because it seems to me that those two terms of Bush 43 kind of present the yin and yang of the U.S.-Palestinian relationship. At the beginning, in the midst of the second intifada and incredible violence, you have the Bush administration really just freezing out the Palestinians even kind of contemplating a possibility that the Israeli government might depose or even kill Yasser Arafat, the head of the PLO and, at that point, the Palestinian authorities sitting in the Muqata’a in Ramallah.

And by the end of the Bush administration, you have Bush declaring support for

Palestinian statehood and the convening of the Annapolis peace conference in which you were involved as you were telling us at the beginning. And that trajectory just seems so dramatic and there also seems to be in your description a clear division within the Bush administration about attitudes toward the PLO and toward the Palestinians and towards Palestinian statehood.

And so, clearly the balance between those two views must have shifted over time as well. So, I wonder if you can talk a little bit about your analysis of the Bush administration?

ELGINDY: The Bush administration was extremely conflicted in how it dealt with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Not only between say the first term and the second term but even at the very same moment sending very much mixed signals depending on who was advising the President at that given moment. And there were factions in the Bush administration that were pushing in very different directions. Starting with Colin Powell and the other Chaney faction and that tension between them.

Actually, the Bush administration began sort of where it ended up. It began with expressing officially as U.S. policy support for Palestinian statehood. And then later on, of course, after 9/11 and after a series of suicide bombings and the war on terror and that context sort of pulled back and conditioned any movement on Palestinian statehood or on a host of security conditions, reform of Palestinian institutions, even reforming the Palestinian basic law.

And so, that period after 9/11 and right up until Mahmoud Abbas's election was a period of total stagnation. There was no political process, there was nothing, by design. The signal that the American's were sending was we can't have a peace process with

someone like Yasser Arafat. The irony was that even when they had originally called for electing new leaders and ending the violence, so the irony was that after Palestinians elected new leaders and ended the violence and the violence ended, they still didn't have a political process. And Mahmoud Abbas was still not seen as a partner. He was, I think, generally respected but because the Israeli side wasn't prepared to move on the road map, move toward final status negotiations, move toward Palestinian statehood, the Bush administration held back and basically deferred.

So, this is one of the basic problems of the U.S.-led peace process over the years. Is there is this tradeoff that I talk about, what I refer to as the Oslo tradeoff which is the basic bargain was if you Palestinians do what's required for peace, specifically in terms of security and state building and institutional reforms, then we, the United States, will deliver in terms of ending the occupation and eventually Palestinian state.

The bargain never really panned out. Even though the conditions for Palestinian statehood kept growing and even when Palestinians met those conditions, we still didn't see progress. We saw that happen when Mahmoud Abbas was president for two and a half years. There was no political movement, even though the lull in violence and the Gaza disengagement created an opportunity to build on that toward a final status resolution.

And we also saw that, I think, with the success of Salam Fayyad. His state building project was, by all accounts, hugely successful and yet even at the end of that, there was still no movement toward Palestinian statehood. And so, what we find is that the peace process is divorced, essentially from realities on the ground. Whether it's Israeli settlements, violence or even when things are positive, progress in the peace

process was almost never determined by events on the ground. And that disconnect is a key reason why the peace process consistently failed.

WITTES: I will say frankly, as a former Obama administration official, even though I did not work on the peace process in the Obama administration, your evaluation of Obama's role is pretty tough. You say that actually he is the first American president since Nixon to fail to move the ball forward at all in steps toward resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And, I think, to be fair to your analysis, you don't just make that judgement but you also lay out a series of things that are no bold, dramatic gestures or even major changes in American policy. But smaller things that the administration could have done in your judgement that would have made a difference. Can you just go through a little bit of that?

ELGINDY: Yeah and, I mean, the reason I make that, why I draw that conclusion is, first of all, every American president did things that were both for and against the goals of the peace process. And so, we will always have that ambivalence, that basic ambivalence in U.S. policy. With the Obama administration, we saw a lot of tough rhetoric when it came to things like Israeli settlements. And even he talked about somehow maybe addressing the situation in Gaza seeing as that he came to office right after this major Gaza war in 2009 but there was never any real follow through.

And even when there were opportunities, for example, after the Arab Spring, you know, these uprisings in which Arab leaders are being overthrown and there's this kind of optimism and shifting balance of power in the region and an opportunity to maybe reframe and reset U.S. policy on this issue it doesn't happen. Even though people like George Mitchell were pushing, for example, to be more explicit on Jerusalem. If you're

going to make a statement on this issue, don't just reiterate the same formula that George W. Bush did about an independent Palestinian state side by side with Israel based on the 1967 lines. All of that has already been said, you need to break new ground. George Mitchell tried to get Obama to break new ground and others in the administration argued against it and he ended up deferring to those and didn't break new ground.

And it's pretty remarkable because he was seen as the one President who was the least sentimental towards Israel and perhaps more sympathetic towards Palestinians than his predecessors. So, the fact that he didn't take that step was, in a way, surprising.

WITTES: You also note that there are things Obama might have done that would have boosted the Palestinian leadership, that would have strengthened Mahmoud Abbas and thereby, you argue, created a more positive environment for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Things like helping Abbas at the UN instead of blocking Palestinian engagement at the UN or dealing with issues of violence on the ground. Some of those very tactical stuff that often in previous rounds of negotiations have poisoned the atmosphere that the U.S. sort of let that stuff go.

And so, it's not just a question of saying something new but it's also a question of not managing the situation in a way that would have bolstered Palestinian leadership. Do you think given everything that we just went through about how weak Abbas was from the very beginning of his term as Palestinian Authority president and head of the PLO. Do you think that those steps and strengthening Abbas at that point would have made a material difference?

ELGINDY: I think it could have, of course, it depends on what steps he took, but I think it could have. And the clearest contrast to me between Obama and his predecessors was really between Obama and Bill Clinton. Because they were both Democratic presidents but also both faced an Israeli leader with whom they had very bad relations in both cases the same person, Benjamin Netanyahu.

Clinton, however, was able to leverage that bad relationship with Netanyahu into some gains for the Palestinians. So, he established the more upset he became with Netanyahu, the more he cultivated a bilateral relationship with the Palestinians culminating in this high point of going to Bethlehem and Gaza, talking directly to the PLO, the PNC in the Gaza strip and sort of laying the ground work for what looked like could be a future bilateral relationship. So, he was able to do that. And that obviously strengthened Arafat, vis a vie Netanyahu even though it didn't involve direct pressure on Netanyahu.

WITTES: And it strengthened Arafat domestically.

ELGINDY: Of course, right. Obama didn't do any of those things. He could have, for example, instead of fighting Abu Mazen at the UN he could have found some way to endorse or at least acquiesce in a UN recognition of a Palestinian state since your own administration is saying that the clock is ticking on two state solution, the window is closing. And so, if someone is trying to affirm the two-state solution, you'd think that you'd be willing to support that.

But he didn't take those steps. He was, at the end of the day, I think, determined to do the absolute minimum. I think once the process failed in 2010, he more or less washed his hands of the issue, told his secretaries of state, if you want to go ahead, be

my guest.

WITTES: Give it a try.

ELGINDY: I'll cheer you on but I'm not going invest political capital in it because I already got burned and I don't want to get burned again.

WITTES: Yeah. So, as I think about where we sit today and we've just had Israeli elections although we don't yet know what the government coalition is going to look like, it's likely to be a government of the right like the last Israeli government. But this time, we have two big differences.

One is that we have an administration in Washington that has been willing to break new ground in significant ways in addressing U.S. policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It has abandoned language about a two state solution. It won't say that it favors a two state outcome. It says it's taken Jerusalem off the table. It has cut aid to the Palestinian authority. It's closed the PLO mission in Washington, it's cut aid to the UN agency that provides for Palestinian refugees.

And now we don’t actually know whether a two state solution is still a possibility. Because just before his reelection, Prime Minister Netanyahu promised to start annexing territory in the West Bank. You have a section at the very end of the book called, neither two states nor one. Which, I think, a very good description of where Israeli's and Palestinians find themselves right now. So, what now?

ELGINDY: I think we are definitely at the end of an era. We're at the end of the Oslo process. That process is dead and as I argued in the book, it wasn't Trump who killed the process—it was already dead when he arrived. The two-state solution is very hard to see without a viable process how we get there and so I think for all practical

purposes, I don’t see a two-state solution happening any time soon.

But the problem is nothing has emerged to replace them. We don’t have a new process. The old process is over but a new process or framework hasn't emerged. Trump has done away with not just Oslo but even the basic ground rules, things like UN Resolution 242 he's thrown out the window.

WITTES: And we have a Palestinian leadership now that as you describe, Palestinian politics in a way has become buffeted by or a subsidiary of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and now we have an upcoming transition in Palestinian leadership. So, without any kind of ongoing peace framework, without Israeli-Palestinian negotiations with no American administration that's concerned about having an effective Palestinian partner, what happens to Palestinian leadership?

ELGINDY: Yeah and I think that uncertainty about the future of the Palestinian leadership is part of what complicates this. When Yasser Arafat passed from the scene, we had a pretty good idea of who and what would come in his place. We don't have that sense at all about when Abu Mazen departs, we don’t know if we're talking about one individual leader ruled by committees, some sort of consortium of Fatah leaders who share power. We don't know what the relationship will be with groups like Hamas. Will it make reconciliation easier or harder. We don't know if there will ever be elections again in the Palestinian territories. We don't know what the future of the PLO is as an institution, we don’t know what the future of the PA is now especially given all the funding cuts.

So, everything is in question. Everything is in flux, the future of the two-state solution, even if we come up with a new process, what will it be based on. What sort of

Palestinian leadership are we having. I mean, it's clear that the conflict is entering an entirely new phase but we're only at the threshold of that and it’s not yet clear what the parameters are.

I think for a lot of Palestinians it is looking more and more like they are going to transition from calling for an independent state of their own to simply demanding equal rights in an Israeli state. What's interesting is that the one constituency that has been most supportive of a two-state solution among Palestinians has been those Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Obviously, they have a direct stake in that sort of an outcome.

But even they, and especially in the younger generation, are losing hope in that outcome and are embracing the idea not on the original PLO idea of one state of Palestine but even to be a part of the state of Israel if that's what it takes to gain their rights. And so, what impact that will have on the future of Palestinian politics, we don't know. But like you said, there is so much uncertainty on all levels.

WITTES: Your project in this book and all of the incredible archival research and interviews and other historical work that went into it was to fill in a missing piece in our understanding which is this relationship between the United States and the Palestinians. What you just said suggests to me that the symbolic move the Trump administration undertook of closing the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem which was the independent U.S. diplomatic mission to the Palestinians and putting it under the U.S. Embassy to Israel might actually be a picture of where the U.S. relationship with the Palestinians is going.

ELGINDY: Right. I think it is. I think this is an administration that has one state leanings and that state is Israel. The Palestinians are an internal Israeli matter that the

United States can help with, they can advise on but will not dictate an outcome. That's very different than what past presidents who have seen the Palestinians and Israelis as two separate parties.

WITTES: Even Wilson.

ELGINDY: Even Wilson, right. And so, this administration is very, very different than anything that we've seen. He's not only dialing the clock back to a pre-Oslo era, he's dialing the clock back to a pre-1967 era where Palestinians are seen as a humanitarian issue, as a security issue, as an economic question but not as a political one. And that's kind of where we were in the period between 1948 and 1967.

And the difference being that it's not based on ignorance or neglect, it is conscious because it requires undoing all of those layers of U.S.-Palestinian engagement that have occurred especially over the last 25 years. And the administration is deliberately and explicitly peeling back and reversing all of those.

WITTES: Well, Khaled, thank you so much. It's really been great to talk to you about this. It's a fascinating story that you've told in this book and it's a story, as you said, that is entering on a new and perhaps dark chapter. But I look forward to talking to you about that as it unfolds. So, thanks very much.

ELGINDY: Thank you. It's great to talk to you about it.

DEWS: You can find the new book, *Blind Spot: America and the Palestinians, from Balfour to Trump*, by Khaled Elgindy on the Brookings website or wherever you like to find books.

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Until next time, I’m Fred Dews.