

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION  
FALK AUDITORIUM  
YEMEN'S CIVIL WAR: A HISTORICAL LOOK

Washington, D.C.

Thursday, October 5, 2023

WELCOMING REMARKS:

NATAN SACHS  
Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Middle East Policy  
The Brookings Institution

INTRODUCTION:

BRUCE RIEDEL  
Nonresident Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy  
The Brookings Institution.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS:

THE HONORABLE CHRIS MURPHY (D-CONN.)  
U. S. Senate

PANEL DISCUSSANTS:

DAFNA H. RAND  
Nonresident Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy  
The Brookings Institution

MODERATOR: MAHSA ROUHI  
Research Fellow  
National Defense University

\* \* \* \* \*

**SACHS:** Good afternoon, everyone. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for joining us, both online and here at the Brookings Institution. I'm Natan Sachs, I'm a senior fellow here in the Foreign Policy program and the director of the Center for Middle East Policy. It's my distinct pleasure on behalf of Amy Liu, our president, to welcome you here to this event. Our event today is to celebrate the release of a new book, "America and the Yemens: A Complex and Tragic Encounter," by my senior and very esteemed and very admired colleague, Bruce Riedel, a Brookings nonresident senior fellow now, I should say. In his book, Bruce places the ongoing conflict in Yemen in the context of America's long engagement with the various political entities that have comprised Yemen, North and South, tracing the history of the U.S.-- U.S.-Yemen relations all the way back to JFK and his response to the Egyptian and Soviet involvement in Yemen in 1962.

This event also offers us a very special and personally important chance to congratulate Bruce on a long, storied career filled with accomplishments as he begins his very well-deserved retirement. His remarkable career includes 30 years of service at the CIA, including postings overseas, serving as senior advisor on South Asia and the Middle East to four presidents in that post and other posts, in the staff of the National Security Council serving as deputy assistant secretary of defense for East Asia and South Asia, and for-- excuse me, Near East and South Asia, and as senior advisor at NATO. He was a member of President Clinton's peace process team at Camp David-- including Camp David. He chaired President Obama's review of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan. I can keep going on and on.

Here at Brookings, he brought us his singular experience of U.S. foreign policy and his broad understandings in the Near East and South Asia, and many other parts of the world. He brought it through numerous books and other publications. This book that we're celebrating today is his ninth book, with today's topic, the U.S. and Yemen, among many other issues, most recently U.S.-Saudi relations, U.S.-Jordanian relations, and much else. He also has been an incredibly valuable and generous colleague. I've said this in other occasions as well, but he has not had any business giving many of us the time of day, he always did. He was one of the most generous mentors to people at Brookings and outside Brookings, offering his time, offering his wisdom, anecdotes from — for me, Camp David and many other places, many other occasions that I care about, but so much else that he has seen, often commenting that, "According to foreign sources, I may have been stationed here

or there and perhaps I spoke to this leader or that leader," and it tends to be just about every leader you can think of.

I'm also thrilled and very honored to welcome to Brookings Senator Chris Murphy, who will offer keynote remarks today. Since 2013, Senator Murphy has represented Connecticut in the United States Senate where he sits on the Foreign Relations, Appropriations, Health [inaudible]. He has sit on health, education, labor, and pensions committees. So, quite a few very important postings. In his time in the Senate and as a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, he has been an outspoken voice for foreign policy, for a foreign policy vision, focused on diplomacy, international human rights, and the need for American leadership abroad. I'll note also that on Yemen in particular, he's been an absolute key voice on issues that Bruce has championed, I think not alone, but really heading the D.C. policy community, championing issues of Yemen. And truly among 100 senators, there's been one senator who has been the champion of that. And we're really honored that Senator Chris Murphy, that champion, is here today. So, we're especially gratified to hear from him before he heads back to his constituency on this very important topic.

Right after the senator will speak, we'll hear from a wonderful panel. And so we're very excited also on that panel to welcome today, Dafna Rand who is joining the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings as a nonresident senior fellow. Welcome, Dafna. And her first appearance, not her first time speaking on this podium, not my first time introducing her on this podium, but her first time as a member of the Brookings family. She, in addition to being here at Brookings, is also a distinguished resident fellow for strategic affairs at Georgetown. She recently served in the State Department as director of the Office of Foreign Assistance, a very demanding and very important job, especially these days. Her long career includes time as deputy assistant secretary of state, Bureau of Democ-- in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, and also work in the Senate and much else. Finally, certainly last but not least, I'm very pleased to welcome Mahsa Rouhi, research fellow at the Center for Strategic Research in the Institute for National Security Studies at NDU, the National Defense University, who will moderate our discussion today. Before joining NDU, Mahsa was a research fellow of nonproliferation and nuclear policy program at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. And she'll be moderating the panel right after the senator speaks.

And before I conclude and you'll stop hearing for me, this is a book launch. So, I really want to remind all of you that you can-- that there's a link to purchase Bruce's excellent latest book, and can

be found on the website for this event at Brookings.edu. Copies are also available to those here for purchase outside and Bruce will be available to sign books. You can line up in the rear at the end if you'd like to purchase a copy. Now that this event is on the record and is being webcast, feel free to continue the discussion online also, using the hashtag America and Yemen. And with no further ado, please, thank you for joining us as well, I'll turn it over to Bruce briefly to welcome the senator, and thank you all for joining us.

**RIEDEL:** Thank you very much, Natan, for those very warm remarks. The Yemens — and Yemen has been a united country for less than a quarter of a century, so it really is the Yemens — are the poorest countries in the Middle East, desperately poor. Before the current civil war began, per capita income in the Yemens was \$965 a year. Fifty percent of the population is under the age of 50-- I'm sorry, under the age of 15, so it's only going to get worse, not better. Yemen is also one of the most water-deprived countries in the world. Yemenis use about 2% as much water as Americans do. When you think about that, it's a staggering figure. Yemen has been important to America for a long time though, as Natan indicated. John F. Kennedy dealt with the crisis in Yemen. Jimmy Carter dealt with the crisis in Yemen. Barack Obama dealt with the crisis in Yemen. In fact, for the last three presidents, Yemen has been not only in a state of civil war, but a country invaded, and to some extent, occupied by Saudi Arabia in a coalition. Barack Obama reluctantly, I think, decided to go along with the Saudi invasion. Donald Trump, of course, enthusiastically supported it. Joe Biden has tried to recalibrate American policy, and we have had some success. We've had a ceasefire in place now. Doesn't hold perfectly. Just last week, four Bahraini soldiers were killed. But it has generally held. But the blockade of Houthis-controlled Yemen, where 80% of Yemen is continues.

Today, there are three flights a week out of Sana'a, the royal ca-- the national capital. That means Yemenis who urgently need medical attention abroad cannot get it, and that literally affects hundreds of thousands of people. Yemen, as I said, is a water-deprived and it's a food-deprived country. Tens of thousands of young Yemeni children have been starved to death in this war. So, President Biden, we appreciate what you've done, but you've got a long way to go. I'm very honored to introduce Senator Murphy, who has been one of the stalwarts in the Congress trying to put reason into American policy, not just towards Yemen, but toward Saudi Arabia in general. One last thing I would also say: Yemen is the only country in the world that comes anywhere near having as many guns in private use as the United States of America. They actually have half as many guns as we do.

The senator has also been an outspoken supporter of gun control in this country, an issue that we desperately need more work on in the years ahead. And with that, I'll give the floor to the Senator.

**MURPHY:** Well, Bruce, thank you very much for that kind introduction. Natan, thank you for bringing us all together today. This is a bit of a unique event. It is not often that you combine book launch party with retirement party, right? And so forgive us, Bruce, if we maybe doubt the sincerity of the retirements, given how prodigious you remain, how vital you will still be to this debate, and how many people will undoubtedly still call upon you for advice. It is really wonderful to be here and to be part of this evening's program. I commend Bruce on taking to pen with this excellent book exploring America's long and complex relationship with Yemen. Brookings actually hosted maybe the first speech, or one of the first speeches, that I actually gave on Yemen when I was very much still learning, which was followed by a discussion with Bruce as part of that part of that evening. And-- but really why it's so special for me to be here is that Bruce's expertise and his courage on this issue, really more so than any other figure in Washington, shaped my views about Yemen.

When I gave my first speech on the floor about this war in Yemen, I have a good feeling 80 to 90 of my colleagues were hearing for the first time what was happening on the ground. But I had become convinced, in part by reading what Bruce had written, that this war was just simply not in U.S. national security interest. In fact, it was, on most days, entirely counterproductive. And there were people saying that at the time, but there wasn't anybody saying it with the CV that Bruce had. Bruce is an insider, somebody who has seen the belly of the foreign policy consensus from the very inside. And it was him that was challenging, maybe what was not a consensus, but certainly what was largely an unchallenged position from the highest ranks of the American foreign policy leadership, the idea that as a means to make Saudi Arabia okay with our decision to enter into a nuclear agreement with Iran, we owed them the unconditional backing of their disastrous war in Yemen. And what Bruce said more strongly and more boldly than others, is that this just-- it's not just that this doesn't line up with our interests. It is actually hurting us as a country on a daily basis. He talked a lot, and still talks a lot, about the reality of the relationship between Iran and the Houthis.

You know, since the beginning of this war, the fallacy has been put forth by supporters of the Saudi campaign that Iran and the Houthis were a combined element from the very beginning. If you're fighting the Houthis, you're fighting Iran. And Bruce tells the much more subtle story of a complicated relationship, but a relationship that became closer as the war dragged on, as the Houthis had

nowhere else to go but Iran in order to continue the war against the coalition. As the war dragged on, the thing we said we were trying to prevent, we were actually facilitating, Iran's growing influence inside Yemen. Bruce has talked a lot about the 400,000 war-related deaths, that's war-time deaths but disease and starvation, really hard to get your head wrapped around the scope of this humanitarian disaster.

But Bruce did a better job than anybody else of really making us understand what we were facilitating. The world's cholera rate, something that we hadn't talked about in this world, and then right in front of us in a war that we are participating in is the world's largest cholera outbreak. And not by accident, but because the coalition that the United States was a part of had a deliberate policy of bombing and attacking civilian infrastructure, including water treatment infrastructure. This wasn't a famine that was naturally caused. This was a humanit-- humanitarian disaster that was caused entirely by the decision of human beings, a coalition of human beings that the United States was a part of. Bruce talked and I listened a lot to the expansion of al-Qaida and ISIS' means of operation. We all know that the most serious arm, the most U.S.-focused arm of al-Qaida was and still is AQAP. And the fact that this war was providing more and more territory for these groups that had clear intent to attack Europe and the United States made absolutely no sense.

And then, maybe in the long term, what mattered most is the enormous damage this was doing to American credibility in this case as well. I remember sitting with a group of Yemeni Americans in my office early on as I was trying to learn more about whether this is a leadership role I wanted to take on, prompted by some of Bruce's writings. And I remember these Yemeni Americans telling us that in Yemen this is not simply seen as a Saudi-led war. This is seen as a U.S. war, right? "There's a U.S. stamp on the munitions that are dropped on us. We're fighting you. We're not just fighting the Saudis." And if you think about our mission to try to prevent young men from being driven to extremism, here's a country that is says has half of its population as teenagers in the middle of deciding what they're going to commit their lives to, and the defining paradigm of their existence is a war attacking civilians, deliberately financed and backed by the United States of America. How do you win a war against extremist recruiting when the, when the extremist groups have that kind of bulletin board material?

The debate in Washington has come a really long way since those early days. The first bill we put on the floor, Rand Paul and I, to stop funding the Saudi coalition got 24 votes. And as Bruce

writes about in his book, eventually we were able to pass a creative measure with the help of Senator Sanders and others, that made it clear that there was a developing right-left consensus against this war. And the Biden administration, well, listen, they do get a lot of grief for, you know, from those who believe that they have not necessarily fulfilled the promises on Saudi policy that the president made during the campaign. Their Yemen policy is a reversal of the Trump administration's policy. We still fund Saudi Arabia, but our decision to cut off funding, logistical support, and intelligence sharing relative to the Yemen war is absolutely a major part of the story as to why Saudi Arabia began the process of wrapping up military operations in coming to the table. That's a long story, it's a complicated story, but a big piece of it is the Biden administration's decision. And that journey that this country has gone on and this town has gone on, from looking the other way and willfully knowing little about Yemen to a moment today where every member of the Senate has to have a basic knowledge of what's happening in Yemen, has to have an opinion on what the United States role should be in that war, that is a legacy of a lot of people's work, of Brookings work, but of Bruce's work as well. And so it's really heartwarming for me to be back here, a place where I first appeared talking about Yemen with Bruce, to celebrate this book, which I think does a wonderful job of telling this story and telling the complicated, nuanced story of Yemen, and the U.S. role in Yemen, and doing it here at Brookings, which has been committed as an institution to telling this story.

To wrap it up by fast-forwarding us to the moment we sit in today, this rash decision-making that Saudi Arabia showed inside Yemen. Remember, it was MBS who confidently and naively asserted that the war would be over in a matter of weeks. And then when he held the advantage in 2018, couldn't understand that he wouldn't hold that advantage permanently. And instead of sitting down and finding a path forward, just continued to press military advantage. All of that rash decision-making and the way in which the Saudis prosecuted that war is one of the main reasons that many of us are very skeptical of a more formal security partnership with Saudi Arabia. And it's the reason the 20 United States senators stated in a letter that we sent to the administration just this week that we have serious concerns about a security commitment, perhaps a treaty commitment, to a country with such an awful domestic human rights record, but also a record of picking fights in the region in both a ham-handed and unconscionable way. And so while many of us remain open to hearing the case from the administration to looking at the fine print of an agreement with Saudi Arabia, there is no way

to view our perspective relationship with Saudi Arabia without looking in the rearview mirror, particularly with respect to their conduct in the war in Yemen.

And this book, I think, will help us understand Yemen, but will also help us think through the future relationship that we want to have with Saudi Arabia. I love the way that Bruce talks not about Yemen, but "the Yemens," because these multilayered conflicts that exist in Yemen, they do make a sustainable political arrangement moving forward extremely challenging. The absolutist approach that the Houthis have right now is the most immediate obstacle to compromise, but the distorting influence of Saudi and Iranian involvement, the corruption of self-interested motivations of the Yemeni political elite, they are serious impediments as well. And as we all know, the looming challenge of the secessionist southern movement, that's a big issue. It's just unclear as to whether the STC is gonna spend all their time fighting for independence or whether they can be brought into a unity government, into a conversation to ensure that Southerners aren't going to be relegated to second-class status, as they absolutely were in the past. But either way, these are the conversations that have to occur on political future for Yemen. They are high risk and the prospect for a new conflict is very high. Nobody should believe that the current state of affairs with relatively low levels of fighting is going to last. And so, as Bruce will remind us, the future of Yemen, it's got to be decided by Yemenis.

But as this book tells us, the United States can never step back and assume that others will lead. The United States has got to play a role in helping to broker peace. And that absolutely involves leaning heavily on our friends in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. And it also involves us taking some chances to build on some of the escalatory developments in the region between the Sunni states, the Gulf states, and Iran, and try to push forward the escalatory measures between the United States and Iran that would help smooth the path to a political settlement there. But while this is a retirement celebration, I don't know that the United States will be able to chart its way forward on Yemen policy without the ability to dial up Bruce, without the ability to draw on his, his wisdom, but also his courage to challenge the consensus when he sees it wrong, even when that consensus is being led with people that he served with and respects so much. And so as the U.S. looks to reshape our own engagement with Yemen, Bruce is going to be an indispensable resource to understand how we got here. And this book is going to be an indispensable resource for all of us to continue to learn about this long and important story of the United States in Yemen. So, thank you for allowing me to help you kick off this evening.



**RIEDEL:** Safe travels.

**ROUHI:** Thank you, everybody, for being here. The introductions have been made, so I turn to Bruce first to tell us a little bit about the book and then we take it from there.

**RIEDEL:** Sure. I spent a lot of time in my career in government dealing with the complicated issues of Yemen. The United States traditionally has seen its role in Yemen largely as a subset of its relationship with Saudi Arabia. It's understandable. Saudi Arabia is an extremely rich country. It has been a partner of the United States since 1943. It is a critical producer of energy resources, and it tends to dominate our thinking of how we deal not just with the Arabian Peninsula, but I would argue we deal with the Islamic world. I think that's probably a mistake. We let the Saudis have too big a role. It's certainly been a mistake in the last decade in how we deal with Yemen. Let me begin by saying right up front about the Yemeni civil war, there are no good guys in this struggle. If you're looking for the Boy Scouts, you're looking in the wrong country. The Houthis are a bunch of thugs, but they have, largely because of the Saudi intervention, been able to portray themselves as the patriots fighting for Yemeni independence, fighting for freedom from the Saudi neighbor next door.

Saudis have never been very popular in Yemen. They come across as rich, arrogant people who throw their money around and interfere in Yemeni affairs. It is been, I think, a tragic mistake for the United States to so singularly support this cruel war. We have literally been participants in the mass starvation of young children. That's not something Americans should be proud of. We have now started to move in the right direction, as the senator said. We've moved some steps. We have a long, long, long way to go. And it's not going to be easy because the parties in Yemen are not going to be making peace very easily. Their demands do not overlay with each other. Let me just say one other word about Iran. Saudi Arabia has spent a fortune on this war. I don't know exactly how much. I've spent an inordinate amount of time trying to find out. I can say it is in the tens of billions of dollars, but I can't say much more than that. Iran probably spends a couple of million dollars a year in this war. There are an estimated 30 Iranian experts and advisers in the country.

From the Iranian perspective, this is the best thing that could have ever happened. Saudi Arabia is literally spending a fortune while Iran is spending virtually nothing, and it has successfully bogged down Iran-- I'm sorry, Iran and the Houthis have bogged down the Saudis in the Yemens. They've bogged down Abu Dhabi to a certain extent as well, Bahrain. The cost-benefit analysis, Iran

is the big winner of this conflict. And Americans, particularly American political leaders, ought to be thinking about, is that really what we want? Let me stop there.

**ROUHI:** Thank you.

**RAND:** Sure. Well, first, I would just say thank you to Brookings and to you, Bruce, and echo all of what's been said, your intellectual leadership, thought leadership, and your courage. This book is really excellent, and I can tell you that it should be on the desk of every senator's staff who has to vote on Yemen because it's easy to read. You can read it sort of almost in one sitting. And it really tells a story about U.S. foreign policy. And I want to just underline two main points that I found throughout the historical re-articulation of U.S. administrations going back 150 years, actually, and their interaction with Yemen. There were two big themes that came out. And I think they're worth reinforcing in light of U.S. foreign policy today. One of them, and Bruce, you mention on this a little bit, was how much Washington can trust a certain leader and invest in a certain leader and really rely on a certain leader to bring stability to ensure that American interests are protected. And sometimes in this book, those leaders are helpful and they deliver, and sometimes they don't, right? And that-- and you see many instances where that intent was very well-intentioned.

There was very clear U.S. efforts to, for example, partner with President Saleh on counterterrorism, which was successful in its own right, and yet led to a reinforcement and a reliance on this president. There are examples in here of reliance much, much earlier on various Yemeni leaders to ensure the protection for U.S. economic and commercial interests through the important seaways of the Red Sea, that we know were especially important 100 years ago, remain important in terms of U.S. commerce and the free flow of oil and other energy sources. So, sometimes that was a good bet. And-- but it wasn't always enough of a strategy. And that theme, I think, is a very important reminder that you have articulated.

The second one is this idea of looking at Yemen through the prism or the the point of view of its neighbors. And you talk not only a lot about how Saudi, Saudi interests and point of view on Yemen, but also even its other neighbors. So, I found it particularly interesting when you talk about the Sultan of Oman and his vision of Yemen, which is entirely shaped by the region of Yemen right near Oman, which is a small part and a distinct part of Yemen. So that was an example, again, at this point of view question in U.S. foreign policy. And you do a really good job here in showing the

dangers of taking at face value neighbor's perspectives of or articulation of the foreign policy, both the threat and then the capacity of Yemeni actors. So, those alone are contributions here.

And finally, I would just underscore your final point of this book, which both the senator and you have already articulated, which is how much work needs to be done. The Biden administration deserves a lot, a lot of credit for what they've done. They reversed U.S. policy and they have engaged in a very tedious and patient diplomatic efforts with the U.N., which also deserves a lot of credit, to keep the ceasefire alive and to build on-- the ceasefire is I guess no longer alive, but the cessation of hostilities to keep, to let it hold, and to build on it. I'd also point out to the sea. For example, this oil ship, which I think the State Department and White House deserve a lot of credit for recognizing what a danger it posed, an environmental and economic danger it posed, and working together with the U.N., funding the technical operation to make sure-- to clean it up, essentially, so that it wouldn't create a massive oil spill in the Red Sea. So, you mentioned it and I want to also give credit to the Biden administration for that important work. You end on a note where you talk about what needs to be done. And I just want to share with everyone your prescription for a new U.N. Security Council resolution that reinstates the importance of the parameters and your discussion of the flaws in the first 1221 resolution from 2015. And so I would highlight that as a real contribution that you've made.

**ROUHI:** Great, thank you. So, I'm going to first raise a couple of questions that-- feel free for either of you to answer. Bruce, I wanted to sort of ask you whether you think there may be time to kind of redefine U.S.-Saudi relations, and not necessarily in the sense of whether we, you know, what we provide, etc., but, you know, it seems there has been recently a lot of incidents where the, the expectations and then the commitments on both sides have been mismatched, and that has created issues. And it seems that there-- we have called for more autonomous kind of security policy in the region that the states become-- take basically a more proactive approach in securing in their own security strategy. And there has been a lot of movement, particularly in Saudi, but other countries as well, with their kind of reach out to Iran or China, etc., to kind of diversify their portfolio. And I think that has created an environment where there's not enough clarity of, okay, now as we have asked them and they're taking this role, then what's kind of the the expectation? How does the relationship change and whether that kind of, you think, impacts future of Yemen?

**RIEDEL:** Thank you. Yes, we now have seen Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in power for the better part of a decade. It is time to recognize this is a very dangerous leader. It wasn't just

Jamal Khashoggi — who I, I have to say I miss here today. He used to sit right over there — but his murder came after tens of thousands of Yemenis had been killed in a really fruitless war. The senator mentioned John Brennan, who was director of the CIA when the Saudis went in, in his memoir says, by accident, he went to see Mohammed bin Salman just a few days before. Mohammed bin Salman said, "Oh, we will wrap it up in the south in two or three weeks, and then we're going to head north and take care of the north," meaning Syria and Iraq. I mean, this is not judgment. This is living in a fantasy world. Now, has he changed? Most Saudis that I talked to don't think so. Is he inevitably going to be the king of Saudi Arabia for the next 50 years? I doubt it. This man has a lot of enemies. When you round up the top 1,000 people in the country and shake them down literally for their wealth, you don't make, you don't make friends. Now, were they corrupt? This is Saudi Arabia, you know, let's not kid ourselves.

One of the things that I liked about Prince Bandar bin Sultan so much when he was the Saudi ambassador was he didn't, he didn't make any shame of the fact that he was taking money all the time out of the government, you know. In fact, he would proudly say, you know, "This deal with the Libyans is worth \$3 billion to me." I would say, "Go get some more red wine then sir." It's time for a fundamental rethink. Do we want to back a very dangerous person who is in control of this much energy and wealth? Or is it time to do what President Biden promised he was going to do during the campaign? No more fist bumps. Make it very clear, not just to the American public, but more importantly to the Saudi public, that we don't think this is the right person to run this country for the foreseeable future. What will be the impact of that? Who knows. Certainly not going to change things overnight, we know that much. But it would send a message more broadly.

So I would say one thing else. American foreign policy in the Middle East has become so militarized over the last 30 or 40 years, ever since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, we had one military base in the Arab world in Bahrain. It was actually a broken-down old freighter that was our local military command. Today we have bases all over the Middle East. Bases-- we are ready to fight the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, in Kuwait, far better today than we were ever before in the past. We have bases everywhere, including in Saudi Arabia. Is that really a wise choice of our military deployments these days, or should we be relying upon diplomacy much more in dealing with the region? So I would argue in the particular case of Saudi Arabia, but also in

the broader case of the Middle East, it is time to rethink fundamentals about American policy and to try to see if we can find another way to go forward.

**ROUHI:** Thank you. I do a quick follow-up, which is, do you think, given the way that the politics here, and that's a democracy, and the kind of stark differences in views of presidents when they come in, which is what a lot of countries in the Middle East have been raising, do you think it's possible to have a kind of reset sustainable policy moving down the line?

**RIEDEL:** I'm not an expert on American politics. If I was, I think I would be going out of my mind in the last five years. I think it's a necessary thing to do. You know, Senator Murphy and 20 of his colleagues have called for a fundamental rethink about our Saudi relationship. They're almost-- they're all Democrats. I think Trump was an outlier in the Republican Party. I don't think Saudi Arabia's very popular with the Republican base for a wide number of reasons, from good to bad. If I was in President Biden's position and I was looking for a vote on a substantial issue about Saudi Arabia, whether it's Israeli-Saudi normalization or a mutual defense treaty, if you think that you're going to get 45 Republican yes votes, I think you better do a lot more probing about where those Republicans are. These Republicans, of course, would like nothing more than to humiliate Joe Biden on a major foreign policy issue. And I think you could see them quickly moving from-- you know, Saudi Arabia is Donald Trump's favorite place in the Middle East. Of course it is, they gave his son-in-law three billion dollars. Why aren't we investigating that? The-- to rely on those votes, I think would be a mistake. I think there's much more doubt in this country about the wisdom of our close relationship with Saudi Arabia. And I think the Biden administration ought to, as I said, go back to preaching what it preached before the election.

**ROUHI:** Do you want to comment?

**RAND:** I'll pick up on that point because I do think that congressional politics is part of the substory here, not on the recent events, but what the senator described, which was the realization across bipartisan divides in around 2017, 2018 that really the United States didn't belong as part of this coalition. It wasn't in the U.S. interests. It's a remarkable story of actually bipartisan agreement, a rare one, on foreign policy, and there are many reasons for it. But it is worth studying because of the way in which there were thought leaders, like Senator Murphy, and there was real bipartisan concern about the humanitarian outcomes. And I do think that it was a moment where our interests and our values as a country aligned, where U.S. Congress and activists and advocates successfully brought

forward the story of suffering and U.S. culpability or involvement in that, and people change their minds and started learning about something around the world. So, it was a remarkable story of trying to save lives. And it led to President Biden's very wise decision in the very first week of his presidency to reverse course on Yemen. So, given the politics around U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, I would just highlight that success in changing that perceived consensus view about the Yemen War so-- relatively quickly in the 2017, 2018 period. You talk a little bit about it here. I do think it was a model of how U.S. Congress, the U.S. Congress, can get involved in foreign policy, can use its both authorizing and appropriating powers to look at what role that plays, for example, in arms sales, which became one of the levers of this change of policy. But again, it's worth, it's worth considering how quickly, definitively, and abo-- what, in what a bipartisan manner this change of heart came.

**ROUHI:** Thank you. I want to pick up on one thing that you said, that was going to be actually my question for you, which was you mentioned that this was the one time that our va-- or a very good example of when our values and interests align. And I wanted to ask about that, you know, what is your experience of when there are conflicting national interests versus U.S. values? And that, in the Middle East, at least, has happened on several occasions. Can you tell us a little bit about sort of that and how the debate goes and whether there are any sort of policy recommendations on that?

**RAND:** Sure. And this is, you know, I think a lot of people like to frame it in academic or theoretical terms as if you're sitting in a meeting. And on one side is the interest and on one side, the values. It rarely comes down to that kind of decision-making. I will say that in both the Obama and Trump administrations and the Biden administration, all three, there was widespread concern for the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. There were many, many civil servants and political appointees who reached out to the NGOs working on the ground for information to try to lessen the suffering. Obviously, part of the suffering was embedded in the structure of the war, the blockade, which Bruce talks about in this book, that still exists actually. That prohibits the, for example, transfer openly on the commercial market of fuel into the country. In some ways it's more important or more endemic as a, as a hindrance to well-being right now and in the previous number of years.

So, there were many, many people throughout, consistently working on that on the values base, out of concern for the people of Yemen. And I do think they get too little attention in stories of U.S. foreign policy. So, I put that out there that that's a consistency and continues till today. And those who worked on the Safer tanker are just an exemplar of that type of humanitarian consideration. In

each case, it's different. There's a different moment when, you know, there is a rack and stack of what to do on decision-making. Decision-making can get very complicated. And I do believe that this administration is wrestling very hard with how to integrate human rights and humanitarian considerations into its foreign policy in the Middle East and is thinking through how they intersect. And so it's, it's a constant discussion, a constant churn of the bureaucracy. In the case of Yemen, there's a lot more work that needs to be done and there's a lot more work on the ground to enable recovery. The first most important step was the cessation of hostilities because it was nearly impossible to address the humanitarian situation while the bombs were stopping, but now there's the issue of livelihoods, there's an issue of transport, logistics, food sources, prices of food, prices of other commodities that, and there's a lot of work to be done.

**ROUHI:** Thank you. I'm going to open up for questions if any of the audience-- please. Yes.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Hi, thanks, Eric Pelofsky. So just one point and one question picking up on what Dafna said about the civil service and the political core of people working on the war when it first started. I think there was a relentless effort to try to address the humanitarian, and particularly the risks of famine, dengue, and cholera throughout the Obama administration. I think it fell off a cliff when the Trump administration came in. And people who were the civil servants who continued across the administration and the Foreign Service officers continue to do address that, but at a much, much more attenuated way and, and unfortunately were not nearly as successful as we had been in the Obama administration.

My question is really for Bruce, and I assume that, having not the benefit of the book yet, that you captured some of the nuances in the Obama administration as it struggled to both end the war while maintaining some of the other whatever you want to call equities, for lack of a better word. As you imagine a strategic rethink on Saudi Arabia, how do you expect it will play out in tow if it were if it were to happen, sort of carry us forward — sorry — carry us forward into 2024? How would such a strategic rethink on Saudi Arabia play out both on the geopolitical stage and on the political stage here in the United States? In other words, what would the Saudi reaction be? And then how would that play out?

**RIEDEL:** Let me just say one thing about the Obama administration. When you read the memoirs of senior figures in the Obama administration — and this is John Kerry, almost all of them — it's curious. The word Yemen, it's not there. I mean, it's not like they downplay the war. They just don't

talk about it. Now, my experience in politics and serving in administrations is if you really feel bad about something you did, you just don't write about it in your memoirs. You kind of say, "Oh, that must have happened while I was in the bathroom or something. I don't know. I had nothing to do with that." Samantha Powers, who led the American delegation to the United Nations that authored this horrifically unbalanced Security Council resolution, doesn't even talk about doing it in her book. And I'm not being critical of her, but I'm pointing out something. They very much didn't want to go the route they went, but they ended up doing it because of larger geopolitical concerns. And those geopolitical concerns were all about Iran and whether or not the JCPOA was going to be attacked not only by Israel but also by Saudi Arabia. And they got the deal they want. The Saudis basically stayed quiet.

When you think about future realignments here, these geopolitics matter a lot. I have felt for a long time that Americans are almost out of their minds about Iran. We have built Iran up into a demon. Mahsa knows this better than almost anyone else I know. We accuse them of all kinds of things. No, they're not Boy Scouts, and they are responsible for a lot of things. I was at the Khobar Towers hours after the bomb went off. The liaison officer the United States Air Force provided me, as a deputy assistant secretary of defense, was bleeding during our initial meeting. Not a little, but a lot. The Iranians were involved in the attack on the American embassy in Beirut. So I'm not saying they are our friends, but we don't need to make them ten feet tall. And I think to the credit of the Obama administration, not just getting the JCPOA, but opening a dialog. In the last year of the Obama administration, Secretary Kerry spoke to his Iranian counterparts virtually every other day. Now, successive American presidents have chased the Nobel Peace Prize of restoring relations with Yemen. We haven't ever come close, but John Kerry and Barack Obama came a lot closer. So as we think about this, it should be part of a broader strategy towards the region to demilitarize the American approach, to increase the diplomatic approach, and to try to stop thinking about the Middle East in terms of good guys and bad guys.

I've spent an inordinate amount of my time on the Middle East. The number of good guys I've met over the years: King Hussein, Sultan Qaboos... I'm struggling to think of number three. We should find a way to rethink our whole geopolitical approach to the region and bring down the number of bases we have in the region. When you put a base in a country, you say that that country is your pal, your friend, good guys. In effect, you say we don't care about their human rights record. So the government of Bahrain has systematically abused the Shia majority on the island for longer than I can



remember, but the government of Bahrain gets a pass because they host the Navy. I think we should rethink those things.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Bruce, first of all, congrats on the book and congrats on the retirement, but I have a feeling that we'll hear a lot from you as a nonresident fellow, which will be good for Brookings and the country, and good for me, personally. The question is, if you're Democrat, whether if you're a Democrat, whether a, you know, rank and file Democrat or a congressional Democrat, if you had to guess after the Trump presidency what a Democratic administration would focus on in the Middle East, knowing that Middle East isn't going to be a top priority given everything else that's going on, but to the extent that you're going to deal with the Middle East, you're going to focus on ending the Yemen war on democracy and give a little more balanced attention to Israel-Palestine.

Those were the expectations. It's not exactly what we got. And instead, we have a priority, which was surprising, which is to get a Saudi-Israeli deal, which is not an urgent strategic priority at all, which seems to not only not have, you know, reasoning for elevating into a priority, but also to be potentially politically problematic, as you have stated, and I'm actually releasing the next couple of days a new poll that shows that Americans are not particularly enthused about this kind of deal. So knowing your experience within government, including in the White House how presidents make a decision, you must have a theory about how this, how this came about? How is it that Biden is focused on this issue and making it a priority in the next few months?

**RIEDEL:** It's a good question. The Trump administration was not known for its diplomatic successes, to put it mildly, but it did have a moderate success with the so-called Abraham Accords. I think that the administration has been overly preoccupied with trying to outdo Trump on the normalization front. And I'm going to use a word that we don't usually use in Brookings conferences, and I think MBS has basically snookered Joe Biden on this. We've been suckered into this. Instead of talking about Saudi Arabia's human rights policies, its abuse of dissent, instead of asking for a direct answer to the question, "Where are the remains of Jamal Khashoggi?" because I think we know where they are, it's been led in a wild goose chase. "Oh, yes. I'll make a deal with Israel if I get a nuclear weapons program. Oh no, sorry! Nuclear program, not weapons. Don't use the word weapons. I'll give you a deal if I get a mutual defense treaty like Japan." Why in the world would we

want a mutual defense treaty with Saudi Arabia? I would have an immediate legal question. If we had a mutual defense treaty with Saudi Arabia, does that mean we are at war with the Houthis? I think so.

Do Americans really want to send their young men and boys to go off to fight in Yemen against people, who most Americans-- I would venture that if you ask 100 Americans who are the Houthis, 99% of them would say the what's, the what's? Despite their snappy little slogan, "No to Israel, no to the Jews, no to America. Death to Israel, death to America, death to the Jews," they've actually never done anything against Israel and they've never really done anything to us except when we are stationed in Saudi Arabia.

The short answer to your question is, I think, that yes, there is room to do this. And I think the polling that you talked about, which I peer-reviewed an hour ago, underscores that Americans are not - they're not following the administration on this. They don't see this as the holy grail of politics in the region. I'd say one last thing. The notion that opening the door between Saudi Arabia and Israel means the rest of the Islamic world will now just politely follow behind Saudi Arabia, I think is crazy. Pakistan's not gonna do that. I don't think Indonesia is gonna do it. It would be interesting to me to see when we have the first real serious intifada-like mass of violence in Palestine, which I think is coming. I think a third intifada is barreling down on us like a locomotive. I'll bet you those Abraham Accords don't last an hour. They'll all throw the Israelis out.

**ROUHI:** Thank you. I'll get one more question here because we're almost out of time.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Thank you so much. There's growing U.S. concern about a growing through China presence and China Saudi Arabia getting closer. How do you feel that the urge to contain a growing China influence in the region would sort of affect maybe bipartisan support for a recalibration of U.S. Saudi relationship? Thank you.

**RAND:** Sure. I'll just start with that fact that, you know, China is interested in projecting military and economic influence in many, many, many places, including in the Middle East. And it's a concern. It's a concern, first and foremost, for the people of Middle East. It's a concern for independence and autonomy of the countries in the Middle East. And the United States government and the Biden administration is obviously concerned about about that. And, you know, I think the bigger question is, what's the foreign policy remedy? What's to be done about it? Can you actually counter China's growing influence in the Middle East? And I think that jury's really out-- the verdict's out on whether and how you can do that effectively.

**ROUHI:** Thank you. Thank you, everybody, for being here. It's been a great pleasure. I say that all the good things everybody said about Bruce and the book, but I do say one thing. One, one of my fascinations with Bruce's books, and this one is no exception, is you feel like you're watching a movie. It's not even reading a story. So like, you pick it up — it's not like general sort of books in the field — you, you really cannot put it down. So, I highly recommend reading, reading this book, and if you can, his previous books because you learn a lot, and as if you lived through all of these issues over the years. So, thank you.