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BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

FUTURE TRENDS FOR ISRAEL AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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PROCEEDINGS

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GROSS: We can expect to see daytime highs of greater than 50 degrees C. That's 122 degrees Fahrenheit.

HUGGARD: The next 15 to 20 years will be really important for averting continued and possibly even heightened political instability in Levant and elsewhere in the Middle East.

TELHAMI: Israel has been, in a way, not just part of a conflict with the Palestinians but in some ways part of American politics, and part of the dispute in American politics, and part of the divide in American politics.

SACHS: Hi. My name is Natan Sachs, and I am the director of the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. Individually, I focus especially on Israeli foreign policy, its domestic origins, and on U.S.-Israeli relations.

Together with several of our colleagues, Kevin Huggard and I tried to take a long view a couple of decades ahead and try and think about what the Middle East might look like, even what we know today. This is, of course, very speculative. We have to approach this with a lot of humility. There's much more that we don't know about the next two decades than we do know.

But, policymaking must take into account the possible scenarios for the future. It has to keep in mind uncertainties associated, but it must project, and that's

to think of where things are going to be in order to devise prudent and adaptable policy today.

We look in particular at how these developments might affect the security environment surrounding Israel, what the trends today suggest about Israel's environment in the future and what policy adjustment that suggests today.

On this special episode of the Brookings Cafeteria Podcast, you will hear from me and four additional experts. We'll discuss findings and recommendations from their field of specialty. A full report can be found on the Brookings website, Brookings.edu.

You can follow the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter, @policypodcasts, to get information about and links to all our shows, including Dollar and Sense, the Brookings trade podcast; The Current; and our Events podcast. And, now, a brief look two decades ahead at Israel's outlook in the Middle East.

We look at three broad categories of trends, first, our very broad trends, transnational and even global issues. Climate change is already affecting the Middle East, which is, of course, an arid region to begin with. And, climate change will continue and likely accelerate in the years to come. This could have dramatic effects on regime stability in the region and on refugee flows within the Middle East and out of it, toward Europe and elsewhere.

GROSS: I'm Samantha Gross. I am Director and Fellow in the Energy Security and Climate Initiative at Brookings. I hear the most immediate impacts that we'll see in the Middle East are the actual impacts of the climate itself changing.

We're seeing those right now already.

Even where we're at right now, certain areas in the Gulf States are almost unbearable in the summertime, combining the heat and humidity. And, you're going to see stronger storms, stronger draughts. Those are already happening in the region. And, so, that's not something to anticipate in the future. It's here already.

We're seeing that right now in the Middle East. We're seeing flooding in coastal cities, both sea level rise and from strong stor We're seeing the Dead Sea drying up, both due to evaporation and because folks are drawing more water from the Jordan River which flows into the Dead Sea.

We can expect to see extreme heat and draught in the region. The region has been in a nearly continuous draught since the turn of the century, and as things go forward we can expect to see daytime highs of greater than 50 degrees C. That's 122 degrees Fahrenheit, for those of us who think that way. And, in the coastal cities where it's very muggy places, like Doha, Jeddah, those temperatures along with humidity are just nearly unbearable.

And, then you think about air-conditioning loads that just could make the climate worse, because you need so much air-conditioning to survive in that sort of climate. So, the actual effects of the changing climate could be a huge problem in part of the Middle East.

SACHS: Further, she notes that an eventual global transition away from fossil fuels will challenge the economic foundations of many countries in the region.

GROSS: Fossil fuels really run the governments in these fossil-fuel-

dependent countries. More than half of employed GCC citizens work in the public sector, up to as many as 84 percent in Qatar. So, all of this is funded by fossil fuels. So, as the world moves away from fossil fuels, this could be a tremendous blow to these economies.

So, those economies that depend on oil and gas, they need a huge change in their economic structure, away from a rentier economy, where the economy really exists to distribute oil rents to the people, to something that's more like a different relationship between people and government, where the government supports private enterprise.

SACHS: This combination of climate and economic stressors could create grave challenges for regional stability.

GROSS: And, so, I worry about climate change and the world's reaction to climate change fomenting instability in some countries, particularly some that have been stable up to now but may become less stable as their main source of revenue goes away.

SACHS: Tamara Cofman Wittes watched the 2011 Arab uprisings from the State Department while leading the Middle East Partnership Initiative. She notes that the governance issues that fueled those uprisings remain unresolved.

WITTES: Hi, I'm Tamara Cofman Wittes. I'm a Senior Fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. I think we're going to continue to see political and social upheaval in the Arab world over the coming decade or two, and that's because the drivers that led to the uprisings in 2011 haven't really been

resolved. They were years in development, decades in some cases, and the governments of the region haven't yet figured out, for the most part, how to respond to them effectively.

So, if you're talking about the bubble of young Arabs who are relatively healthy and well-educated but have aspirations for far more than their economies and societies can give them, the technological changes that have given people access to more information so that they can organize more effectively, but also so that they're more aware of how their society is doing relative to others, and that increases a sense of grievance.

The concerns about corruptions, the concerns about government effectiveness, the failure of health care systems and education systems, and the fact that governments seem just not to be very responsive to the needs of citizens, all of those trends are continuing. And, so, while I don't think we're necessarily going to see mass popular mobilizations in a lot of countries, I do think we will continue to see descent bubble up and we will, I think, see further governments face severe domestic challenges if they can't find a way to be more responsive to their people.

HUGGARD: So, as Tamara discussed, large youth populations and limited economic and political opportunities played a central role in the 2011 Arab uprisings, with young people taking to the streets in massive numbers across the Middle East and North Africa.

SACHS: Kevin Huggard, Senior Research Assistant at the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings provides greater context for the region's demographic

picture. And, Tamara Wittes notes the risk this demographic future poses.

HUGGARD: Today, the peak of that youth bulge has passed somewhat in much of the region. And, with the civil unrest and conflicts of the past decade, somewhat less attention is also given to the region's demographic picture than was the case in the years leading up to and immediately following 2011. That said, the Middle East-North Africa remains a relatively young region, with a median age of 27, according to a 2019 U.N. estimate.

Further, regional economies still do not provide enough jobs for their society's large youth populations. According to Nader Kabbani, the youth unemployment rate in the Middle East and North Africa has been the highest of any region for the last 25 years and remains so, reaching 30 percent in 2017.

WITTES: The youth bulge in the region has for a long time been seen as an opportunity but also as a risk if it's not handled well. Young people can be a source of growth and dynamism. If they can be well-educated and brought into the labor force, they can contribute a lot to economic growth and to social stability.

But, unless economic growth is sufficient to create new jobs for young people, especially given the social structure in a lot of Arab countries, they get stuck. They can't move out of their parents' house, they can't afford to save up money to get married or to start families of their own.

So, that creates pressure at the broad societal level, but for those who are most highly educated and have the best prospects, it also can create brain drain. Some of the best and brightest of this young generation may simply leave the region

or leave their countries and go to more dynamic parts of the region where they can find jobs and fulfill their ambitions.

SACHS: Drawing on the work of Elhum Haghghat, a demographer with particular focus on the Middle East and North Africa, Kevin gives us a sense of the timeline regional governments have for taking advantage of their large youth populations.

HUGGARD: But, Haghghat gives the countries of the region until about 2040 to take advantage of this demographic gift by generating sufficient economic and political opportunities for their youth population. So, this means the next 15 to 20 years will be really important for averting continued and possibly even heightened political instability in (Inaudible) and also in the Middle East.

SACHS: For Israel, its neighbors' stability will remain an important concern.

HUGGARD: So, thinking in particular about the countries neighboring Israel, the Palestinian territories and then Jordan stand out. In this situation, Gaza is especially concerning. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, the total unemployment rate there reached 45.5 percent, sharing the first quarter of 2020 with unemployment in the 16 to 29 demographic reaching 64.2 percent.

So, given that the median age of Gaza, when disaggregated from that of the West Bank, is the lowest in the region in '18. And, if you took that alone, it would actually rank 214 out of 228 countries, counted by the (Inaudible). This should only add to the sense of urgency as observers follow events there. And, in Jordan meanwhile, there is also -- both a very young population -- median age of 23.8, and a

high youth unemployment rate. So, that was 35 percent as of 2016.

SACHS: As Tamara points out, Israel's present challenge represents a reversal from its past concerns about powerful neighbors to the dangers emerging from the weakness of neighboring governance.

WITTES: I think, since the beginning of the era of Arab-Israeli diplomacy, Israel has been primarily concerned about how to win acceptance from Arab states that themselves were fairly strong and stable. The situation Israel is facing today, I think, is quite different. There's a lot of instability on Israel's borders, and even key Israeli partners in the Arab world, like Egypt and Jordan, are facing major challenges in terms of economics and politics and social stability.

So, Israel can't take for granted that deals it makes with our governments today will necessarily hold for the long-term, unless Israel can also find ways to help partner with those governments on behalf of a regional stability.

(Audio played)

SACHS: The second category of trends we looked at was changes in technology, especially military technology. Naturally, our ability to predict these changes is very limited. But, we can already see some important trends underway.

Drone technology and the availability of increasingly cheap and powerful computing power allow seemingly weak actors to use drones and coordinated swarms of drones to great effect. These allow for the targeting of military targets or major infrastructure installations, as was the case on the attack on Saudi Arabia's major oilfield in Abqaiq in 2019 which temporarily took out a sizeable chunk of

global production.

Cyber technology of various kinds opens the door to both offensive operations abroad and surveillance operations domestically. While stronger powers, such as Israel, will also take advantage of these trends and have far more resources to do so, these trends also open the possibility for an erosion in the qualitative advantage of stronger powers.

They allow for the leveling of the playing field to the advantage of non-state actors. This could change the power structure in the Middle East in ways that could be very threatening for countries such as Israel, which currently enjoys a clear, qualitative military edge over any combination of regional rivals.

The third category of trends we look at is the interaction of global-grade powers in the Middle East. The United States has been in relative withdrawal from the region compared to the post-9/11 era during two presidencies that followed it.

(Audio played)

SACHS: Obama and Trump were two very different presidents, of course, but both of them saw a lesser role for the United States in the Middle East, certainly than their predecessor, George W. Bush. Other major powers, however, are much more present than they were in the past. Russia has returned to the region, where the Soviet Union once was, with an important military presence, including in Syria just north of Israel.

And, increasingly, China, the rising global power, already has a large and growing economic presence in the region with very important economic and trade

ties to countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. It also has the beginning of a security presence, even if China itself prefers to stay out of that realm, at least for the time being.

The global U.S.-China rivalry, which is growing dramatically in importance in Washington, D.C., may force many countries in the world to make difficult choices. These include Israel. China presents major economic opportunities for countries in the region.

But, this rivalry, the U.S.-China rivalry, may make partners of the United States have to make choices. Do they, for example, trade on technology, including sensitive technology with China, or do they "obey" directives of the United States to avoid such trade? A rivalry between the U.S. and China may even entice the two powers back into the region against their own instincts and perhaps against their own interests.

We've seen this in the past with great power rivalries, for example, the U.S.-Soviet rivalry, where, because of global considerations, they sought to expand their influence into regions where they were not necessarily inclined to go to begin with. Meanwhile, the increasingly partisan nature of the U.S.-Israel relationship in American politics, threatens to undermine the future of Israel's most important partnership.

TELHAMI: I'm Shibley Telhami, the Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development, and Director of the University of Maryland's Critical Issues Poll, and a nonresident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution.

SACHS: Shibley lays out some of the findings from the public opinion polling he has conducted on how American's see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the U.S. role in helping to resolve it.

TELHAMI: What has started happening more in the past 10 years is two things. One is no change in the overall number of people who want the U.S. to take neither side. In fact, the last poll that we did, which is just in August 2020, we had 62 percent of Americans say they want the U.S. to lean toward neither Israel nor the Palestinians. And, that is in harmony with the historic number for that.

Where the change has been taking place over the past decade is increasingly a majority of Republicans want the U.S. to take Israel's side directly. So, for example, in the August poll, in contrast with, say, 20 years ago where a majority of Republicans wanted the U.S. to be leaning toward neither side, in August 52 percent of Republicans wanted the U.S. to lean toward Israel directly. Only 1 percent of Republicans wanted the U.S. to lean toward the Palestinians. Forty-five percent wanted the U.S. to lean toward neither side.

SACHS: Much of the tensions now present result from how core political values in the U.S. shape Americans' views of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

TELHAMI: On the Democratic side, I would say there are three important factors. And, those have to be understood, because the way they could be changed again, obviously, one of them is demographics. The position of Democrats on Israel-Palestine is absolutely not anti-Israel. It's more evenhanded than anti-Israel. It is also not about Israel and Palestine. It is about fitting into a world view, a world view of

values, equality, freedom, international law, justice, U.N. resolutions, prior commitments.

That kind of package of values that Democrats express has not only been central, particularly now that we're in kind of a values war in the U.S., but also it has been championed by demographic segments of the Democratic Party that have expanded over time. That is, African-Americans, Hispanics, women, young people, Asian-Americans, the many constituents of the Democratic Party that have expanded over time. And, with it, Palestine-Israel has become sort of a prototype of the advocacy on those values.

What we find is that when you then ask the public -- so, let's assume there's no two states. Which one do you favor more -- that I favor the Jewishness of Israel more than its democracy, I support the continuation of Israel's Jewish majority in the government, even if it means that Palestinians will not have citizenship and full rights, or I favor Israel's democracy more than its Jewishness and support a single Democratic state in which Arabs and Jews are equal, even if that means Israel no longer would be a politically Jewish state? And, we're given that choice, obviously, if the two-state solution is no longer viable in their minds, and we find that 2/3, 65 percent of Americans, say they would choose democracy over Jewishness. That's not where the American Congress is.

Seventy-eight percent of Democrats say they would choose democracy over Jewishness, 62 percent of independents. And, even among Republicans, in the recent August poll 51 percent of Republicans say they favor democracy over Jewishness. I

think if you look at what happened, particularly during the Obama administration, is what we've had is mostly a right-wing Israeli government that has been at odds with the Democratic Party. In fact, in some ways it has been an ally of the Republican Party, and sometimes very, very much so even in making its views clear during elections.

That happened during the Obama administration when the Prime Minister of Israel intervened directly in American politics, spoke to both houses of Congress against the Iran nuclear deal which the President of the United States championed. There was always tension there and he was seen to be an ally of the Republican Party in domestic American politics. And, that became even worse once Trump got elected, where the Israeli government was one of the few close allies that Trump has had.

So, clearly, the right-wing Israeli government's relationship with the Republican Party in the U.S. association with positions that are at odds with the values of the Democratic Party, all of that explains why there has been that shift and why it's been elevated, because Israel has been, in a way, not just in part of a conflict with the Palestinians but in some ways part of American politics, and part of the dispute in American politics, and part of the divide in American politics.

SACHS: Taken together, and with all the limitations of forecasting, these trends paint a potentially difficult outlook for the Middle East in the next two decades. For Israel specifically, they suggest some lessons in important policy adjustments that are relevant already today.

The first is that complacency is dangerous. Israel stands in a position of strength today and perceives its position in the Middle East as far better than in many periods in

the past. In 2020, Israel normalized relations with Arab countries starting, of course, with the United Arab Emirates and sees a shift in the global position in its favor.

Nonetheless, this can change based on many different factors, including, not least, the U.S.-Israeli relationship. This relationship faces challenging currents, not just in the short-term with a new administration coming in in Washington but in the longer term as well. As it looks to secure this relationship on a variety of fronts, Israel will face starve (phonetic) choices.

Among the top issues that will affect the U.S.-Israeli relationship is the Palestinian question. Here, securing a long-term bipartisan support in the United States for Israel will require a dramatic shift in Israel's current approach to the Palestinians, one that strives for real change in the circumstances in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and that credibly shows a desire to resolve the conflict, even if a resolution of the conflict is a distant proposition.

Going forward, even one or two decades down the line, Israel will still need the United States, for material support and for support in the international arena, both to help Israel directly and in order to stave off harm coming in its direction. For that to continue, Israel must secure the alliance, and it must secure the domestic U.S. basis for this alliance on both sides of the political spectrum.

Israel faces other starve choices as well, especially with regard to the role of China in the region and the need to balance Israel's interests in a productive relationship with China, with its paramount consideration for the U.S.-Israeli relationship. This balancing act will not be Israel's alone. The countries of the Middle East may find

themselves facing difficult choices in an era of renewed great power competition, even as the regional outlook, in climate, governance, and security gets evermore complex.

To learn more about this topic, please find our full report on the Brookings website, Brookings.edu. Episodes like this are possibly only with the collaboration of a very large team. I'd like to thank Fred Dews, the usual host of the Brookings Cafeteria Podcast; Gaston Reboledo, audio engineer for the Brookings Podcast Network who skillfully stitched the whole thing together; Ryan Jacobs, audio intern this semester; Anna Newby, our communications director and managing editor at Foreign Policy; and Camilo Ramirez who manages the podcast creation team in the Office of Communications.

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I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

Carleton J. Anderson, III

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