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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS:

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PANEL DISCUSSION:

SHIBLEY TELHAMI (Moderator)  
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Distinguished Fellow, Foreign Policy

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**SUZANNE MALONEY:** Good morning to all those of you joining us from here on the East Coast of the United States. Good afternoon. Good evening and welcome to all of those of you joining us from other parts of the world. I'm Suzanne Maloney, vice president and director of foreign policy here at the Brookings Institution on behalf of Brookings foreign policy and our Center for Middle East Policy. I'm delighted to welcome you to today's event as we launch a new book by our distinguished fellow, Itamar Rabinovich. Middle Eastern Maze: Israel, the Arabs and the Region 1948 to 2022. We are so pleased to gather virtually today to discuss the sweeping account of Israeli Arab conflict and diplomacy. Written by an author with singular authority and familiarity regarding so much of the story that he tells. Having previously served as Yitzhak Rabin's ambassador to Washington and chief negotiator with Syria, Itamar is also a distinguished fellow here at Brookings, a member of our International Advisory Council and serves as Professor and President Emeritus at Tel Aviv University, as well as chair of its Institute for National Security Studies. Itamar's important insider account adds the Abraham Accords, the policies of the Trump and Biden administrations, the Syrian civil War, the Islamic State, the political crisis in Israel, and much more to his 2012 book, The Lingering Conflict. Joining him on screen for this discussion of Arab-Israeli relations in the context of wider Middle Eastern geopolitics is Ksenia Svetlova, senior nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council and senior research fellow with Reichman University. The senior has been having some technical issues, but we do hope she'll be able to join us over the course of our conversation today. Finally, moderating today's conversation is Shibley Telhami, a nonresident senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy and Foreign Policy program here at Brookings. Shibley also serves as the Anwar Sadat professor of peace and development at the University of Maryland. Before we begin, I would like to note that we're streaming live, and we'll be taking questions from viewers which can be submitted by email to events at Brookings.edu or via Twitter with the hashtag emails. With that, I will now hand the mic over to Shibley Telhami.

**SHIBLEY TELHAMI:** Well, thank you, Suzanne. It's really a pleasure to join my colleague. Itamar Rabinovich and Ksenia hopefully will join us shortly. So, this book is really an important revision of what Itamar has written in the past. And it's not just a revision, honestly. It has a lot of updates, obviously, for content from the past, but also it brings it up to date, especially with it with a section on the Abraham Accords and the Biden administration. But I was even impressed that he managed to squeeze as a short commentary on the current Israeli government. Obviously, I know how book productions go. They dig forever and it's hard to bring them up to date. So it was kind of interesting to see that he managed to do that and the press worked with him to to get that done.

So what I would like to do is first call on Itamar to give us a little bit of a view of of the book. And then if Ksenia joins us, then call on her to offer some remarks. And I'd like to engage Itamar with some aspects of the book, as well as take it beyond to the moment that he didn't have a chance to explore fully, given the timing of the book and the incredible events that we're all witnessing in Israel Palestine, but also in the region broadly. Itamar, it's a true pleasure to see you. It's been a while since I've seen you in person, and I do know that, you know, you come at this from not just from the point of view of a diplomat who served during a really critical period where in fact it was true hope for Israeli-Palestinian peace, actually even Syrian-Israeli peace, as you know better than anyone in that particular on that particular issue. But you come at it also from from the point of view, first and foremost, being a scholar of this issue, someone who was highly respected in Israel as a scholar of the region, but especially Israel's top specialist on on Syria. And that shows in the way your style of writing and trying to combine your expertise with your experience as a diplomat. So I very much appreciated going through the book. Inevitably, it is a sweeping book, and so therefore you can't give justice particularly to the background stories. That's a history that is rich and highly debated and it's very hard to like, tackle it in depth, which is. But you wanted to provide the readers with this background, and inevitably it doesn't get as much detail as all the different possibilities related to those. But the the the obviously, the focus is really more on the the Oslo till till now. Those are the areas where a lot is brought into play from that combines both your own experience and your own scholarship. So I'd like first of all, to call on you to give us a little bit of an overview. And then I want to welcome Ksenia. She has just joined us and I'm glad that you managed to get over your technical difficulties and join the conversation After Itamar gives his overview. I'm going to call on you with Ksenia to offer your reflections on the book and

commentary, and then I want to come back and engage both of you in a conversation about the book. Itamar, please.

**ITAMAR RABINOVICH:** Yes, thank you. Simply let me begin by showing the book. The book itself is a full view of the book, but I will now start responding to your question. So the book came about. It's actually a third incarnation of a book I first wrote when I ended my diplomatic mission in Washington, and I decided then to write two books. One was the account of my negotiations with Syria, and the other was an overview of Arab-Israeli relations, peace and the conflict and the peace process that was published in 1998 and 2012. So much has happened that I thought I should write a second version of the book. And lo and behold, ten years later, and so much else has happened that I thought it was time to do a third version. The Brookings press was very happy to publish it in the center, and it was very happy to endorse it. So we we have arrived together and to this to this moment.

So what is new about the book? The first the the word the region in the title, Israel and the region. I think the region has become much more important in the scheme of things. And to put it bluntly, the Iranian Israeli conflict now often overshadows the Arab-Israeli conflict or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And the very fact that Iran and Turkey have joined fully and the Middle Eastern police going to, you know, transform that arena. These are two, in regional terms, mega powers, countries of more than 90 million with strong economies, militaries both actually and do not necessarily see themselves just as regional actors, but as actors on the international scene, very much manifested more recently by the fact that by the collaboration between Iran in Russia and in Ukraine and Turkey itself has been active not just in the core of the Middle East, but in the Gulf, in as in Azerbaijan, mainly in conflict in Libya. Both are major players and they both have difficult relationship with Israel. Iran is a country Turkey's and on and off the relationship right now. And there is a certain rapprochement. But there were was periods covered in covered in the book. So that is one point. And the other and the other points, the changes in U.S. administrations and policy is we have the second Obama administration, the very ambitious by John Kerry to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And then, of course, the in the certainly in terms of foreign policy, but not just the unusual administration of Trump, Donald Trump and with his. It's a unique contribution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. First, by having each team put on the table and a very ambitious but not very realistic plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And then I would say, almost inadvertently, his initiative contributed to the Abraham Accords, which were what I call in the book the unintended consequence of the end of the Obama of the Trump initiative and of the particular plan that these three aides put on put on the table.

And, of course, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While some aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict seem to have been moderated, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is ever more intense. And I call this a telescope ization of the conflict, what used to be in earlier decades, the full fledged Arab-Israeli conflict, is now, to a large extent, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which makes it more focused both much more and much more difficult. If there were those in Israel who wanted to see the Abraham Accords, the end of the territories for peace, and something that signals the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict, that obviously was erroneous, actually, and the Palestinian conflict, first of all, the Palestinians are there, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is there. And, of course, more recently, less covered in the book or the alluded to, is the fact that we now have an extreme right wing nationalistic government in Israel that openly wants to annex the West Bank. I know that you're one of the authors of the book on one state reality. From my point of view and the point of view of many Israelis and such Israeli policy as just push forward towards the one state was rather than resolve and resolve the issue.

Now, we also had the the Syrian civil war, a very important event in the history of the region to say and in a way the last and said this chapter of the Arab Spring and with there was massive repercussions for the region from the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria and to the transformation of the Syrian state and in Syria is now one of six failed states that we're having in the Arab world. And the regime is there, but only in 60% of Syria. Bashar al-Assad doesn't. So much seems to mandate that the only people who invented it would be central Syria. They're in control of essentially Syria. And the rest, I think, is of less and less interest to them. And of course, they also had

repercussions for the Syrian-Israeli relationship. The prospects of the Syrian-Israeli peace deal now seem very dim and not very likely. And Syria itself is the arena of the Iranian Israeli conflict. Iran is trying to build a massive infrastructure of missiles and other weapon systems in Syria directly under its control. And Israel, of course, is determined to prevent Iran from and from doing that. And so and now more recently, not so much covered in the book, but I think needs to be mentioned in the context of this event. And as I mentioned, the establishment of a radical right wing government in Israel, a government that began its term by trying to transform Israel itself, changed the legal judicial system and other aspects of public and political life in the country. So the country is now totally preoccupied with these issues. But of course, Israel cannot afford to forget that it lives in a quote unquote dangerous place. And its relationship with the Palestinians, with other neighbors, will come to the fore at some point. How this particular government will deal with these issues is a different matter. Thank you.

**SHIBLEY TELHAMI:** Well, thanks so much for this overview. Ksenia, I want to call on you to offer some reflections.

**KSENIA SVETLOVA:** Well, first of all, it's good to be here. It's a privilege for me to speak about the professor of the knowledge book. And although I didn't have a privilege to be his student because I started in Hebrew University in Tel Aviv, but I can certainly tell you that then back then in the nineties, when I was a freshman, I started from his books on Syria and other issues. And also 30 years later, I continue being a student and just reading the words of wisdom and analysis, deep analysis about things that still matter today because history matters. And today in Israel, given the situation that was so well described right now by Professor Rabinovich, you feel very much more than ever before. Why you started matters, why the unfinished business there and result conflicts with the Palestinians, why it matters. Also, when we are talking about such issues such as judicial reform and the changes perhaps in the very, you know, base of Israeli democracy, because those who support the coup against democracy don't have another word to describe it. They go back to the disengagement with Gaza and they go back to the Oslo Accords. While many facts are being falsified, many a, I would say changed or facts are being completely rewritten. And while this is all modern history that we were witnesses of. Therefore, the importance of this book that basically issues together the most important developments in the in that the sphere of Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the last at least four decades, but also gives original context because unfortunately I'm saying it with great sorrow. There are many also scholars, not only politicians, that tend to do this dichotomy between the regional and the Israeli Palestinian. Let us deal with the regional, they say. Let us focus on the Abraham Accords. Did a splendid, you know, finally somebody wants us in the region. But when you detach the core and this is exactly the core, this is how it's also described in the book, the Israeli-Palestinian, the complexity, the conflict that still is very much the active and perhaps might also go to the even more active phase. This from Adam. Well, we can only say that, you know, there is no regional without there. I don't know how even to regard the domestic. And in order to understand what is the importance and what is the influence, what is the ramifications of not solving, not tending to this conflict, you get it flow going. You know, from the pages of this wonderful book, when you basically try to analyze what has happened in our region in the last 50 years. Of course, I agree with Professor Rabinovich about the political position. Yes, that's how you put it of the conflict being class Israeli Arab, and that they can make essentially more Israeli Palestinian. But again, this is today. This is today. And while, you know, many other things that happened and the unfinished Syrian war that is being going into this later stage, but still, you know, the reasons for their presence are still there. Lebanon that is crumbling. Other states that became failed states as well. At the same time, if somebody in Israel wanted to, you know, nurture hopes that the world will just forget about what is happening there, this Arab Israeli Palestinian conflict. Well, you know, this is clearly a mistake. Everybody can see. And even if this conflict is not being followed so meticulously today, as it used to be by Arab countries, certainly some 40 years ago and 50 years ago, and we are not in active stage of conflict with this countries. We are going to some kind of a pacification and a normalization, but at the same time not tending to what was unfinished again during the fatal Oslo years brings us again today on the verge of maybe cooling down the relations with some Arab countries in the Gulf. And if things will become more, things will escalate, then, you know, everything is possible. And again, you know, this acceptance of Israel into the family of the Middle Eastern countries, which seems very much is a reality. Some two

years ago, even one year ago today, still, I believe, you know that there is a question mark. The book of Professor Rabinovich. Exactly. You know, you know, this framework of the region and the global changes that it leaves during this decade. But we don't forget that the region keeps changing basically every single day. And while it's important to look at the past in order to understand that today, we also have to understand that the future my bills are very, very different. I am, of course, alluding to the future of Abraham Accords somewhere in the normalization that we experienced lately with Turkey. Again, you know, things change here in their unbelievable pace and everything is connected domestic to regional, to international. And it was again, it was a pleasure going through the chapters, first chapters of this book, looking at how they are glued together and indeed, you know, looking into this picture of how did our whole the Middle East changed during this ridiculous.

**SHIBLEY TELHAMI:** Well, thanks so much, Ksenia. So what I'd like to do is engage the two of you. And while I'm going to ask the some of the questions directly to Itamar, so feel free to that. You also win because these are obviously this is a conversation and it should be that way. And I'd like to you know, as I as I noted earlier, the book covers a lot of ground by default because it wants to present the background even as it focuses more on more recent history. So I'm not going to engage the historical part. That's just not because it's not addressed in depth that it's intended more as a background. So I'd like to really address two issues that have been central and beginning with the treatment of the failure at Camp David in 2000. And I say that particular issue specifically because honestly, in historical perspective, we all look back at this. We know that the most optimistic period was the 1990s. And it looked like there was a path toward achieving Israeli-Palestinian peace. And I think in historical perspective, the failure and collapse of the American mediation efforts at Camp David in 2000, which were followed by the second Intifada, those events are the ones that have probably ended the prospect of two states that if foreseeable future. And so they are important. It's important to understand them. It's important to grapple with the history. It's important to grapple with whether it really was an opportunity or whether we're just all kind of, you know, not coming to grips with a reality that is structural, that wasn't going to help make it happen.

Now, in the book, which you treat this, you know, in-depth, this is obviously an area that you knew about a lot and you've been involved in it, but you're treated in a way by providing different narratives about it. So there is the orthodoxy, you know, that that says, you know, Arafat just was just to blame and he's the reason why it failed. And then what you call the revisionist school, which includes, you know, Rob Malley and other and particularly in the book that the article they wrote that became influential about, no, it's not quite like that. It's that it's more complicated and Israel is also to blame. But what you don't do, essentially is something about the American role. And obviously this was a mediated effort that both sides were relying on. The United States. In fact, as you know, Arafat and and Barak hardly talked to each other at at Camp David. This was all direct. Even the conversation was mediated by by by President Clinton. And so the question of the the kind of in in as you know, we covered this ground in a book called *The Peace Puzzle* that I did with William Quandt, Dan Kurtzer, Steve Spiegel and Scott Lissitzky. And we also went into interviews with a lot of the key participants to kind of try to figure out why it failed. Taking these same accounts that you you've stated and summarized very well in the book, and our conclusion was a little bit different. Our conclusion was there were really a couple of you know, obviously, yes, the Palestinians didn't behave in a way that they could have optimally. Barak himself, you know, didn't behave like he should have in order to get an agreement. But there is a primary responsibility or a large responsibility that that on the shoulder of the U.S. role, particularly Clinton, and he had to do more with the with the nature of the Israeli-American relationship, which is obviously it's central to everything that happens between Israel and Arab states throughout the history. And you can't you couple that assessment of bilateral negotiations between Israel and Arabs, Israel and the Palestinians without this American role and the relationship with Israel.

So what we found, for example, is that Clinton never really considered this issue a strategic priority. He was doing it mostly, you know, for maybe legacy political support. But ultimately, while he came to empathize with the Palestinian aspirations, no question over time, he was first and foremost looking at it through the prism of support for Israel. And that when he came in, basically basically being brought to Arafat, to the White House. And then Israel took Arafat out of the White

House. Essentially, American foreign policy was responsive to Israel in terms of what Israel wanted and when ultimately the Camp David failed. You know, and it was no longer in Israel's interest. The whole issue, basically, Clinton embraced the Israeli position as the most graphic part of the story that, you know well is that Arafat did not want to go to Camp David because he think they were ready, that he hadn't talked about all the critical issues of the day. All the critical issues that need to be resolved had not even been discussed in detail between Israel and the Palestinians and the Americans. There was no even preparation by the American team on final status issues, not sufficient. That is, in our opinion, in that book. But Arafat was worried that Barack and Clinton would gang up on him, and then they would blame him for the failure and that this is a setup. And as you know, the Clinton administration promised him that they wouldn't blame him no matter what. In the end, as you know, Clinton made a decision and the decision was very much at the urging of Arafat or Barak to blame him because it was politically convenient, he thought, for him. And ultimately that that really closed anyway. The chapter in terms of the options available to Arafat after that. We also noted in that in that book, something related to the the relationship between Clinton and Barak, that almost all officials in the U.S. government, including the, you know, the national security adviser, the secretary of state, all thought were unhealthy because Barak was too responsive, individual in unprecedented ways. We haven't seen that where the prime minister of another country would call the president any time of the day and does it and bypasses the national security adviser, bypasses the the secretary of state, developed a personal relationship with Clinton, was highly responsive and sensitive to his political needs in Israel. So that actually, to me, that really frames the picture in some ways, because America has a American-Israeli relationship. And the solidity of that relationship over the years has been a major factor. And I would say that at Camp David that was a huge factor in the failure at Camp David insists on. Obviously, you know, the absence of accountability over time has added to much more failures. But I want to draw you on that one, because that's not exactly the way you frame this issue as you basically tell the story of what the different views are in on the failure at Camp David in 2000.

**ITAMAR RABINOVICH:** Okay. A very good question. A very important point. And let let me broaden the picture a bit and put in the Syrian negotiations, because I think. A major opportunity that was missed just before Oslo was to make an Israeli-Syrian peace. When Rabin gave the deposit to Secretary Christopher and surprisingly expressed willingness to withdraw fully from the Golan in return for a package of peace and security. This was mishandled by and by the secretary and the sectarian extreme also. In a couple of days later, flew to back to America because it was August and then vacation time. And I thought that was a huge opportunity missed with the peace process. One of the different routine, but it was mixed. Now, as to as to Camp David and I think and I think the or the point I would stress is not so much the one you presented, the closeness between Clinton and Barak and the Israeli prism through which the Clinton administration saw the issue. But the absence of a more assertive, more manipulative approach. I'm using the word manipulative, going back to Camp David, one to President Carter and the Egyptian-Israeli peace be it would not have been achieved, but for both for the peculiar style of that of Jimmy Carter, who who could be persistent, sometimes nasty, sometimes manipulative. But but he made it. He made it happen. He didn't want it. If you remember the initial response to to the Sadat visit to Jerusalem from Gaza was not positive. But once it happened, he took charge. And and and so so he through and and Clinton was too nice and mild that the person in a way and to be to be a second thought. So that's an interesting that's interesting speculation to to make that a Carter at Camp David two might have made the difference.

But to your specific point and I think Arafat's what do you know Arafat was did not want to come to Camp David. He was not ready. But it may have been a set up, as you say, in Barak very much wanted to go to because he saw that what eventually happened in the second intifada was about to take place. He used to speak about the Titanic in cabinet meetings in his very, very much wanted it, and obviously it failed to happen. So I chose, as you mentioned, to bring the focus the four categories into which the Camp David literature is is divided. And not everybody liked the place I gave him or her and that and that. They said, sure, but anyway, that's the way it is in the book. And maybe another point and you correctly said that the earlier part is, is this so that the brief account of the early conflict, I simply decided I didn't want to write that in the 800 page book.

And no, no one reads 800 books and nowadays so I, I chose to give a relatively short survey is a background and focus on events from and basically the 1990s and in know there's plenty there.

**SHIBLEY TELHAMI:** No that's that's clear and that's obvious and we all do that I mean you to give a background you cannot get into too much detail but you still have to present the, the background so that that's clear. I want to, I want to move to the Abraham Accords because that stuff, you know, a new chunk in the book and obviously very important one, we're still dealing with the consequences. But I want to ask Ksenia if she wants to to add anything to what Itamar said related to Camp David first.

**KSENIA SVETLOVA:** Yeah, well, actually, I was about to ask a question. Couple question about the missed opportunity, the Syrian opportunity. And in this regard, I think that it's important perhaps to clarify another point. While progress might not or might or might not be made, the Iranians were increasing at the same time they involvement in the Arab Middle East and their original aspirations were pretty much, you know, known already by then. Do you believe that the progress that would be made with Syria, Israel over Syria would prevent an expansion of your. Bosnian entrenchment in the Syrian soil, Lebanese perhaps as well, and other Middle Eastern countries.

**ITAMAR RABINOVICH:** And I am glad you raised the point, Ksenia, because and and also to some extent in response to Shibley's earlier earlier comment, the US based in the group of experts that worked with the first with President Bush and then with President Clinton on the Arab-Israeli peace process was divided into two, the quote unquote pro-Palestinian group and the pro-Syrian group, namely the one who wanted more, a Palestinian Israeli settlement and the one that preferred the Syrian-Israeli settlement, the one that preferred the Syrian-Israeli settlement, so that the thought that if Syria were taken out of the conflict with Israel and from the Russian sphere of influence, then it could transform the geopolitics of the region. And consistently, they preferred a Syrian deal to facilitate. And they were disappointed by Rabin's decision to go to Oslo and not to continue would be the opposite. They were then unhappy again with the decision to make this second deal with Jordan and not with Syria. And they had their final chance in 2008, late 1999. Assad, for a brief moment, didn't want to make the deal because I think he wanted to leave his son Bashar and clean and clean this. But at that point, he was too weak physically and politically. He was dying. And when President Clinton met Assad with the last meeting in 2000, in Geneva, in a very unsuccessful meeting, he met a dying man. And that that was a brief and in a very unproductive meeting. So. Yeah, well.

**SHIBLEY TELHAMI:** I interrupt you, Itamar, on that meeting. And one thing you didn't mention about it is, is that Clinton felt betrayed by Barak because what Barak had told him before he went to meet with Assad in Geneva turned out not to be accurate and he was angry. So the failure is not just in the failure in the communication. The messaging that came from Barak to Clinton was not correct.

**ITAMAR RABINOVICH:** Yeah, I agree. There was some some tension and criticism. There is.

**SHIBLEY TELHAMI:** So let me let me switch to the Abraham Accords, because that obviously is really, you know, an important part of the book. And you actually you discuss that in a very revealing way and and helpful. There's a lot of detail, particularly on the annexation. So the first thing I want to ask you is I want to ask you really two questions on it. One. One question is about how it came about. I mean, we all know that the the you know, the Trump administration had basically failed in its effort, you know, with the deal of the century. And without the Abraham Accords, they would have had nothing to show for it. And so, anyway, the United Arab Emirates saved them. And for that matter, I would argue, even saved Netanyahu, not just saved the Trump administration. And I want to just to elaborate on that, because you deal with the annexation as as a proposal that came, you know, from the the the Trump administration to Israel when it looked like the the deal essentially wasn't going to come about. We are in the process of finishing up a sequel to the to the peace puzzle where we also have a huge jump on the Trump administration, did a lot

of interviews of people who are involved, top people who were involved in the Trump administration, the UAE and elsewhere. So we have, you know, sort of formulated some ideas on it that are not very far from yours. But I just want to bring up the question related to the the annexation part. And part of it is that there is this idea that that the deal stopped Israel from annexing parts of the West Bank. But what you say in there very clearly is that that was not necessarily on the horizon. Even if the David Friedman, the ambassador, the U.S. ambassador in Israel, wanted that, Netanyahu may have wanted that. But members of a coalition like Beyonce and others opposed that. And obviously there was also political consequences for him, relations with what was likely to become by that time an American and Democratic administration with the push back. So was there really even was that even on was that even possible that Netanyahu would have done that? Or was that just like a fig leaf? It provided a fig leaf for him politically at home to be able to say, well, you know, I got something much bigger than than implementing annexation. So how do you see that annexation piece fitting into this deal?

**ITAMAR RABINOVICH:** And I think in order to understand that episode as well as you know, to understand what goes on in Israel, now we have to mention the fact that Netanyahu is in the middle of a criminal trial, a serious one, that he reached a conclusion that he must remain prime minister almost at any cost in order not to go to jail or to survive the trial. He looks at the and what happened to Olmert, who left the prime ministership and ended up in jail. And that makes him very weak and vulnerable in these negotiations with the coalition partners, you know. Now, he knows that he's natural support based on the rights and settlers and the settlers party and the ultra-Orthodox, Shas and so forth. And and these are the people he caters to. And when the annexation element was introduced into the deal of the century and the frontline peace plan, if the settlers demanded that he implement it and they were, he was under pressure to do this. But as you indicated correctly, at that point, you had a coalition government. He had guns in the in the government, and they would not let him do that. And the Trump administration came to the conclusion that this was not Israel's Bible. They were willing to look at an alternative, was a policy. And then came the very assertive policy of the Emiratis who wanted this. I think this was it at the time. Iraqis were latecomers to the under the table relationship with Israel that so many other or several other Arab countries in the Gulf had before. But when once they joined it, they wanted to take the precedence in view of their desire to be the victors and to be a leading and important actor. And their role in this is to be very important. Now, the annexation element is still with us. I mean, when Netanyahu made his coalition agreement with the Smotrich and then we are the two radical right right wingers and they put into the coalition agreement the notion of settlement. Yes, if I kept some maneuverability with language. But the the element is, is there this is a government that wants to annex the West Bank and be what be what may. And so there is a certain similarity to what existed before the before the Abraham Accords. And the Abraham Accords themselves, I think, have been slowed down a bit by and by the formation of this government. It is difficult for the Emiratis and others to proceed with Israel as if things were normal when things are not normal.

**SHIBLEY TELHAMI:** Okay. So I want to take that a little further. Okay. On on the on the Abraham Accords to, with regard to all the peace efforts between Israel and the Arab states that have kind of bypassed the Palestinian issue and whether or not the net outcome has been essentially to embolden the far right in Israel and and in the sense that they don't have to. They can do what they want on the West Bank. They don't have to compromise with the Palestinians. The U.S. will continue to back them to make peace with the Arab states. The Arab states themselves are doing it. And not only did Trump obviously conclude the Abraham Accords, but also the Biden administration adopted them and is pushing with the same the same theory, the theory being that let's do that independently from the Palestinian track rather than condition relations with the with the with the Palestinian track. And I say that because now in historical perspective, when you look at the issue of accountability, incentives and to to make peace on the the the central issue, Israel Palestine. One can argue that almost all of the peace agreements, certainly including the Camp David Accords in 1979, have in essence, come at the expense of a just Israeli-Palestinian agreement. You know, one can argue that the Carter administration that you mentioned, obviously, that Carter is in our on our minds these days. I hope he lives longer every day that he lives. I think he's a is a bright light on onto the world personally. But at Camp David, you know, while the Camp David in historical perspective looks like it came at the expense of the



Palestinian issue, it came at the expense of Palestine issue, because obviously it took out the biggest leverage that the Arabs had on behalf of the Palestinians in this equation. When Carter went into it, Carter thought at the time that this would actually make it more likely that to reach an agreement on the Palestinian issue. And as you know, there was an agreement on autonomy, agreement on the Palestinians that was not directly tied to the the treaty with with Egypt. Sadat himself thought it was going to help resolve the Palestinian issue so that, you know, was assassinated very shortly after and Carter was defeated. I had multiple conversation with President Carter on this, in which he he felt, you know, that, you know, he would have he would have used the Camp David Accords to to move forward on Palestine had he been reelected. Obviously, that didn't happen. So what I would say here is that, you know, people were saying about the Abraham Accords, yes, let's make it you know, it'll make it easier because Arabs now will weigh in and they'll have a voice in Israel and they can impact the Palestinian issue. Instead, what we saw is obviously it emboldened the right and the argument inside, we don't have to we don't have to make peace with the Palestinians. We can the Arabs will come to see it our way. So I want you to reflect on this. I mean, is this not a failed strategy when it comes to advancing the most critical issue? Now? You know, we've got we're talking about an Israeli military rule over the Palestinians for most of this century with no end in sight. I mean, it is not just a political issue. It's a humanitarian issue. It is a rights issue. It is something that needs to be addressed today, not not in ten years. And have these accords really made that less likely or maybe even impossible?

**ITAMAR RABINOVICH:** So I've come to that point. But let me make two introductory comments. One is there has been a certain fatigue in the in the Arab world with the Arab with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that was reflected in the Abraham Accords, but also, surprisingly, among the Arab Arabs in Israel. The fact is that the in Arab party, the affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and environments where both joined in the Israeli coalition for the first time when the benefit of a government was was formed. And it reflected the view that said, okay, there is the Palestinian question, we are Palestinians, but it's time we looked after ourselves. After all the interest as citizens of the state of Israel, these two developments, I think the two manifestations often of the same of the same movements is not the exclusive movie in the environment, but the but is the second. I don't think that the radical Israeli right wing, the messianic right wing represented by people like Smotrich, they were emboldened by Mr. Shirley just by the Abraham Accords. I would like to draw your attention and those who listen to us, to an article published with an essay published by Smotrich in 2017 in which which is called The Thankful Decision in which you presented this view in a way of one statement. So we should the next the West Bank, and we will deal with the Arabs in three different ways. It is a terrible, terrible peace, very irritating, very frightening. But we published in 2017. And what's happened was in the elections of November 2022 is that by happenstance he rode on the shoulders of Ben-gvir and from a small party of four they became a party of 15. And they could dictate that I'm still Netanyahu. So it's not a it's not a byproduct of the Abraham Accords is something that has been growing on the rise of that messianic streak among the settlers and among the the Israeli radical right wing. Finally, and the Palestinians reacted. That was very negatively of the Palestinian Authority and other Palestinian spokesmen through the Abraham Accords. They have discovered now that they can actually work with them. Iran sees them. Europe is they become much more much more involved. And I was hoping that the opening of the the Emirates and other countries, Morocco and so forth, if the Israelis would in the long range help to moderate the Arab-Israeli relationship because the Israelis meet and the Arabs of different persuasions are very much affected by this, this is not something immediate, but something that could help Israelis and Palestinians to come to terms because they have to. Now, finally, to the point to mention, you know, I'm the scholar and the book I think is scholarly, but then also a very connected member of the Israeli civil society. And as such, I belong to different groups and organizations that are trying to to keep the idea of two states alive and trying to make it happen now, at least to keep it alive.

**SHIBLEY TELHAMI:** Thanks so much. I know Ksenia wants to say something on this, but I just. One comment on the far right. I didn't mean the far rights position has heart. That's been their position. It's just that that argument which says we don't have to make peace with the Palestinians because the Arabs are going to normalize anyway, resonates more with the Israeli public. It's more persuasive. And therefore, you know, that neutralizes an argument that used to be an incentive or

put as an incentive, if you just like along the Arab peace plan, if you end the occupation, then you get full peace with the Arabs. And obviously that's been bypassed. And that argument is no longer an incentive for the Israeli public in the political discourse. So that takes away from those who want to see change take place in the Israeli policy. Ksenia.

**KSENIA SVETLOVA:** Well, first of all, I would like to reflect on what the both of you just said. And just to mention that just two and a half years ago, prior to the launch of the Abraham Accords, the polls that were conducted by Israel showed strong, very strong support of the whole of the Israeli society. Amazing. 85% supported the peace with the UAE, Morocco, Bahrain and so on over annexation. So if some members of the political sphere in Israel were perhaps emboldened by this belief, and I believe that the Palestinian issue was abandoned forever and nobody will turn to it any more than the general public seems to be moving in the opposite direction from that. But, of course, you know, this is something that polls change. Public opinion has changed. And it also depends how you put the question. The second remark is about the Saudi Arabia. I think that precisely in this day and again, you know, the pace of events is so fast and everything is so fluid that sometimes you say, well, you know, I don't have enough privilege and time to reflect on what just happened. And now you understand. And I think it deal with the standards very well, that while, you know, he was building on the Middle Eastern model and joining Saudi Arabia to the Abraham Accords, suddenly Saudi Arabia is actually makes peace again with Iran. And the broker is China, not not the United States. And the Saudis are saying every single day that there is no peace, there will be no peace without there tending to the Palestinian issue. So that's what I meant. You know, when in actually marks I said that, well, you know, that we are living the history this very day. You stories here it it's happening historical events, you know happening almost every single day. In the end of it lies the reality, which is it's a bitter reality for many Israelis would love to think that we are past we are past Palestinian conflict already, but we are not. And of course, the inevitable question is whether the current coalition on any other right wing coalition that might come here in Israel would choose Saudi Arabia and the Arab world over annexation. And it whether it's crippling taxation without the formal announcement or the official annexation of, let's say, Jordan Valley or some other parts, you know, whether it will be choosing their relations with the Arab world, just like the Israeli people apparently want.

**SHIBLEY TELHAMI:** Yeah. So, you know, whether there's formal annexation or not, that's a side story. It's it's the situation on the ground with de facto annexation that matters. The formality of annexing and in some ways would would take away the the the kind of illusion that there isn't Israeli control right now. And there is. So I don't think that in a way, even if they the technicality of withholding annexation without changing the reality on the ground has no practical meaning for the Palestinians, in all honesty. But I want to since you mentioned the renewal of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which is a very important event, I know we're run out of time, but I want to take a few extra minutes to to address that doesn't give Itamar an opportunity to address that because this is an issue is thought about and written about elsewhere. So I want to just briefly, Itamar, if you could, give us sort of your assessment or read of that relationship, that agreement that is.

**ITAMAR RABINOVICH:** I think I am looking at it in primarily two contexts. One is Yemen. I think it's very important for the Saudis to end the civil war in Yemen, to stabilize it in some way. The effort to obtain a military decision have failed, and they see Iran as a key to that. And secondly, it needs to be put in the context of their relationship with the United States. There is anger. And in Saudi Arabia and among the royal family at the United States, particularly if Obama and his administration. Let me mention the piece written by Prince to keep in voice said We are not free riders. Was a direct response to Obama, Biden and his team not seen by them very much as a continuation of Obama. And, you know, they treated Biden very poorly on the question of dealing with the price and flow of oil. And they are not with the United States on Ukraine. And now to mend fences with Iran and do it through China or for partners. And it was a direct challenge to the United States. These are the two context in which I see this region.

**SHIBLEY TELHAMI:** Yeah, I think that those are really interesting goals, particularly about the Yemen piece, you know, driving a lot of what the Saudis are doing. Just quickly, from my point

of view. Put aside the China piece, that's another big story. But I think if, in fact, this is an agreement that will create a little more Saudi Iranian cooperation in the region, a little more we don't expect, remember, they have strategically opposing interests in the region, but if a little bit more cooperation emerges, this is good for the region. And why I say that is that I think that we were just on the eve of the 20th anniversary of the most devastating war in the region, the Iraq war that has been disrupted across the board. But one of the destructive aspects of it was the intensification of the proxy wars between Iran and Saudi Arabia that have been devastating, including in Syria, including in Lebanon, including in Iraq, including in Yemen. And if there is a chance that this cooperative relationship will reduce those conflicts, that's a good thing for the Middle East. I really, really grateful for you for joining us for writing this book and Ksenia I really appreciate your comments, your insights, that coming on it. Good luck with the book. It's a it's an important one and I think it will be read. And thank you for Brookings to Brookings for holding this event. We'll see you all later on. I believe that I don't know if anyone is coming on to end this conversation, but I am looking forward to the next book as the event. Thank you all.

**ITAMAR RABINOVICH:** Thank you all

**SHIBLEY TELHAMI:** Bye bye.

**KSENIA SVETLOVA:** It was a privilege