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WEBINAR

SYRIAN REQUIEM:
THE CIVIL WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH

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P R O C E E D I N G S

DR. MALONEY: Good morning. My name is Suzanne Maloney and I'm vice president and director of the Foreign Policy Program at the Brookings Institution. It is my great pleasure to welcome you on behalf of the program in our Center for Middle East Policy, as well as the Israel Institute, which is our cohost for this morning, to today's event, “Syrian Requiem: The Civil War and its Aftermath.”

This morning we are pleased to be able to launch a new book, “Syrian Requiem,” which draws on more than 200 interviews to tell the story of the conflict in Syria. In detailing the long developing tensions in Syrian politics, cataloguing the many actors who have fought in the war, and discussing the ongoing policy priorities of the major power involved, this new book provides an important contribution to our understanding of the humanitarian catastrophe that has unfolded in Syria.

It's a timely book, as well, as we near the tenth anniversary of the beginning of the conflict. I am delighted to welcome our excellent panel today, including the book's two coauthors, to discuss the issues raised within their work. Ambassador Itamar Rabinovich, coauthor of “Syrian Requiem,” and a distinguished nonresident fellow with the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings, is also the vice chair of the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv. Previously, he was Israel's ambassador in Washington D.C., chief negotiator with Syria, and president of Tel Aviv University.

Carmit Valensi is also coauthor of “Syrian Requiem.” She is a research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies, where she is also the manager of the Syria Research Program, and the editor of Strategic Assessment.

Joining our two coauthors as a panelist is Murhaf Jouejati. Murhaf is chair class of 1955 and distinguished visiting professor of the Middle East and Global Studies at the Naval Academy in Annapolis.

And finally, moderating our panel today is Stephen Heydemann, a nonresident senior fellow with the Center for Middle East Policy here at Brookings, and the Janet Wright Ketchum 1953 chair of Middle East Studies at Smith College.

With that, I'll turn the mic over to Steve, and look forward to a fascinating and important discussion.

MR. HEYDEMANN: Good morning, everyone. Thank you very much, Suzanne, for those introductions, and my thanks, as well, to the Brookings Institution and the Israel Institute for organizing and hosting this event. And my very sincere thanks to Ambassador Rabinovich and Dr. Valensi for having given us this absolutely fascinating account of the conflict that has gripped Syria, the region, and many other parts of the world for the past decade. Especially delighted to have my old friend Dr. Murhaf Jouejati with us as well.

I wanted to start off this morning, since we're here to talk about this very interesting book that will be released, I think, this month in the United States by Princeton University Press, to ask Itamar Rabinovich and Carmit Valensi to each take a couple of minutes to get us launched by telling us what you see as the most important takeaways from the book.

What is it that you think people who are interested in the Syria conflict would learn, in particular, from the account that you've put in so much work to assemble over the past couple of years? Please, Dr. Rabinovich.

DR. RABINOVICH: Thank you, Steven. Two points. The first I think has to do with the fundamental weakness of the states that formed the core area of the Middle East, typically Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, all unstable. All, unfortunately, meeting the description of failed states. This has to do with the artificial way in which the borders were created by the colonial powers. The famous Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and the peace settlement after World War I, and the discrepancy between the realistic nature of the society and the nature of the political society.

It's been the case with all three. Until addressed seriously, there will be no stability in the core area of the Middle East which leaves, sort of, a black hole in the middle of the region, a source of instability invites regional, international meddling and competition.

The second has to do with U.S. policy, the flaws of U.S. policy both under President Obama and President Trump, different flaws, but the U.S. has played a partial limited, sometimes negative role in the crisis. It's been a subject of a heated policy debate, and I would say, legacy debate will be in the United States, and confronting the Biden administration as it is putting together a Middle East policy now.

MR. HEYDEMANN: Thank you very much. Carmit.

DR. VALENSI: Good morning and shalom. It's great to be here with you, if only virtually. I'm delighted we can have this conversation, so thank you for this great opportunity.

I would say that one of the most significant things, I think, we can take from the book is, as the title of the book implies, the Syrian crisis endures. From our perspective, Syria is unlikely to be put together again anytime soon and remains divided and unstable still, I would say.

It is true that President Bashar remains in power, but he's more of a survivor rather than a winner. He's entirely dependent on Russia and Iran, and faces multiple challenges, competing with multiple actors who operate in Syria. He only controls 60% out of Syrian territories, and even there, he's not able to fully govern and he does not have the adequate resources to govern the territories.

I would say that one of my personal conclusions from the book is that I don't think that there is a future to Syria under Bashar. A change regime, I would say, is a fantasy. Bashar in 2021 is a dictator on steroids. Of course, my paranoid then he used to be, and if that continues and there's oppression and violence, including arrest, disappearances, and persecutions of individuals suspected of disloyalty. Instead of reconstruction of Syria, rehabilitate his army and strength its internal security apparatuses in order to generate fear and deter the public from further social unrest. So learning Bashar's characteristics and history, this is my take on this one.

Finally, I would say that the international community should have done and should do more to resolve this conflict. Sitting on the sideline and watching the grim situation of the Syrian state and its people is just not enough and does not make any sense. I believe that the world cannot watch its end of Syria. It must deal with it and secure a better future for this poor state, and of course, the poorer Syrians.

MR. HEYDEMANN: Interesting, both of you. Thank you. So we have a regime that is aggressively working to reassert itself along deeply authoritarian lines. We have drivers of conflict that have not been resolved and, in fact, have been exacerbated in the period since the uprising began in 2011. And we have external actors whose policy responses to these very challenging conditions inside of Syria are uncertain, ambiguous, and ambivalent. That's a very interesting combination of circumstances

to have to confront.

I'd like to turn, in particular, to the role of one key external actor, the United States. You spend some significant time in the book reviewing the history of U.S. engagement in Syria during the period of the conflict. And you note with, I think, a great deal of candor, that the voices within the Obama administration arguing against significant engagement in the conflict were those that, basically, won the U.S. debate about what the U.S. should do in response to the escalations of violence and massive humanitarian issues that the Syrian conflict posed.

And so I'd appreciate hearing, I think it would be interesting for our audience to hear, and Murhaf, I'd like you to jump in on this as well. What you think the U.S. might have done differently at some point in the conflict that might have led to a different result, or that might have had some effect on the trajectory of the conflict? And why don't we go in the same order that we did before. Itamar, if you'd like to jump in, and then Carmit, and then Murhaf.

DR. RABINOVICH: Of course, the most famous incident during the Obama period was the red line issue in 2013 when a red line marked by the president was crossed by Bashar al-Assad, and ultimately decided not to retaliate. In a way, paved the way for the Russian intervention because the Russians felt that they practically had a free hand in Syria.

But the turning point, to me, is 2012 when there was a plan put together by the Director of Central Intelligence Petraeus and with the participation of several regional and international partners to equip and train the Free Syrian Army, the main military force of the opposition, at the time, to give it a fighting chance against the regular Syrian Army. And it was supported by Secretary of State Blinken and not supported by President Obama.

I should mention that a very significant interview granted by President Obama to Jeffrey Goldberg in The Atlantic towards the end of his term was largely devoted to the Syrian issue because, I think, the president was correct in feeling that when his legacy is discussed and debated in years to come, the Syria policy will be a major issue.

And when President Trump came in, he was totally uninterested in Syria, wanting to pull the troops out. He had a peculiar relationship with Turkey and President Erdogan. One would not have

imagined a U.S. president telling the prime minister of Turkey, or the president of Turkey, if you want Syria, you can have it. We are going out. Very peculiar way.

And a very interesting point is, in a way, the deep state role of the bureaucracy, not deep state in the QAnon sense, in the sense that the bureaucracy actually manipulates the president because, as I think Ambassador Jeffrey was very open in admitting recently, they did not agree with the president's policy and manipulated it, persuading him in different ways to keep a small number of U.S. troops which gives the U.S. actually, a lot of leverage in Syria with a small military presence and the partnership with the Kurdish Militia.

They control more than 20% of Syrian territory, the oil fields, and have a say at the table. So to take it to the current discussion of the Biden policy with regard to Syria, I would hope that as part of a larger Middle East policy in the context of crafting a different relationship with both Iran and Turkey, the administration will find a way to formulate a more effective Syria policy.

MR. HEYDEMANN: Thank you. This question about leverage is one that we should probably come back to. Carmit, before you jump in, I'd just like to point out to all of our viewers that if you would like to ask a question, please use the chat function to do that. We will be taking questions, I hope, toward the end of the moderated component of our conversation this morning. So please feel free to ask questions if you have any. Carmit, please, proceed.

DR. VALENSI: So I think that the U.S. policy has had a significant impact on the course of events in Syria. And from the very beginning of this crisis, the U.S. faces a dilemma which the United States did not want to intervene militarily in the conflict but could also not accept the human tragedy there.

U.S., of course, played a leading role in building the international coalition against ISIS, but it objected to any direct participation in the conflict, or to direct fighting against Assad. And as Itamar mentioned, the crucial American decision with regard to the Syrian rebellion were made by President Obama in 2012 and 2013 when he overruled the plan to arm and train the opposition, most prominently the Free Syrian Army. And when he decided to ignore his own red line and to refrain from, basically, penalizing Assad for massive use of chemical weapons against his own people.

Obama found a way to resolve this issue by dismantling the regime's chemical weapons arsenal, and this was to be one of the most important turning point of the Syrian Crisis, I would say. And Obama's decision also paved the way for Russian military intervention and inflicted a deadly blow on the more pragmatic element of the Syrian opposition, and we all know how this development ended.

So I think that the United States, again, refraining from any military action that could be seen against Assad regime is a very important point in this regard. Surprisingly, I think that this policy adopted by Obama's successor, by President Trump, though it is worth mentioning that Trump's administration twice responded militarily to the regime chemical attacks on civilians, and by that he disapproved the Obama thesis that punishing and deterring Assad would only lead to invasion and occupation.

Regarding Biden, I think the new administration still seems to be debating the right way to approach the Syrian issue. Recent statements by advisors of Biden indicate the intention to keep the American troops. There are about 2,000 troops in Syria and on Syrian soil. And also, to increase debt pressure on Assad in order to lead to a change in his policy, but this is yet to be studied.

I think that one of the first things that the Biden administration will need to do is to boost the diplomatic process and the Syria issue, and to act far more assertively and decisively on goals set out in U.N. Resolution 2254 of December 2015 which basically drafts the roadmap for the peace process in Syria. And I also think that the new administration must commit to punishing militarily any renewed campaign of mass killing of civilians and state terror undertaken by the Assad regime.

Of course, the humanitarian issue is mostly important, and the U.S. should allow humanitarian assistance to refugees, and to Syrians living under areas not controlled by the regime. In any case, I would say that the United States cannot afford to just abandon Syria, you know, and trust Russia and Tehran to handle it.

MR. HEYDEMANN: Well, I hope the Biden administration team is listening. Murhaf, what's your sense of what might have been done differently that could, perhaps, have shaped the trajectory in somewhat different directions? Perhaps more positive directions from an American perspective?

MR. JOUEJATI: Thank you, Steven. And I also would like to thank the Brookings Institution for including me in this important panel.

First of all, never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined that I would be so much in agreement with Israeli statements on Syria, but I do want to second both speakers on all these points. With regard to the United States, certainly, the Petraeus initiative to train and arm the Free Syrian Army was a very good one, I think. I would like to remind people that the Free Syrian Army and the opposition movement, in general, never asked and never wanted American boots on the ground, and it was sufficient for them to be supplied with weapons in order to counteract the brutality of the regime. But again, President Obama, at the time, rejected this initiative.

The deathblow came when the red line of President Obama was crossed. And here, really, it's sent no uncertain message to Moscow that it could have a free hand in Syria. Had, I think, the Russian government had it understood that the United States was serious about Syria, there would not have been the intervention of the Russians in order to prop up the Assad Regime.

Throughout the Obama administration, it was reluctance, it was a lack of leadership, and I could say the same about the Trump administration. Both were reluctant. Trump, in fact, was not interested in Syria. Both lacked leadership on this question.

And what the book here, I think, does very well is to show that the lack of U.S. leadership and the reluctance of the United States to intervene more forcefully in this Syria crisis led other countries in Europe to do the same, and that led, also, the Arab League to do that same. And so it is really the crisis and the outcome of the crisis was dependent on the United States, first and foremost, and on the political will, or lack thereof, in the United States, first and foremost.

We now come to the Biden administration. President Biden has a lot on his plate. There is a national emergency which is the first and foremost priority for this administration, and there are very many important international questions that are going to occupy his time and the time of his administration. I think that Syria is going to be on the backburner again, and I fear this very much. I fear very much this renewed talk of the United States and its interests in dealing with Iran and with a nuclear issue. And my fear is that any deal that may potentially come about is going to be at the expense of the

Syrian people again. I hope I'm wrong.

Within this administration there are forces that would push the president towards the deal with Iran at the expense of the Syrians, and I am hoping for other forces who view things differently, especially those officials who now look back on history and regretted, regretted not having been more engaged on the Syrian crisis than they had been.

All in all, I believe the United States at the very first could have ended the Syrian crisis in a positive manner in a very short amount of time, and with a lot less loss of people. May I remind people that until now, 10 years later, there are more than one million people who have been murdered by the Assad regime. And that there are 11 million refugees, six million of them outside of Syria, and that 70% of Syria's infrastructure has been totally destroyed. All this could have been prevented had the United States had more of a political will to intervene.

MR. HEYDEMANN: Thank you all for those comments very much. You all highlight, in different ways, I think, and this is a point that's also referenced very directly in the book. That while the Obama administration, and to some extent, the Trump administration, were preoccupied with the costs of engagement, with what the consequences might be, and sometimes, Carmit, as you hinted, or tended to overestimate or exaggerate what the potential downsides of a more assertive engagement on Syria might be. Far less thought was given to the consequences of not acting, of not engaging more directly.

And I think all of you pointed to important different consequences flowing from not giving adequate attention to the potential costs of disengagement. But one of the big questions that is part of the broader Syria debate in Washington today concerns, precisely this issue, Itamar, that you raised which is leverage and U.S. leverage.

And we've just had, for example, a recent op-ed piece written by the former U.S. Ambassador to Syria and then Ambassador to the Syrian People Robert Ford, in which he argued that the U.S. does not have leverage. That the U.S. needs to acknowledge that it is no longer capable of influencing the trajectory of the Syrian conflict, and that the Biden administration should make the tough decision, the tough call to distance itself from the Syrian conflict, focus on issues of greater priority, and leave the pathway out of conflict in Syria, resolving remaining issues in the northwest and northeast and

the residual presence of ISIS to the Russians, the Turks, the Iranians, and even to a regime that the U.S. continues to regard as illegitimate for its conduct during the conflict.

So if there is a sense that the U.S. should have done more in the past, if there is a hope, Carmit, as you expressed, that the new team will find its way toward a more engaged approach to Syria. If, Itamar, as you suggested, the U.S. continues to have leverage, and I tend to share that sense. I do think that the very small presence that the U.S. has in the northeast gives the United States far more influence than is often acknowledged.

What are the possibilities for deploying that leverage? What is it you think the U.S. can do that would demonstrate to those who are now arguing against engagement, that there remains a useful role for the U.S.? What do you think some of the possibilities are for the U.S. to play a constructive role in bringing the conflict to a close on the basis of a political settlement that would more closely reflect the interest and concern and needs of Syrians, as opposed to those of the regime and its foreign patrons?

Let me begin, actually, Murhaf, with you this time.

MR. JOUEJATI: Look, this is a great window -- well, great is probably too strong of a word, but there is a window of opportunity here, given the increasing weakness, you might be surprised, of the Assad regime. Now, most people will talk about Assad's victory on this and that. I don't see it this way. Assad is very much in trouble. Yes, he has the upper hand militarily thanks to the Russian and Iranian assistance, but he controls 60% of the territory. That is not victory to me.

He controls about 60% of the population. That is not victory to me. He has now a huge problem with the lack of trust by even his very supporters in how this pandemic is being handled. There are long lines for days to get fuel for heating in this cold winter. People are struggling to buy bread. And so it is an economy that is collapsing. To further aggravate this, there is the collapse of the Lebanese economy on which Syrian businessmen depended. So there is a window of opportunity here to exert pressure on Assad.

How do we assert pressure on Assad? Not necessarily military, but by operating with the Russians who also, despite their assistance, their military assistance to Assad, are having serious

problems with him. And they have voiced that publicly from time-to-time. So I think at the end of the day, the United States and Russia should find ways to cooperate into bringing this crisis to a close.

MR. HEYDEMANN: You know, Murhaf, has much as I'd like to think that the relationship with Russia offers us one instrument of leverage, we have tried for years and years to outsource leverage over the Assad regime to the Russians, and it has produced, I'm afraid, very little in the end. But let's hold on that. And raises significant questions about whether the issues that the Russians have with the Assad regime outweigh the sense of Russia's leadership, including President Putin. That the relationship is more important than the issues that it raises for them.

Carmit, what's your sense about where we might be able to play a more productive role? Where the U.S. might be able to play a more productive role in the conflict, given where we are right now?

DR. VALENSI: First of all, I would say again, I think the regime is in a very weak point right now, not only the regime, but also one of its biggest supporters, Iran, and the Iranian Shiite access is at a very weakened point. And I think the international community should take advantage of this weakness. And as Murhaf said, there's a window of opportunity that we need to think how to better exploit it.

I think that the American troops on the ground, even if only symbolic presence on the ground is highly important as a deterrent to Iran and to, you know, to harm its vision to consolidate the Iranian land bridge from Iraq to Syria. And also to defend the Kurds which are the main actors who actually fought ISIS on the ground. I think it's one of the commitments that the U.S. should keep and be there and protect them. And so I think that it's very important to keep American troops on Syrian ground. And I hope that the next regime will continue in this policy.

And again, I think that the main point has to do with the diplomatic process. I think that the U.S. should lead. And I do believe that tighter cooperation with Russia is possible, at least in the Syrian case, and contrary to other international issues. I think that they can cooperate, but it's not only between the U.S. and Russia. I think that there are a lot of regional actors. The Gulf States, for instance, that are very relevant. Turkey will have to be part of this diplomatic initiative.

And, you know, with the normalization winds blowing in the region, I think that we can all, even Israel, can find a common ground with all these actors, and to support and encourage this kind of diplomatic initiative that basically calls for the removal of Assad. This is the only option to stabilize the Syrian state.

MR. HEYDEMANN: Well, it seems that the changing tides in the region with respect to Israeli/Arab relations have gone hand-in-hand with modest, but nonetheless, nontrivial moves on the part of some of those governments with whom Israel now has new ties to also begin to rebuild relations with the Assad regime. So those policy trends may actually pull in somewhat different directions, it seems. It's not entirely clear, of course, but it isn't clear yet that they align in the way that you suggested. It's something worth thinking about.

Itamar, what's your sense about where the leverage might be and how the U.S. might deploy it?

DR. RABINOVICH: I have a very high regard for Ambassador Ford. I think that he was personally courageous when he went to Hama in the middle of the insurrection. I think he handled himself very well in opposing the administration, behaving very professionally as a U.S. diplomat, but I disagree with his recommendation. I don't think the United States can afford to be absent from a major Middle Eastern arena.

The U.S. is a superpower. It needs to be in all crucial international arenas, the Middle East is one of them. And if you want to be present in the Middle East, to have influence in the Middle East, you cannot just walk away from Syria. It's too central and too important.

Now, how can influence be asserted? Two points. One, is to continue what actually has been the policy of the bureaucracy is represented by Ambassador Jeffrey, at the time, not necessarily by President Trump, that is to say to try to bring the regime to its knees by refusing any funding for reconstruction as long as there is no political sentiment, reform, and return of refugees.

And in the absence of American, European, or international institutions, financial help, the money for reconstruction is not going to arrive and the regime is bound to continue to lead on a shoestring. And this is not short-term policy, this is long term policy, but I think it's a very solid policy.

You don't need to send troops into, or more troops into Syria in order to have influence.

The second has to do with the need, sometime, to support Israel vis-à-vis Russia when it comes to fighting the Uranian drive to build a second Lebanon in Syria, to build a military infrastructure with precise missiles and so forth. Russia 99% of the time is not interfering with Israel action. At one point, it lost patience with Israel and interfered with Israeli action.

It's not up to Israel to stand up to Russia. They are, after all, a small Middle Eastern country. It's up to the United States to do that when it's needed. It was not there in the times of Trump, but I think President Biden, his administration needs to take that into account at any given moment they might be required to give Israel backing vis-à-vis a potential change in Russian policy.

MR. HEYDEMANN: Interesting. Well, you both presented a picture of the Assad regime as struggling through a number of internal challenges, and of course, significant external challenges as well. And I wanted to ask just a couple more questions before opening things up, and would, again, remind our viewers that the chat function is available if you want to post questions. We have some that have come in and would be welcome to receive more.

But one question, Itamar and Carmit, for you, and then one for Murhaf. You've both made the case, and I think quite persuasively, that we need to be mindful of the many vulnerability of the Assad regime, to some extent, of the effectiveness with which U.S. policy and the policy of the European Union concerning reconstruction funding have contributed to the vulnerabilities and weaknesses that the Assad regime is wrestling with.

And perhaps, created possibilities for translating those vulnerabilities into some sort of movement toward an outcome based on 2254, the U.N. Security Council resolution that defines what a political settlement might look like and how we might reach it. But it seems as if, within the Israeli security establishment, there has been a kind of grudging acknowledgment that the Assad regime is not going anywhere. There is a sense that Israel has a long history with the regime of both Hafez Assad and Bashar Assad.

And that he is, in effect, the devil Israel knows, and that the most prudent course at the moment, even while Israel continues to take active measures to try to prevent the deepening of Iran's presence along

Israel's northern border, that the most prudent course is to accept reality, in effect, and to acknowledge that Assad will be there. Is it your sense, however, given all of the issues we've talked about this morning that confront the Assad regime, the economic issues, the escalation of violence, the ongoing low-level insurgency in the south, the continued unresolved problems in the northwest and the northeast?

Is it your sense that Assad can be a source of stability in Syria? Is it your sense that Israel is making the right call if it arrives at this conclusion and acts on the conclusion that it has no alterative by Assad? What's your sense of that? Itamar and then Carmit, and then, Murhaf, I have a question for you about the opposition.

DR. RABINOVICH: First of all, Israel is like the United States and does not want a massive military intervention in Syria. They've often been asked. Israel is the strongest military power in that area. It could have decided the issue if it really wanted to intervene. It did not want to intervene. Israel lives, still, with the memory of the 1982 War in Lebanon. A major effort to try to engineer the policies of a neighboring Arab State which ended in failure and too many years of extended stay in Lebanon. And there's no appetite in Israel to repeat that in Syria.

Second, there's a question of the alternative. When the phrase the devil we know was first uttered by Prime Minister Sharon to President Bush at the time, he meant to say that if the alternative to Assad is his armies, than we prefer Assad. In the meantime, we have also discovered to the right of the east armies the jihadists. Right now, the opposition, fortunately, does not project the image of a viable alternative. The opposition is divided.

When I used to meet with opposition activist leaders sometimes over the years, I always used to ask them, ask yourself how come that no one in the world knows who the hell the Syrian opposition is, and who is the alternative to Bashar Assad. And the divisiveness of the opposition is a reflection of the divisiveness of the country.

So right now that question does not present itself to Israel, and, you know, no country in the world wants anarchy on the other side of its border. So right now Assad maintains a semblance of some order in Syria. He's not challenged seriously by any opposition, of course. If such a pose emerges, Israel would have to make a choice, but that need does not confront Israel right now.

MR. HEYDEMANN: But it could, I suppose, in the future. It could. Carmit, what's your take?

DR. VALENSI: So by not interfering in the initial phases of the war, I think that Israel basically came to terms with the idea that Assad would remain in power, and perhaps, even serve its interests. And that policy stems from various reasons.

First of all, as you said, Israel has a tendency to prefer the devil we know. Obviously, that Assad regime kept the Syrian front quiet for many years, and we just mentioned all the multiple challenges that Assad is currently facing. He's mostly concerned with regaining his hold over Syria. He's not interested in a direct confrontation with Israel.

So having said that, I think that recently, I would say the past few years, something has changed in Israel's point of view or Israel's perception towards its policy in Syria. And I think a lot of us realize that Assad is either unwilling or unable to remove the Iranian presence from Syria, and this is, of course, Israel's main concern. The Iranian entrenchment in Syria, and not only near our border in Golan Heights, but also in the deep of Syria.

And so I think that we realize that Assad is a terrible part of the radical axis, and it will not allow or diminish or undermine its relations with Iran. So it was back in 2016 when Israel, I think for the first time, grasped the scope and extent of the Iranian entrenchment and decided to use aerial attack in order to attack Iranian assets in Syria. What we call in Hebrew, the mabomb (phonetic). The time between wars.

They're also involved in more of a humanitarian project, the operation Good Neighbor, which Israel, basically, provided humanitarian aid and support to the Syrians who live in the southern part of the state. But I think Israel's main interest is basically any scenario in Syria which results in maximum removal of the Iranians, or at least diminishing their influence and power. I'm repeating myself, but this could be achieved only if Bashar is being removed.

I think that a lot of voices in Israel and a lot of politicians in Israel started to acknowledge this equation and, of course, there is a debate. Each of us represents a different point of view regarding the alternatives, but we have a clear demonstration of the way Syria looks right now under Bashar's

control, and --

MR. HEYDEMANN: Carmit, you've frozen. We're having trouble with the connection.

DR. VALENSI: Can you hear me now?

MR. HEYDEMANN: Carmit, we lost you for a moment there.

DR. VALENSI: Okay.

MR. HEYDEMANN: Just one- or two-word summary of and sort of wrap up.

DR. VALENSI: Yes. So I would say that I think that we have a great demonstration, a really clear demonstration of the way that Syria looks right now under Bashar's control and it's completely chaos. Even if he managed to regain control over southern Syria, it's very chaotic. Multiple actors operate there, and I think that Russia is the main decisionmaker today in Syria, not Bashar. But there are alternatives to Bashar.

MR. HEYDEMANN: It's interesting. The devil we know argument was premised, to some extent, on the assumption that the Assad regimes would maintain the kind of stability, Carmit, that you mentioned existed from the end of the 73 War, more or less, for several decades. And if that's no longer the case, then the extent to which just knowing who that devil is, is a benefit, I think becomes open to question.

And things have changed on the Israeli side as well. The annexation of the Golan would seem to have a significant implication for the possibilities for any kind of future negotiation between Israel and Syria directly. So it seems that the restoration of that, sort of starting point, of the devil we know as the basis for Israeli policy may turn out to be, perhaps, somewhat problematic.

Before we open up, and let me just also point out as I've been notified, that in addition to the chat, it's possible to ask questions using the hashtag on Twitter, #SyrianRequiem, or by emailing events@brookings.edu. We already have quite a few questions, however. So I'll just warn everyone that we won't be able to get to them all in the time that we have left.

But Murhaf, it isn't only the U.S. and others who struggled to figure out what to do as conditions on the ground in Syria have changed. The Syrian opposition has also, I think, struggled on its own with its declining relevance, declining influence as the Syrian regime has retaken control of much of

opposition held territory as international diplomacy has tended to wane as the Astana Process became the arena within which so many critical elements of management of the conflict were decided.

What is your sense of the future of the opposition? Of course, the Geneva Process continues. It continues to participate. I don't know, perhaps, whether it should. The Geneva Process has been described as a form of zombie diplomacy, par excellence. Keeping going but with no discernable progress.

What are the possibilities for the opposition now? Should it stay in Geneva? What should it do? What is its role given the current circumstances?

MR. JOUEJATI: Before I get to what it should do or what it can do, let me agree with Ambassador Rabinovich. The opposition initially, and today, was very divided. There was a lot of factionalism. There was political intrigue. And that took away from the credibility of the opposition vis-à-vis the international community, no doubt.

But I have to remind you that the uprising in Syria initially was spontaneous and there was no organization at the time. There were no political leaders because all the traditional national political leaders have either been killed by the Assad regime or have been exiled or what have you. And so the mere fact that an opposition, a political opposition rose is an absolute miracle. There has been no political experience for the Syrians since 1963 when martial law was declared, and any descent was snuffed out. So again, it's a miracle that there is a political opposition.

The political opposition tried to form Syrian interim government. The interim government, one of its members was in charge of the Free Syrian Army, and things went well initially until some regional parties put their fingers in the pie and had their own preferred factions to fund, and this is when things began to fall apart.

No, it was not an alternative to the Assad regime in the eyes of the international community, absolutely true. But in addition to this regional playing around the Free Syrian Army, then there was another army and that is the Jihadist, the extremist, the terrorists. And so that fragmented Free Syrian Army was fighting both the Assad regime and the Jihadists, furthering and exacerbating the weakness of the opposition.

The opposition will not go away and has learned in these ten years many lessons. And the role it is now playing and should continue to play is a political, diplomatic role to keep Assad's feet on fire, and to remind the international community that Assad is not the agent of stability in Syria. He is the agent of instability. And as a result of these diplomatic efforts, you know, I have to give credit to Syrian NGOs, Syrian-American NGOs who have pushed for the Caesar's Act and the sanctions against persons in the elite of the Assad regime.

There has been a lot of humanitarian work and rescue by Syrian NGOs in those areas that are not controlled by the regime. There has been a lot of efforts in Europe to bring some of those who have participated in the killing of Syrians to bring them to tribunals, such as in Germany and in Madrid. So the opposition will not go away. It has learned many lessons. It is not strong enough now to be able to act as a state, but it has to render accountability to the Assad regime by constantly reminding the world of what Assad has done, and what the future lies ahead if nothing is done against him.

Here, we might want to ask the Italian and narcotics and custom services of how much drugs are being exported from Syria to Italy, or for that matter, to the Egyptian authorities, or the Saudi authorities. If nothing is done, Syria will implode, and that is going to create a further mess in Syria and with a ripple effect throughout the Middle East.

So again, and here that dovetails nicely with what we were talking about earlier about the Biden administration which has the choice of either doing nothing and then expecting a further mess, if that's at all possible, in the Middle East, or now acting in conjunction with this growing Syrian opposition in order to fix things.

MR. HEYDEMANN: Thank you, Murhaf. If it were the case that the U.S. and the EU were willing to engage with the opposition more actively to assist its transition to be able to perform these functions, as you describe. I think that would be a very welcome development. The support has been rather lukewarm in the past several years.

Let me turn to some questions from the audience. We only have about eight minutes or so left. And one of the questions concerns sanctions and your views on the utility of sanctions. Another really important piece of the policy debate, both in the U.S. and in the EU.

But before that, Itamar, I had one very specific question that came in for you concerning your comment about the importance of the U.S. providing additional top cover for Israeli actions against Iran in Syria. The sense of the question was that you felt that, perhaps, the U.S. had not done enough in that regard in the past.

Whereas the impression of our colleague asking the question is that the Trump administration gave a great deal of cover to Israel in support of its operations against Iran and Syria. So could you just elaborate a bit on where you felt, perhaps, that things might not have been as supportive as you would have liked.

DR. RABINOVICH: Yes, the Trump administration did support the Israeli policy of trying to prevent the construction of a military infrastructure, missile infrastructure by Iran in Syria. And Russia was willing to look the other way. Reflecting both, I would say, a reasonable working relationship between President Putin and Prime Minister Netanyahu, but also the complex attitude of Russia to Iran's role because they are partners, but they are also competitors in Syria. And I think sometimes they don't mind is Israel is cutting them down to size.

But there was an incident where Syrian Air Defense shut down a Russian plane. And at that time, it was a few weeks, they interfered with Israeli overflights over Syria, and there was no support from the Trump administration at that time. Now, that could repeat itself and what I meant is if it ever happened in the future, it would be wise for the United States to give Israel cover and support vis-à-vis Russia. Because, you know, Russia and the United States play in one league and we play in another.

MR. HEYDEMANN: Thank you. Thank you for that. So let's wrap up with a round of comments on the utility of sanctions and the efficacy of sanctions, another really critical piece of the policy debate today.

The U.S. policy towards Syria now rests very heavily on sanctions. We've mentioned the Caesar Civilian Protection Act which was passed into law now about a year ago. And that is only one of a wide, wide, wide web of sanctions that have been imposed on the Assad regime, and on specific individuals, not only by the U.S., but by the EU, by Canada, by a number of other countries, Australia, Japan, England. Each have their own sanction regimes in place. There is an argument that sanctions

are one of the principle causes of human suffering in Syria.

I tend to be somewhat skeptical of that view, given the effects of conflict, given corruption, given the predatory nature of the Assad regime. And yet, the argument is out there. And we find ourselves confronting the question of whether and how we might ease the burden of sanctions on Syrians all the time. In fact, a former ambassador to Lebanon and deputy, I think, Deputy Secretary of the U.N. for Political Affairs Jeffrey Feldman argued recently with a colleague for a strategy in which sanctions would gradually be lifted in exchange for compromises or concessions toward a political settlement by the Assad regime.

What is your sense of the efficacy of sanctions? What role do they play? How might we leverage sanctions? And I'm going to have to ask you all to be rather brief in your responses, if you don't mind. And let me begin this time with Carmit and then we'll shift to Murhaf. And Ambassador Rabinovich, we'll give you the last word.

DR. VALENSI: Well, dealing with totalitarian regimes, I think that economic sanction is a very limited and less efficient tool. Because I am thinking both about Iran and Syria when I'm answering this question. And as you said, I mean, the economic sanction on Bashar and his inner circle and his family and so on has not, basically, changed his behavior, changed his policy towards anything. He continues to do whatever he wants in order to secure his survival.

And, you know, arguing that the sanction was the main cause for the economic hardship in Syria is ridiculous. There are so many other factors and explanation for this. You mentioned corruption and so many others. So I don't think that on the one hand, they are quite effective, but on the other hand, they are not what brought Syria to this grim economic situation, so we should definitely think of using other methods and other measures when dealing with this kind of regime.

MR. HEYDEMANN: Thank you. Murhaf.

MR. JOUEJATI: To the critics of sanctions, to those who think that sanctions are hurting the Syrian people, don't take my word for it, listen to Assad who said it publicly. That it is not the Caesar Act and sanctions that have led Syria to where it is now. And he's right. He's right. The Syrian economy is collapsing and has collapsed not as a product of the sanctions, but again, a product of the cumulation

of corruption and mismanagement and so on.

It is a tool of diplomacy. It is cost free for the governments who impose it. And it reminds those dictators who engage in the murder of their citizens that there is accountability. There is punishment. And I cannot imagine that there would not be sanctions against a genocidal regime. And so I think sanctions should not only continue, they should be intensified, and as Ambassador Rabinovich said, reconstruction and the financing of reconstruction should be denied until such time that the regime make compromises.

I agree with Dr. Valensi, that at the end of the day, survival trumps or mitigates -- or dictators rather look for their survival more than anything else. I absolutely agree. But we have to use all the tools, including these diplomatic tools in order to bring the crisis to a point where it is knocked down.

MR. HEYDEMANN: Thank you very much, Murhaf. Itamar, the last word.

DR. RABINOVICH: You know, sanctions have a limited value, but they have value, symbolic and as part of the policy of pressure, Murhaf Jouejati just mentioned. It goes hand-in-hand with the denial of financial aid for reconstruction, as long as reforms are not introduced. And it's a long-haul policy. It's not going to have immediate effects, but in the long run, it's the only option for a policy that doesn't want to use military means and has to rely on diplomatic means and economic sanctions.

MR. HEYDEMANN: Well, that brings us to a close. So let me end by thanking all of you, Itamar, Carmit, Murhaf, you've given us enormous insight and a great deal to think about. I encourage all of you watching to look for the book “Syrian Requiem.” It will be available very soon, if it's not already out in the United States. And my thanks, as well, to our hosts at the Brookings Institution and the Israel Institute.

My apologies to those of you who posed questions we weren't able to get to. I think you'll agree this has been a very substantive and interesting and productive exchange. God bye to you all and thank you.

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