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BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

PROPOSALS FOR THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND COUNTERING EXTREMISM

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PARTICIPANTS:

Host:

FRED DEWS
Managing Editor, Podcasts and Digital Projects
The Brookings Institution

Guests:

MADIHA AFZAL
David M. Rubenstein Fellow, Foreign Policy
Center for Middle East Policy, Center for Security, Strategy and Technology
The Brookings Institution

TAMARA COFMAN WITTES
Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy, Center for Middle East Policy
The Brookings Institution

DAVID WESSEL
Director, Hutchins Center on Fiscal and Monetary Policy
Senior Fellow, Economic Studies
The Brookings Institution

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P R O C E E D I N G S

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. In December, Brookings launched the Blueprints for American Renewal and Prosperity Project to offer federal policy recommendations in five challenge areas. These are racial justice and worker mobility, economic growth and dynamism, international security, governance, both domestic and international, and climate and resilience.

On this third episode from the blueprints project, two Brookings experts discuss their policy recommendations on international security. They are Tamara Cofman Wittes, senior fellow in Foreign Policy and the Center for Middle East policy, and Madiha Afzal, a David M. Rubenstein fellow, also in Foreign Policy and the Center for Middle East policy.

Their respective essays on Middle East policy and countering extremism through education are just two of the eight policy briefs in the international security area of the blueprint series. The other essays cover issues including the China challenge, nonproliferation cooperation with Russia and China, bolstering democracies, preventing pandemics, and additional security challenges like climate change and America's weakening internal cohesion. You can find all the essays at brookings.edu/blueprints.

Also, in this episode, David Wessel, senior fellow and director of the Hutchins Center on Fiscal and Monetary Policy, focuses on the proposed child tax credit in President Biden's COVID-19 Relief Package, which Wessel says would substantially reduce the number of children living in poverty. You can follow the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter @policypodcasts to get information about and links to all our shows including Dollar and Sense: The Brookings trade podcast, the Current, and our Events podcast. First up, here is David Wessel.

WESSEL: I'm David Wessel and this is my economic update. There are lots of pieces to President Biden's $1.9 trillion COVID Relief Package, but I would like to focus today on just one of them. His proposed expansion of the child tax credit, which would if Congress goes along, substantially reduce the number of children living in poverty. Today, eligible families can claim a tax credit, which reduces income taxes they owe, dollar for dollar, of up to $2,000 for every child under age 17. Families who owe little or no income tax, can get cash back of up to $1,400 a child. A feature which makes the tax credit partially refundable in the jargon of Washington.

The tax credit has its roots in a 1991 report by a bipartisan commission, which declared that it is a tragic irony that the most prosperous nation on earth is failing so many of its children. A version of the credit was proposed by republicans in 1994, by President Clinton in 1995, and eventually was enacted in 1997, as a $500 per child tax credit, but it was nonrefundable. So, it was aimed at middle- and upper-class families. After George W. Bush, during his 2000 campaign, promised to double the credit as part of his proposed tax cuts, my colleague at Brookings, Isabel Sawhill, argued for making it refundable to make sure that at least some of the benefits of the Bush tax cuts went to low-income families. Congress went along.

In 2001, it doubled the tax credit to $1,000 per child as Bush had proposed and made it partly refundable as Sawhill had proposed. And then in the 2017 Trump tax cut, Congress increased that tax credit, made more of it refundable, and offered it to many more families in the upper middle-class. More than 48 million households are expected to claim the tax credit for 2020. That's $118 billion for qualifying families. Forty percent of that will go to households with incomes above $100,000, and only 15 percent to households with incomes below $30,000.

Jacob Golden at Stanford and Katherine Michelmore of Syracuse say that 90 percent of

all children will get some benefit, but the majority of tax returns filed by people in the bottom 30 percent are eligible for only a partial credit. And virtually all children living in households in the top half of the income distribution will get the full credit. They say that about 3/4 of all White and Asian children will be eligible for the full credit, but only about 1/2 of Black and Hispanic children. So, embracing a proposal that several Congressional democrats have been circulating for the past couple of years, Biden would increase the credit from $2,000 a child to $3,600 for children under 6, and to $3,000 for children between 7 and 18.

He would make it fully refundable, meaning low-income families would get the full amount even if they don't owe any income taxes. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal think tank in Washington, estimates this proposal would benefit 27 million children. And the Center on Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia University said it would reduce the poverty rate among children under age 18 from 13.6 percent to 7-1/2 percent.

Expanding the credit has been popular with both democrats and republicans in part because assisting low income and middle-class families with children is regarded by members of Congress as both politically appealing and economically prudent. So, there's a good chance the expansion of the child tax credit would be included in what's likely to be a scaled-back version of Biden's $1.9 trillion proposal providing cash to poor families that need it, and probably given the politics of the moment, increasing the tax benefit to middle and upper middle-class families as well.

Expanding the child tax credit might not be the best approach to reduce poverty, but it is clearly one of the most politically appealing. Joe Biden is proposing just a one-year expansion of the credit, but people inside and outside the administration anticipate that once written into law, it'll be renewed year after year and would become an even bigger piece of the federal

government's support to families raising children.

DEWS: You can listen to more of Wessel's economic updates on our SoundCloud channel at soundcloud.com/brookings-institution. And now, here's my interview with Tamara Wittes and Madiha Afzal on their Blueprints for American Renewal and Prosperity essays.

Well, Tamara and Madiha, welcome to you both to the Brookings Cafeteria.

WITTES: Great to be here, Fred.

AFZAL: Great to be here.

DEWS: I was reviewing the tape and I realized that while both of you have been on the Brookings Cafeteria in the past, I have actually never directly interviewed both of you. Madiha, you've been twice to talk about either a book or a paper, your book on Pakistan and your paper on Boko Haram. Tamara, you've been on some of the edited episodes we've done about the 1967 war, the future of the Middle East, and also, you interviewed a scholar, Khaled Elgindy, on his book on U.S. Palestinian relations. But I have never directly interviewed both of you. So, I'm very excited to have this opportunity to do so at this time.

WITTES: Hey, we're breaking new ground.

DEWS: Yes.

AFZAL: Looking forward to it.

DEWS: So, both of you have contributed policy briefs in what Brookings is calling the Blueprints for American Renewal and Prosperity, as I mentioned in the introduction earlier. And I wanted to start by having each of you lay out for our listeners just kind of at a high-level what challenge that your policy brief addresses and kind of what your high-level policy solution is, just so listeners can keep that in mind as we go through the conversation. And, Madiha, I would ask that you start with that one.

AFZAL: Sure. So, in the wake of the pandemic that we are all living through currently, and also sort of this increase in domestic rightwing terrorism, I think we're seeing a real desire and sort of an urgency to want to turn the page on the post-911 era here. Yet, terrorism and extremism remain really significant problems around the world. So, while Al Qaeda and ISIS are not the threats they once were to the United States, there are a lot of local and regional groups that remain significant around the world and some are resurging or ascendant. So, we need to tackle these twin problems, as I call them.

And we need to do so in a manner that's both cost-effective, because we can't put all our resources there, and comprehensive, so they're actually tackled. So, I propose a couple of solutions in this paper to this challenge. And I will highlight the main one, which is around education. And in particular, reform of country-level education policies to counter extremism.

So, I talk about curriculum reform that teaches tolerance, that espouses critical thinking, and that teaches people how to basically decipher and determine what they might be looking at if it's extremist propaganda or fake news. And as is obvious, I think the benefits of this would extend far beyond just extremism, and even rightwing extremism to a lot of other problems like disinformation, et cetera. And I'm sure we'll go into more detail on this, but I propose a UN centered, yet U.S.-led program to do so.

DEWS: Perfect. So, yes, we will come back to you in some more detail in just a moment here. But first, Tamara, could you kind of lay out at a high level the policy challenge you write about and kind of at a high level the policy solutions.

WITTES: Sure. So, my blueprint is aptly titled, *What to do - and what not to do - in the Middle East*. And the what not to do is really the challenge. This is something that I've been writing about in various forms over the last couple of years, which is that successive American

presidents have tried to reduce the amount of time and resources, especially military resources that the United States devotes to the Middle East, to wind down the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and to devote more energy instead to the challenge of a rising China, a confrontation with Russia, and so on.

But we have very strong and compelling interests in the Middle East and very important partners there. And so, it's been this sort of push me pull you dynamic for years in which both Obama and Trump tried to do less but found themselves unable to. Now, President Biden is coming into office with an economic challenge that is going to create budget austerity and demand for cuts in military spending, increasing challenges from China. All of those pressures are tighter and yet, the U.S. still has to figure out how to protect its remaining and still important interests and what to do about its key relationships with countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel. And, of course, the confrontation with Iran.

So, the paper is really looking at how the United States can reorient its military approach in ways that will allow it to be leaner and meaner. More efficient in deterring threats to naval traffic in the Gulf, for example. How it can ramp up its diplomacy. This is a region that is in turmoil with multiple civil wars that have thrown off horrific refugee flows and humanitarian crises. So, how to engage with partners in the region on diplomacy to tamp those civil wars down, hopefully resolve them. How to deal with the ongoing misery of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And how to set up new approach to relationships, especially with Saudi Arabia, which is a major focus in the paper.

DEWS: I'm going to suggest -- in my mind, at least, that seems like a really interesting segue for context to start talking to Madiha in more detail about your paper. Tamara, you just outlined a whole series of challenges, focused on the Middle East, but more broadly speaking in

the world, China, Russia, refugee flows. And the world is very challenging. Home is very challenging too for the new Biden Administration.

So, Madiha, what I would want to start with is asking you to talk about your starting point for your policy challenge. You suggest that the urgency that the United States has in dealing with its own domestic issues, but also with all of these other issues on the global stage, poses what you say is a danger that we might move on without learning the lessons of the last two decades that start with 911. I mean, it's been almost exactly 20 years since the attacks of 911. And that is in terms of lessons in dealing with extremism and terrorism. So, you're suggesting that we haven't learned the right lessons even 20 years on from 911. Is that right?

AFZAL: Yes. I think at best, our learning has been incomplete. And there is a real danger that with this urgency to turn the page, we will lose even what we've learned. And sort of shelve anything we still have yet to learn. So, the first thing that we should recognize is that counterterrorism is where the vast majority of the resources since 911 have gone. And that's been successful at least in terms of the fact that the U.S. has not faced the kind of jihadist threat that it did -- that we feared in the wake of 911, since then.

But while counterterrorism has been an area that we've spent resources on and that we've seen successes in, we have not focused enough at all on countering extremism. And so, the extremism that fuels this terrorism remains intact around the world. And I will talk perhaps a little bit more about how the approaches to countering extremism when they began were problematic. But if we first recognize that the extremism around the world remains intact, that's sort of the first step.

The second thing to recognize is that there are local and regional groups around the world, terrorist groups, that remain intact and are even ascendant. So, you know, in Nigeria,

there is Boko Haram and its splinter the Islamic State West Africa Province, which allies itself with ISIS. There is the ISIS Khorasan, the rival of the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan. There is the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan in Pakistan, which while it had been routed out of the country's northwest into Afghanistan in the last five years or so, has been regrouping in Pakistan's northwest. There is, of course, the Afghan Taliban, which has signed a peace deal with the United States in 2020, and has gained international legitimacy, which has given its old friend, if you will, Al Qaeda a renewed vibrancy even though Al Qaeda remains a shadow of its old self.

So, these groups remain there around the world. The fact that extremism still exists and the fact that these groups still exist, what does that mean? That means that one of these groups may resurge to attack the U.S. again and so, we are not out of danger there. And more importantly, these groups also cross lines with each other and so somebody from the Afghan Taliban could go over to Al Qaeda and make Al Qaeda stronger again. And so, we really cannot consider these threats to have diminished entirely.

DEWS: That's fascinating to me as just kind of a lay observer of this policy area. And I think a lot of people would look at this and be surprised by your description of the change in the spread of what you call local and regional extremist groups. Whereas, the two traditional ones that we've often thought about that perhaps that's been the lesson of 911 is that Al Qaeda is bad and the Taliban is bad, and ISIS more recently is the big group we should worry about. Those groups except maybe the Afghan Taliban, are not the ascendant global actors that we worry about. And it's these more regional and local groups, right?

AFZAL: Yes. One way to think about it is that right now the groups that we worried that they would target the U.S. or Western targets, that capability has diminished because of all of the efforts that we have spent on counterterrorism. But the fact of the matter is that in Afghanistan,

in Pakistan, in Nigeria, local populations remain very, very vulnerable to terrorist attacks because these groups still exist locally. And so, their scope has become much more laser focused on those areas. There are huge parts of the world that are still in danger. But just because we sitting here in the United States don't feel that danger anymore, we've sort of lost our focus on this.

WITTES: You know, Madiha, I think it's so important the way you highlight the links between local grievances and this terrorist recruitment and terrorist activity because it is a problem that Nigeria is destabilized by terrorism. It's also a problem that local militant organizations see the brand of transnational Islamist terrorism in Al Qaeda or ISIS as an attractive brand and one that they want to associate themselves with.

But it's also the case that well before 911 the United States itself faced attacks. The USS Kohl was bombed in Yemen. American embassies were bombed in Kenya and in Tanzania. So, it's not as though the U.S. is immune if the terrorist threat is kept out of the homeland. And more broadly, isn't the lesson of 911 that the U.S. needs to care about local governance and ensuring that there are not vacuums that these groups can use to plan attacks against the U.S.

AFZAL: Exactly, exactly, absolutely. And I think that is the lesson that we seem to have forgotten in all of this rhetoric now that we really need to turn the page on the post-911 era. And I think the other thing to think about is, yes, you know, while Al Qaeda at large and ISIS at large, the global jihadist groups perhaps are not as strong as they once were, the local jihadist groups, while they may target local populations, they still share a broad ideology with the father organization, if you will.

DEWS: Madiha, I'd like to follow-up then on some of the distinctions you make because I think they underpin your analysis and then your policy solutions. And those distinctions have to do with terrorism and extremism. And then within the extremism bucket, between extremism and

violent extremism. And you have this section in your paper where you actually talk about the second Obama Administration's policy on countering violent extremism. But I think you're looking at it in a broader sense of just extremism. So, could you talk about those distinctions, terrorism, extremism, and violent extremism?

AFZAL: Sure, absolutely. I talk about them being twin problems and one would not exist without the other. So, extremism may lead to violence, but does not necessarily have to be violent. So, extremism or, you know, attitudes of a certain type, which may mean sympathy towards terrorist groups, which could mean intolerance towards minorities as I talk about in my book. And I think of extremism as a spectrum. On the left of the spectrum, if you will, is sort of nonviolence, and you can move to the right where it becomes violent. And extremism is something that gives terrorist groups oxygen. It enables them to survive. So, you need an environment of extremism in order for a terrorist group to come into existence or survive in a particular environment.

So, thinking about logistical support or financial support for these terrorist groups comes from populations that may espouse extremism. You can think about them for potential recruits. You can think about them most broadly, I think, in terms of ideological space. And so, again, in the Pakistani context, it's an environment where there is ideological space for terrorist groups to thrive. So, you may be able to decimate the terrorist group by killing off its chain of command. But while there's an environment of extremism, you will get another group emerging if the conditions exist.

So, you know, that's one. And then if you start thinking about them in terms of policy, right? So, counterterrorism policy really just is about taking out sort of the hierarchy of the groups or disrupting their planning of attacks. So, one of the things the Obama Administration

did was conduct drone strikes and actually really took out a lot of Al Qaeda's leaders and people in the Af-Pak region over the last 10 years. But if we think about countering extremism, that's as I said, a space where there hasn't been that much focus, and the second Obama Administration really started talking about countering violent extremism, or CVE. But that really was around the violent, sort of the right end of the spectrum. And it was groups or people who were vulnerable to becoming violent or had already shown some signs of becoming violent and so, you reintegrate them.

So, it's really on the very right of the spectrum, on the violent end of the spectrum that you're talking about things as opposed to PVE, which is kind of preventing violent extremism, or really targeting the whole range of extremism. So, the CVE policies in the Obama Administration really talked about local grassroots community level, really tailored interventions. You know, I'll give you an example. So, something like youth sports programs is something I have actually seen in Africa that were used to reintegrate vulnerable youth. And so, it's a very, very localized targeted intervention that targets youth who may be considered in danger of being recruited by militant groups. But it's not targeting the ideological appeal of these groups to this group of young people. And it's a really fragmented, very bottom-up approach. Whereas, I argue, and we'll discuss that policies that affect extremism are by necessity top down.

DEWS: I think that takes us into your policy recommendations in this essay. And that is what you referred to earlier as kind of a country-level education policy designed to counter extremism. So, can you talk about how you would design that kind of policy? How it would be implemented. What agency or what maybe a global body would oversee that and how that would work.

AFZAL: So, in my research on Pakistan, I really found that it was top down-level

policies. Pakistan's legal system, its politics, and its education system and curricula that affected attitudes, and that state-level policies that we really needed to focus on. And by looking at that level, you're not only able to look at sort of the ideological appeal of extremism, but you're really able to target it early on in the spectrum of extremism so that you don't worry about people actually becoming violent. You can actually affect attitudes early on. So, that's the motivation for looking at this level.

So, I'll give you just one example or a little bit of context of how I think education affects extremism, at least in the Pakistani context and then give you my policy approach. So, in Pakistani government schools and in schools where the government system is what students studied, even in private schools, the textbooks really impart a very biased one-sided view of the world. And one that basically victimizes Pakistan and places the blame for its problems on the rest of the world, teaches intolerance, sort of an us versus them mindset. And you can really look at history textbooks in high schools to sort of see that there's no critical thinking. It's just rote memorization. Facts and half-truths and even errors, lies, are presented essentially without sources, and students are expected to absorb them.

And so, as a result, when they encounter extremist propaganda, which they do, and it aligns with the exclusionary view of the world that they're learning in their textbooks, they just buy into it. And so, in interviews that I conducted with students in high schools, basically they would say, look we saw such and such video or photo that showed that people were being trained in America to attack Pakistan, which is a common conspiracy theory. And they would just buy into it because it aligned with their whole world view of what they were taught in their textbooks.

And so, I argue that we should basically focus on reform of national education policies

and formal schooling systems. Focus on history curricula in elementary and secondary schools, as well as other parts of the curriculum, such as language where intolerance, et cetera, can seep into the curriculum to counter extremism. And, of course, curriculum reform is not an easy thing to sell to various countries because they use education to sort of impart or inculcate their own sense of nationalism. And we do that everywhere. So, my argument is that we should not have a bilateral approach or target specific countries, but really use the UN, the United Nations, which has obviously a very unique platform to bring countries around the world onboard on this.

So, I propose sort of an ambitious approach, which is a universal or near universal membership of a UN convention on education. Akin to what was used for the UN Convention on Climate Change, which was used to get countries to sign on to the Paris Agreement. And have an agreement reached according to which signatory countries would then commit to making education systems compliant with a certain set of guidelines. And these guidelines would include an audit of curricula. You remove hate material. You espouse tolerance in the curriculum. You teach critical thinking. You teach students how to determine the credibility of information that they see both in mainstream and social media. You teach them how to evaluate sources found in their textbooks, and so on.

And this could extend to adult education as well. So, for instance, you could have a television ad campaign for citizens basically which could have a message that citizens receive via WhatsApp that's clearly fake news and show them how they could actually figure out that that's fake news and one that isn't and show them how they could figure that out. And essentially, this kind of approach with U.S. leadership but a broad global sign-on would be beneficial to all countries because you would be able to counter the phenomenon of fake news and disinformation and rightwing extremism. So, this isn't just targeting a particular kind of

extremism. But because the research I did was sort of focused on countries where jihadist extremism was a problem, that's where I started off from.

DEWS: It strikes me as a very salient time for the United States, in particular, to suggest a kind of new approach to information and misinformation on the world stage in light of recent events. We could do a whole other podcast episode about that. But I do wonder, then, if the United States is kind of taking the lead on this at the United Nations level, I mean, what would be the incentive and what would be the obstacles for that approach for a country like Pakistan or some other country where there is a homegrown extremism issue?

AFZAL: The biggest hurdle would be for states to recognize that the benefits accrue to themselves, right? And so, they're not doing this in service of a Western agenda. So, to have the United States, for instance, sign on to this, to have other parts of the developed world sign on to this and being initial signatories, that would show countries like Pakistan that the U.S. can put its money where its mouth is. And, of course, this would affect outcomes in the United States as well, right? This would affect the phenomenon of rightwing extremism in the United States. So, it's not that America signing on to this would be costless in some ways, right, to the United States. And so, being able to see commitment from countries around the world would then incentivize countries like Pakistan to sign on to this.

And I presume that this would take some time, and this would be an ambitious approach. You know, there are other ways to do this, which would be to subsume this under the sustainable development goals, which already have a little bit on the quality of education in sustainable development goal number four. But the advantage of doing this as sort of an ambitious all-out policy is that it would gain more attention. Again, parallel to the Paris Agreement to counter climate change. And so, I think it would really require commitment on the part of the U.S. and

some initial signatory countries to do this in order to then convince others that this is what needs to be done in order to have sort of credible education systems around the world.

DEWS: One last question for you before we turn it over to Tamara. You do have an example in the paper of a country that has taken this kind of approach to countering extremism, and that's Bangladesh. Can you talk about that for just a second?

AFZAL: Yeah, so, Bangladesh is a counter example in some ways to Pakistan. I mean, really interestingly, of course, because it was once part of Pakistan. It was East Pakistan until 1971. Bangladesh, when it separated from what is now Pakistan, what was then West Pakistan in 1971, did not become an Islamic republic the way Pakistan did in 1947, of course, when it came into being. And part of what Pakistan did when it became an Islamic republic, is that for instance, in its textbooks, literally you open up a history textbook and the first thing that you see is that the Pakistan ideology is Islam, right? And that there's a particular world view that then goes through those textbooks.

That is not the case in Bangladesh. Its state-level policies are it's a secular country. Religion does not play a role in its politics the same way. It still does. It doesn't go away completely. But not in the same way as it does in Pakistan. And Bangladesh's textbooks actually have in some ways removed the very notion of a shared history with Pakistan. And so, they really just start from 1971. And so, that's a country where the textbooks have imparted a nationalist agenda, but without espousing intolerance and this kind of view of the world that victimizes a particular religion at the expense of others.

DEWS: Let's turn it over to Tamara now. What to do and what not to do in the Middle East. Tamara, you mentioned this at the start, but you say in your essay that a new approach from the United States to the Middle East is long overdue. Can you talk about what you mean by that?

WITTES: Sure. So, if you think back to Barack Obama's victory speech in Grant Park in Chicago in November 2008, you may recall that he said something that night about turning the page on a decade defined by two wars. The war in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq. Well, that was 2008. We are now in 2021, and the United States still has troops on the ground in both countries. Now, not in active combat and not anywhere near the same levels they were in 2008.

But the United States has found it much, much harder to extract itself from these wars in practice than in theory. And partly, that's because of precisely the issues that Madiha was describing. The fact that terrorism is not something that you can simply defeat on the battlefield and then walk away and it'll stay defeated. This set of ideas inspires violence amongst a range of actors and these actors are pretty opportunistic and pretty resilient.

And so, for the United States if it wants to do less in the Middle East so that it can do more in other places because resources are finite, how can it make sure that we don't inadvertently leave a large terrorism problem to grow. In fact, this is what Obama dealt with in office. He withdrew all U.S. combat forces from Iraq in December 2011 and then had to reinsert troops in 2014 in order to fight ISIS. So, the challenge is how can we do what we need to do in the Middle East and not get sucked into doing more?

DEWS: It seems like in the past 20 years there's been a pretty heavy reliance by the U.S. on the military tools and also maybe the economic tools. But really the military tools to deal with issues all across the Middle East. And you talk about in your essay that array of tools that the U.S. does have in its relationships with the Middle East, the Middle Eastern countries, from diplomacy to the military to everything in between. But you note that America's greatest impact there has not been through the military tools but has been through diplomacy. Can you expand on that?

WITTES: Sure. The United States has been or was, I would say, from 1956 or so up until 2011, the United States was the unchallenged hegemonic influence in the Middle East. It structured a geopolitical order in the region with partners like Egypt and Israel and Saudi Arabia and defended that order for half a century. And it did that primarily not using military force. It was really only beginning in the Iran-Iraq War when the United States began reflagging and escorting Kuwaiti oil tankers out of the Gulf that we started building up our military presence in the region. And then, of course, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. We mounted a massive military engagement in the region to push him out and to defend Saudi Arabia and other parts of the region. And then we kept a lot of forces there. After 911, we used the region as a staging ground for Afghanistan. And then, of course, invaded Iraq in 2003.

One result is that our partners in the region and our adversaries, as well, have become used to a really historically high American military presence in the region. But our greatest impact in the geopolitics of the region has been through negotiations, through diplomacy. I think, for example, of the 1979 Camp David Accords that solidified Egypt leaving the Soviet camp and joining the American camp in the cold war and ending a period of interstate Arab-Israeli wars that had torn the region apart over the previous decades. We didn't fire one shot to do that.

And this is a time, we're 10 years after the Arab uprisings now, and this region has been torn by civil conflict and now, a lot of competition within the region between countries like Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, and others jockeying for influence. This is a time for diplomacy. This is a time to resolve the proxy wars that are raging around the region. This is a time when we can use that kind of engagement to reduce everyone's perception of threat and to stabilize an unstable region. And that will help us do less over time.

DEWS: Could you also then talk about Iran and where U.S.-Iran policy has been over the

past few years and what challenges the previous administration leaves to the current administration. And I suppose to be fair, we should also if you think it's appropriate, go back to what challenges the Obama Administration left to the Trump Administration, which is being left to the Biden Administration.

WITTES: The Obama Administration took the view that Iran's nuclear program, which was widely suspected of being a basis for nuclear weapons development, presented the most urgent threat, not only to regional security but to global security, emanating from the Middle East. And through an international sanctions regime, managed to get the Iranians to a multilateral negotiation and produce the JCPOA, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, to constrain the Iranian nuclear program and put it under international scrutiny so that Iran could not develop a nuclear weapon.

That did not deal with a lot of other dimensions of Iranian behavior in the region that Iran's neighbors, including good partners of the United States, found threatening. Subversion in domestic politics of Arab states. Sponsorship of terrorism, sponsorship of proxy militia groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon has repeatedly targeted Israel. So, there were a lot of security challenges from Iran that were not addressed by that nuclear agreement.

President Trump campaigned on, came into office intending to leave that Iran nuclear agreement, and he did. What he did instead though, was escalate military pressure, escalate economic pressure through really crushing sanctions, to punishing levels. And they lay out such a laundry list of demands that it wasn't clear that Iran could meet any of these 12 demands. Nor was it clear which of those demands the United States really prioritized. And then President Trump sort of swung wildly between blustering rhetoric and military escalation and efforts to get the supreme leader of Iran on the phone. So, none of that really yielded much. It also didn't

address these other security challenges.

Now, Biden said during the campaign and he has said since he took office that he is interested in seeing whether it's possible for Iran to come back into compliance with the JCPOA. And if so, then the United States would also come back into compliance with the JCPOA. That would mean Iran would have to do things like reduce its enrichment of uranium and get rid of some of its uranium stockpile. And the U.S. would have to do things like remove some of the additional sanctions that Trump imposed.

It will be challenging just to get to that. It seems like it should be a simple tit for tat, but it's not. The devil's in the details. And I think in the meantime, the United States needs to work with its regional partners on intelligence cooperation, on military deterrence, on regional security dialog, to deal with the other dimensions of the Iranian threat to regional stability.

DEWS: If we could stay on the Iranian threat just for a second because it's something I learned from your paper. I always learn so much from reading papers that I interview scholars about. And it's that Iran exercises regional influence and I believe the way you put it is on the cheap. Which is a distinction that you make between how say the Gulf Arab states would exercise their regional influence, but they have been hit by economic downturn, by the fall in the price of oil. And so, it's an interesting juxtaposition between how Iran operates in the region versus how the Gulf Arab states operate in the region. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

WITTES: Yeah. I'm glad you raised that actually, Fred, because I think it's something that we don't always talk about when we're talking about sanctions on Iran or how to pressure Iran. And I'm really indebted to my colleague and our Vice President for Foreign Policy Suzanne Maloney who is a wonderful political economist who specializes in Iran and really has helped me understand this dynamic. But look, we're in a global recession. Everyone is hurting because

of COVID, right? And for states that rely on oil income, which includes both a bunch of Arab states and the Iranians, the fall in the price of oil is like an additional blow layered on top of that recession.

But it affects them differently. Because Iran has been so heavily sanctioned for so long, and also because of its ideology and because of its history, it has developed ways of wielding influence around the region that do not rely on large amounts of cash. The support for proxy militias doesn't cost nearly as much as say the United States floating an aircraft carrier group through the Persian Gulf, right? Just to compare. Give a few dumb missiles to the Houthis, that's pretty cheap, right? Now, developing precision guided missiles, which the Iranians are also doing, costs a little bit more.

But here's the other thing. The main arm of the Iranian regime that is engaged in this activity around the region supporting proxy militias, providing missile technology, carrying out attacks, is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the IRGC. These guys also make money from smuggling. So, the more sanctions Iran is under, the more money they can make from smuggling. So, even though Iran is under tremendous economic pressure, that pressure doesn't really prevent Iran from doing what it's doing around the region to cause trouble. It may have some marginal impact, but it doesn't really change the game.

The Gulf states on the other hand, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, they're all very small. None of them have really large or powerful militaries. What they do have is money because they extract oil and gas. And so that has been their main tool of influence. Giving economic assistance, putting deposits into the central banks of other countries to help them stabilize their currencies, giving loans, supporting infrastructure projects. And that is how they've built their influence in the region over time. So, the fall in oil prices really constrains their ability

to do that.

DEWS: Tamara, you mentioned just now the Houthis and a little while ago you mentioned humanitarian crises, which brings us to Yemen, which the United Nations has called the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. Can you talk about the situation now in Yemen that the Biden Administration inherits and what challenges that presents for U.S. policy in the Middle East?

WITTES: Yeah, Fred, look this is an incredibly complex and miserable situation. But I think that Biden is going to have to give it some significant attention early in his administration. Partly that's because the degree of humanitarian crisis, the starvation, the proliferation of diseases like cholera. It's just devastating the Yemeni civilian population and a lot of Americans, including a lot of progressives and democrats, are really exercised by that. And they're upset by the fact that the United States is providing resupply of weapons and equipment to the Saudis who are engaged in a war in Yemen against this Houthi movement.

Now, there was already a civil war in Yemen that the Houthis were a part of. The Saudis intervened in that civil war against the Houthis because the Houthis are getting support from Iran. So, this is a perfect example of one of those regional civil conflicts that has become a proxy conflict for bigger neighbors to fight their own battles on someone else's territory. That's what's going on right now. And there are a lot of Americans including in Congress who don't want the United States implicated in that war any longer. And they want the U.S. to stop providing weapons to the Saudis.

Last year, Congress actually voted to cut off that flow and President Trump had to issue his very first veto to shoot down that resolution. So, Biden faces pressure from his own party, his own constituents, and also from some republicans on Capitol Hill. Address the U.S. role in the

war and to find a way to press the Saudis to end their involvement. But that in and of itself isn't going to be enough to give relief to these suffering Yemeni civilians. They need an end to the civil war as well. And the Saudis are going to have to play a role there.

There has been for a number of years now, a United Nations mediation process that's been ongoing. The Trump Administration didn't really do much to support that process. But here is another place that I note in the paper where the Biden Administration can put the emphasis on diplomacy rather than on military tools and give robust support to the UN process.

DEWS: Well, let's turn now, Tamara, to your policy recommendations. The way these blueprints papers are structured, there is identification of the challenge. There is discussion of the context and the history and where we are now. And then there's a set of policy recommendations. And as the title of your paper suggests, your policy recommendations section is framed as what the U.S. should not do in its Middle East policy. So, can you talk about the items that are on that list?

WITTES: I think the biggest don't do in the report is don't try to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Which is not to say that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not painful, costly. It's not to say that the Israeli- Palestinian conflict doesn't have dangerous implications for the region as a whole and for American interests. All of those things are true. What I'm arguing against is a high-level presidential envoy to bring the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships together and knock their heads together to achieve a final conflict ending agreement. The Israeli and Palestinian leaderships and the politics within each of these two societies are very, very far from being able to negotiate a final agreement.

And so, rather than pushing forward with a fruitless negotiating process, it's time for the United States to really reorient its approach to the conflict. Now, there's a great tool here, which

is right before the Biden Administration came into office, Congress passed a law giving $250 million over five years to a brand-new program, which is designed to be part of an international program to bring Israelis and Palestinians together at the people-to-people level. To try and increase engagement, increase trust, increase people's confidence in the possibility of coexistence. And that's the kind of foundational work that's going to be necessary in order for Israelis and Palestinians to choose leaders who want to compromise and to support those leaders in making compromise. So, what not to do, don't have the new peace summit work on the ground to lay the foundation for peace.

I think another big not to do in the paper is don't let relationships with important countries like Saudi Arabia just drift. The Trump Administration really in many ways didn't care what the Saudis did internationally, regionally, or domestically, as long as they were buying American weapons and saying nice things about Donald Trump. And as a result, that relationship has become really unbalanced. So, it's important for the United States if we're going to work effectively with our regional partners, to set clear expectations. To have honest conversations about the things these partners are doing that we find unconstructive and unhelpful. And to ask them to make a shift on behalf of our partnership.

DEWS: You know, just kind of wrapping up this part of our conversation, Tamara, I'm thinking very globally again and back to Madiha's discussion of lessons learned after 911, it seems to me that maybe not a lesson learned, but a lesson taken by a lot of Americans after 911 is that the Middle East is kind of the be all end all of American foreign policy. And it strikes me that what you're saying is that it definitely is not. And that American foreign policy needs to kind of pull itself back from the Middle East in many ways. Let diplomacy do more of the work. And then other scholars at Brookings have said, you know, we should be focusing on some other

issues. Is that kind of a good way to look at it?

WITTES: I think that this is where Madiha's work and my work really come together because I think the history, the recent history of American policy in the Middle East is that we try to pick and choose our battles. But there are certain issues that if we leave them unaddressed, they land on our doorstep anyway. And so, ISIS being a perfect example. The United States withdrew from Iraq and also reduced its economic assistance to Iraq and downscaled its diplomatic engagement with Iraq and left a vacuum that ISIS could fill. And then we had to go back into Iraq.

So, the lesson here is that you can't just walk away from these issues. The United States needs to find a way to engage and support its interests in the Middle East, but at a sustainable level, in a consistent manner. Not this sort of pendulum swinging back and forth. And when I think about Madiha's work, I think she's really trying to give some ideas about how the United States can do the same thing for the war on terror writ large. How do we deal with the fight against violent extremism in a sustainable way? In a way that gives us a lasting benefit.

AFZAL: I wonder if I can jump in, Tamara, and ask you if you have a policy recommendation for our involvement in Afghanistan given that it relates, of course, to the terrorism problem, given that the Taliban has not cut its ties with Al Qaeda, which was a key, of course, provision or condition of the U.S.-Taliban deal. But also, the fact that our current posture in Afghanistan while it's sustainable, it's not acceptable to the Taliban. But if we leave right away without resolving, if you will, the intra-Afghans, the squabbles between Kabul and the Taliban, we could leave with an Afghanistan that essentially is handed over eventually to the Taliban, which is ascendant.

WITTES: Yeah, I mean, look you know this issue much more than I do. But it strikes me

that both in Iraq and in Afghanistan, our residual troop presence, which is 2,500 troops at this point, is not in and of itself a magic bullet for anything, right? What it is, what it can be is a component of a broader strategy. That strategy has to involve working hard with the domestic political leaderships in both of these countries. It has to involve an emphasis by the United States on the core components of inclusive responsive governance and anti-corruption, right? That give these leaderships a legitimate foundation to do the hard things that they need to do to fight terrorism and to maintain stability and to partner with us.

So, you know, it's not just a question of 2,500 troops stay or go. It's how do you build that residual presence into part of a broader strategy? And I think the big challenge in American-Afghanistan strategy is that that's an area where the Trump Administration's negotiations had already gone pretty far down the road. And Biden is kind of coming in the middle of that story and has to figure out what, if anything, he can change about the bigger picture, not the true picture.

DEWS: Well, let me take this opportunity to wrap up our conversation by asking you both a question that I've asked other scholars in our Blueprints podcast series, and that is as follows. With the new Biden-Harris Administration just now standing up in Washington, but with a very closely divided Congress, are you hopeful, are each of you hopeful that some progress on these issues and these policy ideas can actually happen? Madiha, do you want to start with that?

AFZAL: Yes. Thanks, Fred. I am because this is an administration that will take its role on the world stage obviously very seriously and rely on multilateral approaches. And both the education approach that I spoke about as well as another policy recommendation I have in the paper about relying on the Financial Action Task Force, another multilateral body, to try to

counter terrorist groups around the world that are local and regional by basically making it something that countries do rather than that the U.S. focuses on.

Both these approaches because they are multilateral, I think fit in very well with the Biden Administration's view of itself and its role in the world. And I basically visualize this role being something, of course, that the State Department could take a lead on along with the Office of the Ambassador to the UN. So, I'm hopeful.

Of course, the question is given the domestic policy challenges that the Biden Administration faces, will this be something that it can start looking at right away? That's the question to me.

WITTES: For me, I think, Fred, the U.S. really wants to rebuild its diplomatic capacity in the Middle East. It has to rebuild its diplomatic tool overall after a period in which not only through the years of the war on terrorism in which the U.S. military was very heavily resourced and American diplomacy was consistently under resourced.

But also, after the last four years in which the American diplomatic instrument was devalued, decimated, depopulated under the Trump Administration with some extraordinarily bad leadership.

So, this is an important role for Congress. Number one, when the administration comes forward with funding requests for American diplomacy and diplomatic and development assistance and democracy support, that costs money, but it costs a lot less than an F-35. Congress needs to be responsive and fund this tool in the way that it needs to be funded if it's going to be effective.

And then there's a lot of discussion about how you don't just rebuild the State Department the way it was but rebuild it better. More diverse, more flexible, bringing in more of the technical and functional expertise to deal with the foreign policy problems of the 21st Century. And Congress has a role to play there because there's a lot that needs to be done through legislation not only through executive action.

So, I am hopeful. I think that that problem is one that got a lot of attention in the last Congress, especially in the House. And I'm hopeful that they will be able to get agreement on, for example, a new State Department authorization bill. We haven't had one in years. And it would be such an important signal of support as well as a great opportunity to make necessary changes.

DEWS: Well, Tamara and Madiha, this has been a fascinating conversation. I have learned a lot and I'm sure our listeners have learned a lot too. So, I thank you both for sharing your time and expertise today.

WITTES: Thanks so much, Fred. I really enjoyed it.

AFZAL: Thanks, Fred. Thanks, Tamara, for a great discussion.

DEWS: You can find the papers by Tamara Wittes and Madiha Afzal in the Blueprints for American Renewal and Prosperity section of our website brookings.edu/blueprints.

Look for the International Security section. You can also find the already published policy briefs in podcasts on Racial Justice and Worker Mobility, Economic Growth and Dynamism, and International Security.

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A team of amazing colleagues helps make the Brookings Cafeteria possible. My thanks to audio engineer Gaston Reboredo. To Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press, who does the book interviews.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.

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