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PANEL DISCUSSION

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MALONEY: Good afternoon. I'm Suzanne Maloney, vice president and director of the Foreign Policy program here at the Brookings Institution. And on behalf of Brookings, I want to thank all of you for joining us today for this discussion on Turkey in a Middle East at war. We have a tremendous panel of experts, which has been planned by the Turkey Project here at Brookings which is directed by my colleague, Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, and our Center on the United States and Europe. Along with Aslı myself, our panel includes Phil Gordon, who is the Sydney Stein Jr. Scholar in our Strobe Talbott Center for Security Strategy and Technology. And among other roles in his very impressive career, Phil has served as assistant to the president and national security advisor to the vice president in the Biden administration. He's the author of "Losing the Game: The False Promise of Regime Change in the Middle East," among other books. I'm also delighted to welcome Ambassador John Bass, who has also had a long and distinguished career in government serving as ambassadors to Afghanistan, to Turkey, to Georgia, and as undersecretary of state for management and acting undersecretary of state for political affairs in the Biden administration.

Our conversation will be moderated by Hümeyra Pamuk, who is currently the White House correspondent for Reuters in her long and also distinguished career as a journalist. She's had postings in London, Dubai, Cairo, and Turkey, covering everything from the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war, Turkish electoral politics, and the Kurdish insurgency.

The dramatic and historic developments in the region since the United States and Israel commenced the war against the Islamic Republic of Iran on February 28th have reframed our discussion. So we will be covering different aspects of the war and its impacts, as well as Turkey and its role in the region and its relations with the United States. We moved to Zoom thanks to severe storms in the Washington DC area today, but we're really glad that everyone can be with us virtually. There's much to talk about, so I'm going to hand it over to Hümeyra now, and thank you very much, Hümeyra.

PAMUK: Thank you very much, Suzanne for that wonderful introduction. I'm really honored to be moderating this. It is super timely because I think we're witnessing the unfolding of something pretty unprecedented here: the biggest U.S. military confrontation in the Middle East, basically since the 2003 Iraqi invasion. This is also coming from a president who has literally campaigned and won on ending the endless wars. And yet here we are.

We have seen oil prices go up. United States on Friday bombed military targets in Kharg Island. President Trump today is asking for other countries to help with the reopening of Strait of Hormuz. There's so much to discuss. So I just wanna start with you, Suzanne, specifically where we are today. The administration, we have seen them perhaps struggle a little bit on to articulate what the end game is, what exactly the military objectives are, and we're in the third week now and everybody seems pretty dug in.

So please help us understand the importance of this moment and where we go from here.

MALONEY: Well, thanks Hümeyra. I'm trying to understand, I think as probably many of our panelists and many of our viewers are also trying as well, the president's initial announcement of the strikes that began about 16 days ago on Iran really did lean into the idea that he was trying to achieve a change in the regime. And that theme has returned in a number of his public statements. It's also clear, however, that senior State Department and Defense Department, excuse me, Department of War officials have sought to scale back that, that ambition a little bit by focusing on the military objectives of the campaign itself to really degrade Iran's ballistic missile program, including its ability to continue constructing ballistic missiles, its navy, its air force, and its security services, including the Basij and internal police, the who were responsible for the massacres of large numbers of Iranians who came out to the streets to protest back in January. There's also, of course, the question

of what Israeli objectives are. I think they probably lean much more closely to the idea of regime change.

What is clear is that the regime has not changed. It's certainly not for the better. Despite the assassination of Ali Khamenei, who had served as supreme leader for almost 37 years, the regime very handily made a transition to a new leadership. Although we haven't seen the new supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, the son of the Supreme Leader, I think in fact in many respects, his selection came about entirely because of this war. He would've been a controversial selection under ordinary circumstances, but at a time of war, the opportunity to lean into the legacy of his father to reinforce the relationship between the clergy and the security services, of which Mojtaba has been very influential was very much a moment for the system.

And so what we're seeing now is an Islamic Republic that appears to remain consolidated. It has been retaliating against its neighbors in ways that highlight their vulnerability and obviously has now effectively taken the Strait of Hormuz hostage and is using its ability to control passage there to try to dictate an end to this conflict.

PAMUK: Thank you for that, Suzanne. So I just wanna go to Ambassador Bass and certainly you have found yourself throughout your distinguished career in many crises like this. And the U.S. government constantly collects intelligence, constantly collects information, and constantly does scenarios for this kind of crisis. I'm wondering, were you surprised by Iranian regime's reactions, perhaps their resilience, and do you see the President Trump taking perhaps an off ramp around here, or did we just pass that and that's no longer realistic?

BASS: Thank you very much Hümeýra and to colleagues watching, Ramadan Mubarak, for those of you who are observing the holiday. One thing I learned throughout my career, as Phil and other colleagues know, is once a conflict starts, it takes on its own logic and dynamics and the prospective off ramps or solutions that you may have envisioned at the outset change and evolve sometimes quite rapidly. And I think what we're seeing now to a degree, is a dilemma within our administration, the U.S. administration, between aspirations as they've been voiced by the president over the period preceding and during the conflict, and really core objectives that are realistic to achieve without an enormous amount of unintended consequences and prospective collateral damage.

And in some respects, I'm not surprised by the response from the regime. This is a regime that prepared for many years for some type of conflict with the United States, spent an enormous amount of time and energy developing asymmetric capabilities, whether that's the proxy networks, whether that's the reliance on cheap new drone technologies, given the cost differential between what a drone costs and what an anti-aircraft missile costs, for example. Or more classic terrorist activities. They've, the Iranian regime has long surveilled targets of interest around the world, whether that's U.S. and other Western diplomatic facilities, whether that's Jewish synagogues or other targets of opportunity from Jewish communities around the world. And so I think we have to prepare ourselves, however the major fighting evolves here, and whether we can get to a substantial reduction in the overt hostilities at some point in the future, although I think that's gonna be harder to achieve than many have assessed. I think even with that, we have to be prepared now for years to come of potential Iranian terrorist attacks against U.S. and Western interests globally.

PAMUK: That is quite a grim picture. And I just wanna take it from there and go to Aslı with that thought exactly. Can you help us understand Aslı, what are the risks and benefits, right, of calling it a day here right now? Because the president last week started saying, oh, we're going to wrap this up soon, right? Because the oil prices have started shooting up. And he even started calling it excursion. We've had our own reporting that wording was actually

formulated in one of the brainstorming sessions with his advisors and was specifically targeting the short-term nature of this. But then we see him bombing Kharg island, so the actions do not seem to match.

But, and then we have the Gulf countries, and I will elaborate on them in a minute, but what are the risks of leaving it here as is and then continue and dealing with a regime that's not destroyed, but wounded. But also continuing for the for the foreseeable future. And ambassador said perhaps for years.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Hümeýra, thank you for this and for moderating this interesting panel. It's clearly that United States and Israel may be having an operational success, but not necessarily a political victory, and President Trump has painted himself into a corner in which he risks having a political failure out of all of this for a number of reasons.

The first is that there is no stable theory of victory. Wars are easy to start, difficult to end, as John Bass has just noted. And we've heard a lot how the president has been all over the map in terms of defining an end game. And it is the case that regime change seemed to be on his mind and on, at least on Israeli policymakers' mind.

We did not get a regime change. There's no, there's less and less prospects of a regime change, but there is a change within the Iranian regime, and that's for the worse. With a hard hardened national response and the more hard-line elements that United States wanted to dislodge are now more firmly embedded around Mojtaba, Mojtaba Khamenei and the IRGC that he's relying on. So, I think this risks being a political failure before we even get to the broader regional picture and the risks of escalation. To me, I think it's been very difficult to raise president's decision-making process and whether or not allies were consulted. I think there's discussions on the left, of course, but also on the right, on his base, which I know you are going to want to touch upon.

But also, interesting has been observing Washington, this town in the whole situation. The paralysis, in a sense, is itself is very unique and unique to this war. What I mean by this is that Washington is unique as having a very dense ecosystem of expertise and think tanks and officials and former officials and planners and so on and so forth that are typically integrated into a decision-making process and a foreign policy debate. And it's hard to make the case that they were. People like Suzanne and others, Iran experts, of which there are several important people in town, have been warning about the difficulty of getting to— impossibility, or if not, I shouldn't say impossibility or, but of course, the difficulty of getting to regime change through an air campaign. And it does seem like, this city who's the most capable of stress testing policies produced a policy that was clearly not sufficiently stress tested.

So I think there is a lot of improvisation going on. It's hard for us to, at this point be able to come to a real conclusion about where this is going or whether or not it's a success, because there really isn't a theory of the case as of yet.

PAMUK: Let me go to Phil to ask what you mentioned, the political risk because there is a serious political risk here, right? We are seeing the MAGA divide unfolding in front of our eyes, and there was some of that even before this war, right, over military support for Israel. We have seen a lot of MAGA prominent people be against that. But right now we've got the midterms. We've got president's advisors reportedly struggling to re-shift his focus on the midterms and foreign policy headlines keep dominating. So, Phil, please help us understand what does, what will this mean for the midterms? What is the risk here?

GORDON: Thanks, Hümeýra. And, behind your question is one of the biggest puzzles of all. This, everything about this is confusing, trying to figure it out, but one of the biggest

surprises of all is not just that America launched a war of choice in Iran, but that Donald Trump launched a war of choice in Iran.

I think any American presidency, given U.S. attitudes about changing attitudes about wars and involvement in the Middle East, would've been very reluctant to go down this road. Any president. But this president in particular, as you flagged in your opening remarks, campaigned on the, on avoiding this very thing and said, if Kamala Harris was elected, we get World War III, but I'm the president of peace and we won't get dragged into that. His cabinet this time was staffed not just with loyalists, but people who, in a number of cases, had served in Iraq or Afghanistan. His first national security advisor Mike Waltz, JD Vance, vice president, Tulsi Gabbard, and took away from that, this is exactly what we should avoid. So it's really the gap between what President Trump is now doing and what he campaigned on and his MAGA supporters believed in is enormous.

I can come to what that means for things like midterms, but I would just note in the meantime, to me, the only explanation of that is, some of his actions in the first year went to his head. In the sense that he was skeptical about using military force. But he always talks about Midnight Hammer, last summer, the attack on the nuclear program in Iran, which he was reluctant to do. And then Israel showed that you could actually destroy, successfully, Iranian air defenses and do bombing. And then Trump participated at the last minute and he just felt the naysayers were wrong. And then he did Venezuela. And everyone said it's gonna be a quagmire, regime change, but he did it, he got Maduro. And he just got increasingly comfortable with the use of force to the point that he seemed to think this time the naysayers will be wrong again.

And he now admits – he doesn't usually admit failure – but he said he was surprised that Iran responded the way that it did. Sort of the question you asked John Bass. He shouldn't have been surprised. It should be surprising to us that he was surprised that Iran did what any Iran expert for years would've told you Iran did.

And it's different from the three rounds of conflict in 2024 and 2025, where Iran didn't escalate in the region because there was a way to see that conflict ending without escalation. But once we said that regime change was an objective then their backs to the wall and their only hope was to escalate. And that's exactly what I think they're doing now.

And to circle back to the specific question you asked, this is a political risk for Trump. We shouldn't, as I said, it's going away, it's going against what he campaigned on. It's going against what his supporters wanted. We should always be cautious. We've heard about his political demise so many times. And his support is sticky, his supporters stick with him. He said 10 years ago that he could shoot someone on Fifth Avenue and he wouldn't lose support, which is one of the most insightful things anybody has said about politics ever. And that had, and, and that's what, he just shot, he did the equivalent of shooting someone on Fifth Avenue by a war of choice in Iran. But it's still broadly supported among his supporters.

You said we are like, we are at the midterms. Of course, midterms are still a long way away, but the clock is ticking, the calendar is moving and it is probably fair to say, and I'll just end with, he will not want to be running for midterm elections with oil prices rising, inflation going up, mortgage rates going up, troubles in the bond market, and U.S. service members being killed in the Middle East, which I think gives him a, an incentive sooner rather than later to declare victory and wrap this up.

PAMUK: I wanna go back to Suzanne and discuss a little bit the human side of this. This is something you know really well, Suzanne, Iranian opposition. And just before this before this panel, I was actually listening to President Trump at an event at the White House, and he was asked about the Iranian opposition. It seems like they were perhaps factored into the,

one of the scenarios that at some point that they were going to rise up with the help of this aerial war. What do you, what do you think about that scenario? What can you tell us about the Iranian opposition? Do you think that was a real expectation? And if it was, do you think it was a realistic expectation?

MALONEY: Thanks, Hümeyra. Look, I think that the events of January certainly played into the president's willingness to undertake this mission. He inserted himself in those events fairly early on as the protests began to multiply. He posted on Truth Social, and then amplified through other social media outlets. He promised to rescue the protesters, claimed that the United States was locked and loaded, encouraged Iranians to seize their institutions.

We have anecdotal evidence that was taken very seriously by at least some Iranians. This was language that no American president had ever utilized. American presidents have steered very carefully around Iranian politics and any notion that they were trying to promote an uprising simply because of the long history of the regime's disapproval of quote unquote interference in Iran's politics. And so to hear this kind of language from the president in January, I think certainly did persuade some people in Iran that this was a different moment and that it might end differently.

It did end differently. It ended with far greater casualties than any prior set of protests in Iran have experienced. We, we know that in, we've seen at least four major sets of protests in the past eight years, and at least in 2019, 1500 people were killed. In, in the span of a week in January the numbers that have been validated show that at least 7,000 were killed in a span of only a few days. And the numbers are probably significantly larger than that.

So it was a different moment, but I think the logic that suggested that Iranians were very fed up with their government, that the government was itself far weaker because of the strikes that the U.S. and Israel had undertaken back in June that had disabled key elements of the nuclear program, and by the erosion of their proxy militias around the region. All of that contributed to some idea that somehow Iranians would be able to seize their government.

Under the current circumstances, I think it was simply deeply misinformed. And I'm not surprised that the President bought it, but it is shocking to me if, if serious people in either Washington or in Jerusalem genuinely thought that people on the streets who have no real political leadership, no real political organization or movement to represent them, could actually contest the power of a regime that's been entrenched for the past 47 years, that has spent all of that time trying to ensure that no one can do to it what the regime and those who were in power did to the Shah in 1979.

There may have been some illusion that Reza Pahlavi, the son of the Shah who has become a symbol and a figure whose name has been invoked by many in Iran, including in the recent protests, might somehow provide that leadership. I think that was deeply misinformed and the president himself has dismissed Pahlavi in multiple interviews, so it's not entirely clear to me what this perception was that suggested that people who were unarmed, unorganized and very unhappy with their, with the state of their country were going to somehow be able to oust a government that has been really just embedding itself in power for 47 years.

PAMUK: Indeed, yeah. I think he dismissed it in a number of interviews, but notably one Reuters interview. A little ad inserted there.

Just want to go back to Ambassador Bass on to have him elaborate a little bit on what I earlier asked and that is the ties with the Gulf. Ambassador, we've seen president go to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, as the big first overseas trip, and he has received billions of dollars' worth of investment pledges, right. And right now, those cities, their cities, their ports, sometimes hotels, shopping malls have come under attack. What do you think, what is your

sense that they're thinking at this moment in time? If you know anything, whether like they're picking up the phone and telling President Trump to finish this off, please do share.

But aside from that, what do you think they would be telling President Trump right now? Would they want this to end soon? And how do you think that is going to, whether or not it's going to have a lasting impact on the relationship?

BASS: So just several things. As perilous as the times are for countries and citizens within the Gulf, I think pretty much every government in the Gulf is grateful for the depth and strength of their defense cooperation and their relationship with the United States.

And it's, it's two sides of the same coin. At the same time as U.S. bases in the region are an obvious target for the regime, have been throughout, by the same token, it has been with a substantial amount of U.S. firepower directly in the form of U.S. forces, indirectly with U.S. defense articles that have been provided over the years to these countries that they've bought, that the Gulf, I think has done a pretty good job of defending itself.

Yes, inevitably there have been some successful strikes by the Iranians, but I think looking at the volume of missiles and drones that they have thrown at Gulf targets they've been comparatively not very successful.

Now, having said all that I think at a point in time when, or in a period when most of the Gulf states have been looking to diversify their economies and become more integrated into the global economy for reasons other than hydrocarbons and energy, inevitably an ill-formed long running conflict is it is not in their interests at all. And I think the longer this goes, the more concerned they are going to be about how it ends in ways that do not create longer term instability that may disrupt for a long period of time energy flows out of the Gulf. Clearly a key element that's gonna have to be resolved here is the ability to use the Straits of Hormuz and the international waters there for commerce. And to find ways to prevent Iran from actively blockading effectively that strait.

But beyond that, I think these countries are gonna wanna make sure that the outcome of a conflict is not perpetual instability for an extended period of time. Given the challenges that the conflict in Iraq, for example, 20 years ago, created for them in ways that weren't anticipated at the start of that conflict.

PAMUK: Indeed, for sure. You mentioned Strait of Hormuz and I wanna go to Aslı and ask a question about alliances via that. Because it's an interesting moment, right? Since yesterday we have seen the president come out and ask for help from other countries. And I think it is fair to say, even in the most diplomatic terms, the president has been playing tough love with the allies. Like for example, Denmark is a country that's pretty active in the Red Sea, and we all remember what we went through in January over Greenland. So I wonder how they're feeling about helping out right now.

But of course there's realpolitik and they wouldn't be acting emotionally. So, I mean, what do you think the [audio interruption] for Aslı. And also perhaps like you can bring in the board of [interruption] the president had just weeks ago. What does this moment mean for U.S. alliances? Do you see them coming for help on this?

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Well, I don't see Europeans for certainly coming for help, and there is a reason for that. They have just witnessed in the month of January, which feels five years ago, but in the month of January, they've just witnessed a major crisis around Greenland. And over the past year they have been thinking that their dependence on the United States for their energy supply, for their defense, for technology, has been weaponized. Weaponized

by, in, in many ways, by President Trump. The tariff saga aside, I think the fact that the burden shifting issue when it comes to Ukraine has been a bit too rapid for them to adjust to.

So I think that having just gone through this incredibly dramatic few days of U.S. threats on Greenland, I think they find it hard to adjust back to a situation in which they are to help United States on a mission that clearly is very, very risky.

In other words, our colleague, Caitlin Talmadge, also a Brookings scholar, but also a professor at MIT has an very important piece up at Foreign Affairs now. This is not her first piece on the Strait of Hormuz, but she talks about the difficulty of this mission in which the weaker side has enormous advantages, militarily, and President Trump may end up as using U.S. Navy to escort ships. But that too entails huge risks. He may end up using ground troops, he may end up using Marines, he may end up seizing Kharg island, or he may take an off ramp tomorrow.

I think Europeans are looking into this and realizing that this is just very risky from an ally that has shown itself to be willing to weaponize their dependency, military dependency. So it becomes a very difficult proposition for other countries to join.

PAMUK: I wanna expand that Europe alliances question a version of that [interruption] a little bit, because from the list of questions that people have sent that this is definitely an area of interest. Ask Phil Gordon, just very broadly, what do you [interruption] war and means for, in terms of the calculus in Ukraine?

I think you're on mute.

GORDON: Yeah, I'm on mute. And you, and what I was saying actually is that I'm, I think I missed some of your words 'cause it was coming in and out.

But let me, I'll, I got the Ukraine piece and I also wanna begin by reinforcing Asli's point about the allies in the Strait of Hormuz, even before Ukraine, even though it's all part of the same picture.

Asli's final words were difficult proposition, which is quite the understatement. If you really think about the context, the European allies have gone through tariffs, an unbalanced trade deal, Ukraine, where President Trump withdrew U.S. support for Ukraine on something that is a deep core national interest. And then insulted Zelenskyy, took Russia's narrative in the war, then did the Greenland thing to the point of threatening military force against a NATO ally, and threatening further tariffs, even beyond the ones that were unbalanced and agreed to. Right? and in the process, disparaged European troops who served alongside Americans and died in Afghanistan.

All of that is the run up to, boy, I've now created a situation where I desperately need allies, against their will. I didn't consult them going in, but now I'm not only politely asking them to help, I'm demanding it. So I think that, that shouldn't, I, we shouldn't underestimate the strength of feeling. Imagine the political risk for a European leader who sends a warship to the Strait of Hormuz and risks the lives of their soldiers. In that context I sure wouldn't wanna be that leader for a war that's unpopular and not supported by their population. So I think, I already thought Greenland was a fundamental split in the transatlantic relationship, which we talked about at the time. But this just takes it to a further level.

I mentioned Ukraine and your specific question, Ukraine is another victim. I suspect virtually every country we talk about in this context will be a victim or a casualty of this conflict. But Ukraine will suffer in a number of ways. Oil prices going up is a windfall to Russia, and we've seen numbers of billions of dollars flowing into Russia coffers, which you can use for the

war. I think Russia's windfall already, the Ukrainian defense minister said exceeds Ukrainian investment in defense. And so, it's a windfall for Russia.

It also exacerbates the interceptor shortage that Ukraine was already suffering from. We spent, the Biden administration, scouring the earth and doing whatever we could to come up with interceptors so that Ukraine could defend itself, ironically, in large part against Shahed drones exported from Iran to Russia. And we're mostly holding the line, but things get through and Ukrainians suffer every night in Russian infrastructure attacks.

So then you launch a war that does what: creates a desperate need for interceptors. And there's opportunity cost. There's a finite number. So if they're going to the Middle East, they're not going to Ukraine.

So, already Ukraine was in a challenging position, arguably, and tragically, it was really holding its own. And I think we were getting earlier this year to a point where Russia was the one that might have to think twice about how long this was sustainable in Ukraine. But another consequence, unintended consequence of the Iran War is that it may shift the balance in Ukraine as well, in an unfavorable way to the Ukrainians.

PAMUK: Before we pivot to Turkey, I just wanna do a very quick answer question, answer thing. I have one question. If this was a journalistic event, I would be imposing that on each of you, but I'm going to keep it voluntarily. But I would really appreciate at least a couple of answers. Let's just imagine you are in the Oval Office and the president wants your very, very brief advice at this point in time. It is Monday, March the 16th. He wants to know what he should be doing between now and the next week. Anyone, go.

GORDON: I'm happy to start if you like. Though I would start by saying if I was in the Oval Office, we wouldn't be in this predicament. But that's not the premise of your question because I would advise not to go here in the first place.

But given where we are now, which I think is your question, I would be urging him to find an off ramp. Which is to say, it's not as if he has nothing to boast about having accomplished. He could—and that's one advantage of shifting messaging and goals as you can, point to the ones you accomplished and not the ones you didn't.

So he has already done job A, which was to significantly set back Iran's military and whatever you thought of this war, it was a threat, Iran's ballistic missiles are were a threat. That, that serves our interest to further degrade the nuclear program and production sites, drones, and missiles. I would urge the president to say that that was the primary goal that we set out to accomplish, I have accomplished it. Now I am pivoting to bring this war to an end and oil will flow and all that. The goals that he hasn't accomplished yet – this is what I would tell the president. You would like to accomplish some other goals like finding and removing the HEU and getting rid of the regime, but you can't do that with realistic costs. And so if you take that route, we're just going to get into a further more costly conflict.

PAMUK: Any other takers? No?

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: I would agree with Phil, although I will say it's such a painful thing to answer because while the president and the United States needs an off ramp in order to avoid the sort of very painful deescalation scenarios, it's also a betrayal of the Iranian people for the reasons Suzanne has cited.

They were told to go out, get out on the streets and demonstrate and paid dearly often with their lives for this sort of flip flop in the end. And that's probably where we'll end up.

MALONEY: I'll just jump in very quickly. I think both Phil and Aslı are exactly right, but the, unfortunately it's a bit of a sunk cost now in terms of what has happened. If the president had declared victory very quickly, if this had been indeed the four-day mission that he apparently believed it was going to be, he could have really had that wonderful story of having done real damage to Iran's ballistic missile program and taken out Ali Khamenei, who is universally despised.

The difficulty now is that the Iranians control how this war ends, and they may continue their attacks on the strait and on their neighbors, even if the United States winds down the war.

I think the other challenge, of course, is you talked about allies and partners. We're not in this war alone, and the Israelis do have a, I think a bigger ambition of regime change. And they are more determined to sustain the war because it is, for them, at least in the post October 7th moment, an existential one. They do not want to have to confront a threat from a new and improved, potentially, Islamic Republic. And they're going to be prepared to take greater losses and to assume greater costs than perhaps the United States and the wider international community would be.

GORDON: And just to, just add, I agree, Suzanne, that my recommended strategy gets harder with each passing day, and as you say, would've been easier a week ago. Still on the Israeli piece, I think you're right, Israel would rather keep going. But I would like to believe after what President Trump has done for Israel over the past few weeks, he would be able to say, just like he did last summer, after Midnight Hammer, we're calling it now and this stops now. Otherwise we get all the downsides, but no upside of stopping the war 'cause then the strait would be closed.

And on the Iranian piece, which I think is even harder to solve, the risk you rightly flagged, that even if we call it and look for an off ramp, Iran might keep going, I would leverage U.S. military force for that rather than continuing the bombing campaign to try to pursue these other likely unattainable goals.

Which is to say if we called it off and Iran kept it going then Iran would've to run the risk of renewed U.S. and Israeli military force, which probably wouldn't be a lot of fun from their point of view.

BASS: Yeah. And just to chime in, agree with the analysis and recommendations have been out there. I think that the key piece is to now develop a credible threat against things the Iranian regime values if it were to decide to continue strikes through the straits after we said, essentially, we're done.

And I think with regard to Israel I wanna say I saw something over the weekend indicating that they've acknowledged publicly their stock of interceptors is running rather low. And so there may be some desire on the Israelis at this point to get a hiatus, take some stock, and then think about next steps down the road towards their ultimate objective. And I would think the continued U.S. military support for the defense of Israel gives the president some pretty persuasive leverage in terms of encouraging Bibi to cease and desist at this point.

PAMUK: Thank you everyone. I'm glad that question got everybody's input. So now we're gonna pivot a little bit to Turkey and how it's finding itself in this rather tricky situation. So I just wanna kick this part off with Aslı, because over the weekend something important happened. We, so now we've been seeing Iranian ballistic missiles violating Turkish airspace and we have seen Iranians deny that.

So this is actually gonna be both for Aslı and Suzanne, two sides of the same coin. We have seen Hakan Fidan say effectively call out the Iranians and say they're not owning this. Then

we have the technical data. So, Aslı help us understand like what Turkey is navigating here and if I can then get Suzanne to talk about why are the Iranians denying it? Of course I understand it's, it's hard to come out and say we've done it, and there's this whole pro-Iranian sort of public opinion, a little bit in Turkey that Aslı can talk about. But why do you think Iranians are trying to appeal to the Turkish public? If I can get both of you to talk about that.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Hümeýra, if I can take a moment to briefly talk about Turkey's relationship with Iran, that is, that has been based on a policy that exists for centuries. Turkish-Iranian relationship have pretty much shaped with an 1639 agreement, Qasr-e Shirin agreement that everybody who goes through the Turkish school system knows. After Ottoman and Safavid empires, after sort of decades of fighting between these two empires, they got together and decided on three pillars, three core principles. One was the physical border, which is one of the oldest borders around the world that has not changed along the Zagros mountains. The second was non-interference in each other's affairs. And the third was no direct confrontations. And regimes changed, empires, rose and fell and dynasties changed, but this principle the two countries have kept to. This is not because there's any love lost between these two regimes. Turkey and Iran are frenemies, but they have stuck to this sort of principle of non-interference and no direct fighting.

So Turkey is very determined to stay out of this war, and it can live with a difficult Iran, it has over decades learned to live with a difficult Iran, even though it was concerned about the nuclear program, its proxies in Iraq and Syria, its ballistic program and so on and so forth. But it's difficult to live with a, with a broken Iran that is involved in, that is the source of regional chaos.

Obviously, there's issues like migration, economic disruption, and so on and so forth, but the idea of a regime change operation that triggers a civil war or a regional chaos is very frightening to Turkish decision makers. So they're playing this in a very interesting way, not—obviously these three missiles came from Iran, possibly a result of their devolved mosaic defense structure, and Turkey's—they were intercepted by NATO, ballistic NATO anti-missile systems and so on and so forth. But I think for Turkey, it's very important to manage this conflict, stay out of it, hoping that it will be a short war.

Also important, I think at this point for Ankara, is try to see if there could be a decoupling of U.S. and Israeli war aims. In the beginning, for the longest time Ankara saw in President Trump what they wanted to see, which was not somebody that was going along with every suggestion from Israel, and they saw in the Board of Peace and the whole Gaza ceasefire what they wanted to see. Maybe he is using leverage over, leverage over Israel. They were obviously very frustrated with the Biden administration and President Biden throughout the Gaza conflict because of the conflict.

But now it's a different situation. It's hard to see if there is going to be a divergence between U.S. and Israelis, that's something Turkey would like to see. And an off ramp, of course, is very much something they would like to see. So I think they're keeping relations with Iran and Washington, not jumping right now, not raising their hand for a mediation effort or anything. Neither side seem to have, seems to have much appetite for that at the moment. But I think they're keeping channels of communication open, if and when there will be a time for an off ramp at the moment. At the moment, it doesn't seem to be the case.

MALONEY: I'll just jump in and echo what Aslı has just said. I think, the most obvious and probably plausible explanation for the Iranian denial is the fact that they have devolved command authority that is part of the overall structure of the Iranian military. And it's a longstanding approach. And obviously, there's an argument that someone might not have been aware. It does strain credulity even in a system that is currently disrupted by an

ongoing war that somehow, that someone wasn't aware that a, that ballistic missiles were launched at Turkey.

I think it's also notable that the Iranians have denied that they've been talking with Turkey's, other remarks from Fidan on about, about a back channel. I have no doubt that there, that these conversations are ongoing. It also reflects the fact that there are different power centers in the regime right now. We're still really, I think, watching to see who and what kind of leader Mojtaba will be, whether he actually is capable of exerting control over what has always been a heavily factionalized system, and certainly in the aftermath of the loss of Khamenei, who had kept a kind of stability and balance between different aspects of different institutions and different political tendencies within the system. There's going to be competition and infighting, and I think it's entirely likely that, some of this is just a heavily factionalized country at war and trying to manage a situation which is moving exceptionally quickly.

PAMUK: So now I just wanna go a little bit deeper on, on Turkey. And for sure, like Iran is the war is going to keep looming large in the background. But I just wanna go to Ambassador Bass. We have seen U.S.-Turkey relationship evolve over the past decade not necessarily in a good way. We have seen during the first Trump administration, there's this thing they call leaders diplomacy which is now basically how at the moment now U.S. does diplomacy with everybody. At the time it wasn't so obvious.

But since the beginning of Trump administration, we have seen the relationship be significantly warmer. Hakan Fidan speaking regularly with Steve Witkoff and they align on Syria. We have seen the developments on Halk Bank. Ambassador, how do you think that relationship will evolve with the Iran war and, just help us understand. S-400s, F35s, we have not seen any concrete progress in any of those, right. Do we have any reason to think that the warm bilateral ties will be enough for those issues to be resolved anytime soon?

BASS: Yeah. Before I touch on all of those, would just add one other component to Aslı and Suzanne's observations about the direct conflict. And the other reason why direct Iranian strikes on Turkey are strategically a bad idea for Iran is that it prospectively provides a really compelling reason for NATO as an alliance to have to pay significant attention to the conflict, if only to respond to Turkish calls for additional air defense support. And prospectively that gives the conflict a very different character or dimension if it persists for a longer period of time.

With respect to Turkish-U.S. bilateral relations I think they clearly have improved and they have improved for a variety of reasons. That leader chemistry that you noted and the subsidiaries of those leaders in the form of their sons-in-law and key business partners and the good relationships among that group similarity of how they see the region particularly into the Gulf I think has had a lot to do with that.

I think this war has for Turkey created some new dilemmas, .however, in that it has disrupted I think work that was underway to realize some concrete benefits from that better tone and shared perspective of the two leaders. If only because it has distracted President Trump and his immediate advisors and taken them off some other things they would've been focused on.

My understanding is there continues to be some real desire to address this lingering impediment to increase defense cooperation in the form of the S-400. There's a bit of a difference between what the sanctions require whether it's use or rendering unusable or transferring completely outside Turkey.

And, there may be a bit of discussion about how, what that looks like as a resolution. But clearly the conflict on the plus side, I think will drive respectively further impetus towards more intensive defense cooperation. We already saw some of that happening as a result of the conflict in Ukraine, where Turkish defense industrial capacity was providing important backstops for some of the fundamentals, like ammunition and key components to artillery shells and those kinds of things.

And prospectively now with this rapid drawdown of air defense interceptors as western defense manufacturers look at ways to scale production wouldn't surprise me if they were looking to some of the companies in Turkey and their capabilities.

I think on the flip side, the challenge for this next period is going to be Turkish, U.S., and Israeli dynamics in that triangle. Particularly given some of the rhetoric we've seen from Prime Minister Netanyahu and some other prominent Israeli political figures about Turkey now being the next threat and potentially the quote unquote future Iran as if there is a parallel theocracy being built in Turkey that would rival the Iranian regime. That's of course a, a dramatic overstatement, but I think it speaks a bit to the uneasy relationships between the three capitals at certain periods of time as they talk about each other. As the U.S. is having to figure out the relationship with Israel, with Turkey in ways that deconflict between the two. And for Turkey to try to reconcile its relationship with the United States and the strategic importance of it against its fundamental objections to Israeli policy and the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

PAMUK: Ambassador, I'm gonna have a follow up question on this in the Q&A a part because there are a lot of questions on this.

And so, let's hold that thought for a minute. But I will ask Phil Gordon to elaborate one side of this. What would you say-- as a journalist, this is something that I have been watching with a little bit of alarm because I'm obviously very used to harsh rhetoric. And then behind the scenes people conduct diplomacy business as usual.

This is very common, but I feel that in over the, since October 7th especially, there is a real shift in the dynamic. I see Israelis in evening TV shows are more talking about Turkey is a threat and the same is happening in Turkey, and the public opinion is shifting, and I find that very dangerous and alarming.

So Phil, help us understand why do you, where is this coming from? How realistic. It is that it's one thing that Turkey and Israel would compete in the Syria theater, but how realistic it is that there could be a confrontation down the road. And what would President Trump do, I suppose, to avert that?

GORDON: So you're right. It's a real issue and it's also a real dilemma for President Trump because as John just described, there are conflicting pressures. On one hand, there are various signs that point to a stronger U.S.-Turkey relationship and some of the thorniest things that have divided us over the years, starting with Syria where we almost came like militarily to blows with a new Syrian government, that is less with talks with the PKK and the Kurdish issue going down, that goes down. We had the Gülen issue, which hasn't gone away, but it's certainly not what it was a couple of years ago or when John was in Turkey. S-400s. It's not resolved yet, but you can see a way forward in the way you couldn't before. Gaza when it was, at its peak was deeply divisive.

So all of that sets the stage for what you all rightly talked about as a potential warming of U.S.-Turkey ties. But the biggest constraining factor is the Israel angle that you also mentioned, because Trump, while he is he seems to like Erdoğan and wanna have a better

U.S.-Turkey relationship. He certainly hasn't given up on the U.S.-Israel relationship, which will be a ball and chain on any effort to reconcile with Turkey.

Because from the Israeli point of view, Iran is still the biggest threat in the region. Even after this. Their dream was changing the regime and the Iran issue would go away. That's not gonna happen. But a close second is what they would consider to be this Qatar-Turkey alliance of political Islam sympathetic to Gaza, Palestinian agenda, closer to Iran. So that's a real dilemma for President Trump. It probably is a limiting factor on the U.S.-Turkey relationship because it's gonna be hard for him to really consolidate ties with Turkey when his Israeli allies are telling them that Turkey is the biggest enemy.

I will say Trump has shown a willingness and ability to buck the trend and Turkey kind of seems to be in that category and Qatar too. And then you can get into questions about investment and, gifts of planes and whatever. But for whatever reason, he doesn't just follow Israeli interests on these questions.

So it may be that all the reasons we said there's a potential or better U.S. Turkey relationship and his relationship with Erdoğan will allow him to just tell the Israeli, sorry, that may be your view, but it's not mine. But it just makes it a little bit more difficult.

PAMUK: Thank you very much all. So I have more questions, but I see we have a number of questions from various participants who have sent it to Brookings. So I'm just going to combine a couple of them because there are a couple of very predominant themes. And one of them is what we just discussed actually, like this rivalry and the risk of confrontation between Turkey and Israel.

And I just wanna go back to, because there is someone here, is Iran, is Turkey the next Iran and Israeli officials are openly declaring that after the Shiite axis, they're aiming at crushing nascent Sunni axis. I just wanna go to Ambassador Bass very quickly. Can you help the audience understand why, is Turkey the next Iran or Turkey is the next Iran headline is a bit misplaced?

BASS: Sure. I mean there are some really key differences fundamentally at the societal organizational level, right? It's, it Turkey is not a theocracy. And instead of the state largely flowing from the religion, you have the flip in Turkey where there is a ministry of religious affairs, for all intents and purposes, that ensures that the tenets of the faith and what's coming from the mosques on Friday during sermons is consistent with what the state believes should be discussed. So very different concept, number one.

Number two, I think it's important to remember that even as President Erdoğan throughout his tenure has sought to reestablish Turkey as a political presence in the Middle East and across the Islamic world, at the same time, that has been tempered to a pretty significant degree by some of the core tenets of the Turkish Republic and the restraint of Kemal Atatürk in ensuring that Turkey did not get involved in problems beyond its borders. That it focused principally on domestic security, on having a strong military that could protect its borders but that it would not get involved in overseas adventures.

Now, obviously we've seen some evolution in that over the last 10 years. But principally that's been a consequence of the profound instability on Turkey's southern border with Syria and the enormous challenges that created for Turkish society with the outflow of refugees, with the foreign terrorists streaming through Turkey to get to a conflict in Syria where they could wage jihad and in some cases engaging in that kind of extremist violence within Turkey itself.

So there have been some real cautionary tales over the last 10 years about embracing an aggressive foreign policy that seeks to assert a view of society organized around faith that looks anything like what Iran has done in an equivalent period, or indeed as Suzanne noted for the 47 years of the theocracy.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Hümeýra, can I come in on this issue as well briefly? Hello?

PAMUK: We can hear you, please.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Oh yeah, sure. I wanted to just come in brief briefly because this does, it is very important and dangerous, the kind of changing strategic culture in both countries over the, very noticeably over the past two years. This whole notion, oh, Turkey is a bigger threat than Iran or was a completely fringe idea in Israel and Israeli security circles. And now we are seeing it, easily this aired by both Israeli officials or at this point an opposition member. And I think we are in a place where both countries think the other is pursuing a policy of encirclement and that their expanding zones of influence are going to clash.

I think more importantly, it's no longer about Syria. It's no longer about differences a clash of cultures in the, on the far-right party on one side and the far-right party on the other, it's also about eastern Mediterranean, expansion of Israeli ties with Cyprus and so on. It's also about Horn of Africa, and it's also Turkey's deep discomfort with Israel's policy of keeping its neighbors militarily suppressed, mowing the lawn, as they say.

And this to Turkey is very much long term, it's unacceptable. This type of hegemonic role that Israel wants to play in the region, I think inevitably clashes with how Turkey sees itself as a regional heavyweight. So traditionally there have been in the past there have been times in which, Turkey and Israel had tensions flare up, diplomatic spats and so on. Traditionally, you had United States stepping in and mediating. I don't think President Trump is uninterested in that role, but he just does not have the attention span and the sort of dedication, so to speak, to actually step in and go through the cumbersome work of trying to mediate.

There is one deconfliction track that's in Syria and that's good, but that's just not enough because it's also eastern Mediterranean. It's also about Israel's understanding of its relationship with the rest of the region. It's also about Lebanon and so on and so forth. And of course the, I don't know if you were going to touch upon this, but how Turks perceive Israel to be using a Kurdish guard in, in, in Iran. I think these are all very dangerous issues that U.S. policymakers need to play a very more active role in trying to deconflict.

PAMUK: Yes, that is actually my last final big topic because I see multiple questions on it and it was in my questions. It's a big topic that we haven't discussed. We've all seen the reporting, we have done the same reporting, that U.S. was in talks with various Kurdish groups inside Iran. And these stories started coming out perhaps about 10 days ago. And after the, some of them said CIA was arming them, obviously this is like very sensitive for Turkey. And now we are no longer reading that much about it, although I can assure you we're digging into it.

So I just wanna open it up to everybody. What are the risks? How would Turkey take that? What do you make of the stories coming out 10 days ago and this issue going a little bit quiet, do you see this as a real strategy for the Trump administration? Could these groups really be deployed in Iran? Just anyone?

GORDON: Hümeýra, it may be one area actually where the Erdoğan's relationship with Trump paid off. Because like chronologically it looks like, and we do know that even though they haven't said regime change was a formal objective, that's what they wanted to

accomplish. It clearly wasn't gonna happen easily through air power. Somebody had the idea, maybe we could put pressure by arming Kurds. That sort of thing has been done in the past. But Turkey got wind of that and we understand through good reporting that Turkey communicated that back to the White House and does seem to have had an impact on Trump and got him to stand down.

Even aside from that, it's inherently a terrible idea. It might well put pressure on the regime, but more likely to cause internal divisions, more killing, civil conflict than some transition to some stable alternative government. So it was a bad idea to start with, but it does feel like Turkey weighing in got Trump to realize that it was a bad idea and I suspect we won't really see it reemerge.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Hümeýra, if I could add on this issue, it also seems like Kurds have made a strategic choice not to go along with it. Bafel Talabani, the son of legendary Mam Jalal Talabani, who also served as the president of Iraq, but also obviously a legendary Kurdish leader. His son's statement was very clear. We don't wanna be instrumentalized in a, in, in regional rivalries, in a war among great powers.

And second thing he said is that Iranian regime is not crumbling. So Kurds have made a strategic choice. They're not one entity, of course, there's Iraqi Kurds. It's a very, it's a, it's 30 plus million people. So there's Iraqi Kurds, there's Turkish Kurds, there's SDF, and it's very, it's a very complex picture.

But on the other hand, they realize they are in this for the long game. Not until midterms, not until Trump's visit to Beijing, they're going to be in this neighborhood for centuries. So they are extra cautious about the dangers. Also given the history of U.S. betrayal of Kurds, which has happened in multiple parts of the Kurdish geography. And very importantly trying to preserve the sort of fragile peace process with Turkey because it's no secret that, arming Iranian Kurds, particularly PKK offshoot PJAK, which is the strongest group in the area, would inevitably one way or another draw Turkey in perhaps trigger something between Azeris, Azeri-Iranians, and Kurds and so on and so forth.

It's, it is just a Pandora's box that I think the, when Kurds looked at it, pluses and minuses and U.S. long-term commitment, I think they were just not sure it's worth it's worth trying. So they made a strategic choice to stick with their historic, traditional neighbors, Turks, Iranians, and Arabs, in Syria and I think it for now in Iran.

PAMUK: Thank you Aslı for that. I think from a journalistic point of view we're gonna keep at that particular topic. Unfortunately I've seen some terrible ideas become policy, so I'm just gonna have to keep an eye on that.

So thank you very much for this discussion. I learned a lot. I really appreciated the insight and knowledge of every single one of you. I'm deeply honored you asked me to moderate this. I hope this was a rich and fruitful discussion for the audience as well, even if it was online. Thank you very much to every single panelist. Thank you for everybody who tuned in. I hope we can do a repeat of this in the coming months in person.

Thanks for being with us, everyone. Have a great day.