

Tarek Masoud:

All right. Welcome everybody to this sixth installment in our series of conversations with Arab thought leaders, the state of the United States leading up to, and now in the aftermath of the 2020 US election. My name is Tarek Masoud. I am a professor of public policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government and the faculty director of the Middle East initiative here. And it's my pleasure to welcome you along with my cohost ambassador Kerim Haggag of the School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the American University in Cairo. How are you Kerim?

Kerim Haggag:

I'm good. I'm good. I'm holding my breath on the results of the US elections

Tarek Masoud:

As we all are. So what we've been doing over the past two months is that each week, Kerim and I have been meeting with leading Arabs from the worlds of policy, practice and ideas to explore their perceptions of the current election, their sense of where the United States is heading and what all of this means for the Arab world and the Middle East. So far in this series, we've interviewed Iraqi prime minister, [foreign language 00:00:01:39], the Emiratis intellectual [foreign language 00:01:39], the Kuwaiti Palestinian journalists, [foreign language 00:01:43], the Emiratis and Iraqi journalist, [foreign language 00:00:01:46], the Lebanese journalists [foreign language 00:01:49] and the former Egyptian Foreign Minister [foreign language 00:01:53]. And those conversations will soon be available actually on the Middle East initiatives podcast, Middle East Matters. So you can relive them at your pleasure. We're going to take a quick hiatus in December, but then we'll be back in the spring when we hope to kick off the series with an interview with the Palestinian legislator and activist, Dr. Hanan Ashrawi.

Tarek Masoud:

I'm joined as always by my co-host Kerim Haggag. And what we want to do today is dive right into what will be the last of our conversations this semester. And I think it's fair to say that we've saved the best for last. So our speaker today has amassed such an impressive record in his small number of years on this planet that he almost requires no introduction.

Tarek Masoud:

Mohammed Alyahya is the editor in chief of Al Arabiya English, which is the English language outlet of the Dubai based Al Arabiya satellite news channel. He's also a senior research fellow of the Gulf Research Center. And prior to that, he was a fellow of the Atlantic Council and of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh. He's published very widely on the geopolitics of the Gulf, including in such places as the New York Times, the Wall Street journal and Newsweek. And he really is one of the freshest and most insightful voices on Arab affairs who is writing today. He is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania. And if I told you the year in which he graduated, which was so recent, you would probably not believe me, especially given how insightful and mature he is. So welcome, Mohammed. We're really glad to have you with us.

Mohammed Alyahya:

Thank you very much for this introduction. I don't deserve it, but again, I must say it's unfair for me to be the last person in the series because of the fantastic lineup of speakers that you brought in, but I'm glad to be here and thank you for the privilege. I remember when you taught me that I'd be speaking about the election November 17, and I told you, who's going to be listening about the election in November

17th. You said you'd be surprised. At that point in time, I don't think this will be solved in the first week or two weeks. The fact that still today there are debates on this and there are people in the streets and there's a controversy surrounding this is something I think I'm not alone in finding surprising.

Tarek Masoud:

Yeah, absolutely. And so I guess our first question for you is if you could give us a sense of what the reaction has been in the Arab world, or at least in the parts of the Arab world you're most familiar with, what's been the reaction to the results of the election and to the uncertainty around the results of the election?

Mohammed Alyahya:

Well US elections have always been a very important pastime in the Middle East. They've always been watched regardless of the parties that were involved. This year, the party is now on its third week, instead of one that was just one election. People are still speaking about precedence and the history of US elections. Something to consider, and I'm sure that it's something anyone... Political literacy, even amongst taxi drivers in Egypt or any Arab country is very high. And it's higher, I think, than political literacy is even in North America.

Tarek Masoud:

So-

Mohammed Alyahya:

And current affairs [inaudible 00:05:45]. So speaking about the latest headline with somebody in the street in the Arab world is much easier than doing so in a random city in United States, I think.

Tarek Masoud:

So, if you were to characterize what people are saying about the election. So one thing that you often hear in the United States now is that our inability now three weeks after the election to definitively settle on a winner and have everybody line up behind that winner might actually undermine the reputation of democracy and of elections as a way of choosing leaders. Are we hearing some of that in the Arab world?

Mohammed Alyahya:

I wouldn't go that far, I think. At least from what I've seen, there aren't big discussions about the efficacy of democracy as a result of this. People are taking this very lightheartedly. People are looking at this to a large degree as entertainment. Of course, there are real debates that have been had across the region on what the policies of a second term Trump would have been, what the policies of Biden will be in the region of comparison to what the Obama administration chose to have in terms of policies in the region.

Mohammed Alyahya:

All of these things that are things that people discuss frequently and that people are looking at. And there is a large degree of uncertainty. We have to remember that many people in the Gulf are very excited that Hillary Clinton might become president. And everybody expected Hillary Clinton to win that. I remember that night, I was in Washington DC, and I spoke to several journalists, all of whom wanted to just file in their copy and go to election parties. And I spoke to a few of them on what Hillary Clinton

meant for the Gulf region. And I went to a viewing event myself and everybody was shocked to see that Donald Trump won and that he became president.

Mohammed Alyahya:

The expectation was that Donald Trump would be horrible for the region, horrible for the Gulf. People remember what he said about making the Arabs pay, making Iraq pay for protection. So, the discourse, at least in the Gulf was that Hillary Clinton is more on our page in terms of Syria, more on our page in terms of Iran. We deal with establishment Democrats. Hillary Clinton is exactly that. We don't want any more of this innovation in terms of dealing with the region that we've seen under the Obama administration and what we saw in the 4 years after that is totally the opposite. Actors in the Gulf saw that Donald Trump was not their worst nightmare as people feared. So I think people are coming into assessing the significance of this election with a degree of humility right now, precisely because the Donald Trump presidency was such a wildcard for the region.

Tarek Masoud:

So Mohammed, if I can ask you to maybe expand on that and talk a little bit about the Arab media coverage of this election and in particular, literally the pan Arab media, what are the op-ed pages saying? What are the issues raised? What are the issues raised in the Arab talk shows about how a potential Biden administration would approach the region and what are the expectations?

Mohammed Alyahya:

That's an important question, I think. There are several issues that I am sure we'll discuss in a little more detail. Iran is something that's very important to an Arab, is will president Biden return to the Iran nuclear deal? Will he sign a new deal with the Iranians? Would it be a larger deal or would it be just a nuclear deal? Will it cover Iran's expansion in the region? It's ballistic missiles program. All of these are questions that are being asked, not just in the regional press, but also in the US press and European press. So, that's definitely something that's important, but yeah.

Tarek Masoud:

So maybe this would be a good opportunity to begin a sort of a deep dive into some of the issues. So the general sentiment that one picks up from the Arab commentary on the elections is this anxiety that a potential Biden administration would be a return to the very problematic policies undertaken by the Obama administration. So can you begin to unpack that for us? What are the causes of this anxiety? You mentioned the Iran nuclear deal. Perhaps this would be a good opportunity to explain the reason for that anxiety. And of course it was not just the Iran issue, but there were a host of issues that related to the general approach of the Obama administration towards the region. Do you think that anxiety is justified?

Mohammed Alyahya:

Of course, that's an excellent question, I think. There is anxiety, but I don't think... Look, there were many articles and if we look at the discourse in the US media, you would come out to the conclusion that people are panicking in the Gulf. People are panicking in the Arab world, that they've got free ride for four years under the Trump administration, and that their worst nightmare would be a Joe Biden presidency. I think that couldn't be farther from the truth. And that has no relation to the reality that I see in front of me every day in the region.

Mohammed Alyahya:

People are not panicking. People are anxious about a number of issues. Iran is one of them, but I don't see panic. People are hopeful. And I think we forget where there are convergences of interest with Europe, with the democratic party in the United States, and that's important, but it's important to contextualize all of this, I think. The media in the US and the discourse among political pundits in the US sometimes has a short memory. And the Donald Trump presidency is a very, very unorthodox to say the least presidency.

Mohammed Alyahya:

I think there was a lot of assumption that the close ties between the White House and Saudi Arabia or the White House in the Gulf states was something that is a hallmark of a Trump presidency, something new, when in fact it wasn't new. It's true that under the Obama administration, as you mentioned as well the points of contention between the White House and Gulf actors maybe were at their highest while there was still strategic alignment. There was the strategic alignment that Iran was a bad actor that needed to be dealt with. There were a lot of tactical disagreements on this, but that was a strategic alignment, but of course there were policy disagreements. Egypt was a huge policy disagreement between Saudi Arabia and the EU on one side, and the Obama administration on the other. Tactically with Iran, the Saudis weren't even included in the discussions on the GCP way [inaudible 00:14:02]

Mohammed Alyahya:

And that was something that America's partners in the region all found problematic, especially since all of them are within the range of Iran's ballistic missiles, but they were left out of a security agreement that was signed by the P5+1. None of them are within range of Iran's ballistic missiles, or even close to any Iran's proxy. So that was a problem. And also Saudi Arabia's intervention in Bahrain was a point of contention with this administration. But it's important I think to keep in mind that strategically there is a huge overlap, and there is alignment on almost every important issue and that this is something that will continue with the Biden administration.

Mohammed Alyahya:

And it's important to consider that there is even more alignment with Biden administration and some Republican administrations on issues like Yildirim's Turkey. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are in complete alignment with Western European actors, with Germany, with Democrats in the United States about Yildirim's pushed into the Mediterranean on the way he's funding Islamist and backing Islamist groups across the region. They're on the same side as France and Libya and elsewhere in the region. So there could be disagreements on how to deal with Iran, but they could be counterbalanced on agreement on how to deal with Turkey and vice versa.

Tarek Masoud:

But, Mohammad, I think we agree with your read of the possibilities for alignment between a Biden administration and the interest of the major Arab countries. But, I am surprised that you make it sound as if this thing that we've all been witnessing for the last four years, which is a tremendous affection for this particular administration in Arab capitals is not really a thing. In our interviews, for example, we've seen that to the extent that the Chancelleries of Arab power had felt that they had a horse in this race, it really did seem like they were pumping for Donald Trump.

Mohammed Alyahya:

Sure. And I can see why it would seem like that to many people. But the fact of the matter is just take the Iran deal, as an example. That was a huge security agreement that changed the face of the Middle East. For actors in the region, it empowered Iran to expand into Iraq and to Syria, it caused death and destruction on these countries. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians were slaughtered. Yemen was overrun by the [inaudible 00:17:18] the militia that is funded and armed by Iran. All of these things happen. And in many people's minds here in the region, as a result of a deal that was signed without the knowledge of governments that have to live with the consequences of it every single day. So if this is how they see the eight years under president Obama and under the Iran nuclear deal to have a White House that is back to involving them back to it's natural position of doubling down on its allies and standing firmly against the adversities, which is traditionally what US administrations, Democrat and Republican alike have done before the Obama administration.

Mohammed Alyahya:

That is considered the return to normalcy and a breath of fresh air. So, if you want to consider which policies were abandoned in terms of traditional US Gulf relations, it's the policies that were witnessed under the administration of Barack Obama, regardless of what you think of him. Maybe you think that we've been trying the wrong things in the Middle East, and it's important to, shake things up a little bit. And that's what President Obama did. That's regardless of what you might think on those issues.

Tarek Masoud:

Yeah, but-

Mohammed Alyahya:

Unorthodox part was that.

Tarek Masoud:

And I understand what you're saying, but again, when I think of unorthodoxy I think of Trump. So the way you framed it as Trump represented a return to normalcy, a return to a period in which America's allies in the Gulf could count on the United States to double down in support of its allies. That's what you said. And I guess what has always been puzzling for me is why anybody in the Arab world would have actually thought that about Donald Trump. You yourself noted the discourse that President Trump used before he got elected, about how we're going to make these people pay and the Saudis have to pay for their security, et cetera, et cetera. But the New York Times reported last September, President Trump said, "I'm bringing our troops back from Afghanistan and bringing our troops back from Iraq. We're almost out of every place"

Tarek Masoud:

At another event, Time says he promised to keep America out of these endless, ridiculous, stupid foreign wars in countries that you've never even heard of. And now we see he's actually trying to make good on that promise. He's not even as consistent on Iran as they would like him to be in the Gulf. Yes, he's made some noises about bombing Iran, but if you look just the most recent appointment that he made to the defense department, retired Colonel Douglas McGregor.

Tarek Masoud:

This is a guy whose actually said, "We need to listen very carefully to the Iranians to find out what their interests are and to look for areas where we can cooperate." that to quote Elliot Abrams recently

tweeted that actually Trump and Biden weren't so different on Iran because if Trump got elected, he was going to reopen negotiations with Iran, and that raises the specter of the president initiating the kind of conversations with Iran supreme leader that he initiated with Kim Jong Un that could actually rehabilitate Iran. So I guess help me understand why the leaders in the Gulf never saw this. And instead saw in Donald Trump somebody who would to quote you "Stand firm and steadfast in support of allies."

Mohammed Alyahya:

Well, I would disagree about this consistency with Iran. He has been consistent, but that's not a marker on whether he would remain consistent. I think if the Iranians came to President Trump with a deal that beat significantly or satisfactorily even, beat [inaudible 00:21:26], he might've signed it to the detriment of certain Gulf actors. But I think at the end of the day, it's important to note that stalling Iran for four years, reversing the gains that it made on the ground in countries where it has its militia spread is still something that's a net gain for these Gulf countries. Now it so happened that he did not make this deal with Iran. And we don't know if there's going to be a deal made or what the contours of this deal will be made, but there was a threat recently that the military action is not off of the table with Iran, but we also have to consider what the tangible benefits of the Iran policy we saw over the past four years are. [foreign language 00:22:16]

Mohammed Alyahya:

[foreign language 00:22:16] was the engine behind the Iran regional expansion network. The fact that he's out of the picture is something that deals a huge blow to the Iranian revolutionary guard and their ability to prosecute their foreign policy and the regional policy in the region. The number two of Al-Qaeda was eliminated by the Israelis at the behest of the Americans, according to the New York Times in a posh neighbor neighborhood in North Iran. That's a huge piece of news that everybody just brushed by. When Osama bin Laden was killed, that made headlines for weeks and weeks on end. The same thing with [foreign language 00:22:57] even [foreign language 00:22:59] Somebody like Muhammad al-Masri, the number two in Al-Qaeda is a huge deal when it comes to counter terrorism. That introduces a series of questions. One, the United States entered the Iraq, invaded Iraq based on several false pretenses.

Mohammed Alyahya:

One of those false pretenses where that Saddam Hussein had a relationship with Al-Qaeda. He didn't have any relationship with Al-Qaeda, it turns out that the leaders of Al-Qaeda and Iran, Muhammad al-Masri was killed along with his daughter, who's the late widow of Hamza bin Laden They both got married in Bahrain by the way. So that mean the entire extended families of the Al-Qaeda's top leadership and Al-Qaeda royalty have been living like royalty in Bahrain. All of this is something that has been exposed to a large degree by the operation against Abu Muhammad al-Masri.

Mohammed Alyahya:

So if you look at this pressure strategy at the sanctions regime that was leveled on Iran, Iran's militias in the regions are suffering. And this is something that is tangible for people that live here, live in the Middle East. Iranian militia is required or Iranian funded militias [inaudible 00:24:19] Arab Shia's or South Asian Shia's that are fighting on behalf of Iran, seldom do they send actual Iranians or Persians to fight the IRGC. These militias cannot be maintained with toman or with Iraqi currency or Syrian currency. You need cold hard US dollars and US cash to maintain these militias. And that has dried up from the coffers of the revolutionary guards and from the coffers of Iran, as a result of the sanctions. The

sanctions deprived the regime of much needed dollars that are required to maintain a bloated regional proxy network. That is a tangible benefit that people feel in the region. So even in the worst case scenario.

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:25:04]

Mohammed Alyahya:

... the people are filling the region. So even in the worst case scenario, the one similar to what you described, where president Trump is just a deal maker and he wants to come back and say, "Let's make a deal," and reverse what we've done for years with the revolutionary guards on a back foot, with the machine that produces militia so quickly on the back foot, something that is a net gain for the region. The alternative to that would have been more US dollars being given to a regime like Iran's, would have been opening up to a regime like Iran would have been the proliferation of more proxies in the region. And that would have been something that would have been very harmful. I mean, you've seen firsthand the effect of that on the popular mobilization units in Iraq throughout the past 10 years. We've seen that in Syria, we have Afghani and Pakistani Shia militias fighting there.

Mohammed Alyahya:

And you know [inaudible 00:26:01] some of these fighters are shipped in from Afghanistan and Pakistan, promised residency if they go fight in Syria and then survive and come back to Iran. Some of these fighters, and then they were transported on Iran's official airlines, they discovered after they reached Syria, that they couldn't fight and they couldn't be trained. And many of them have starved to death because feeding them was too expensive for the Syrian government and for the Iranians. And it turned out that they were [inaudible 00:26:34], and that there was no plan to return most of these fighters back to their home. So any sanctions regime that works to chip away at this regional structure is something that is useful.

Tarek Masoud:

So, Mohammad, if we can perhaps press you a little bit again on the Iran issue to ask, what should the Biden administration do on the threat posed by Iran? Because it's interesting on the one hand, as you mentioned, the strategy of maximum pressure on Iran as applied by the Trump administration, did have tangible benefits in curtailing the threat posed by Iran and Iranian sponsored militias in the region. But on the other hand, the fact that the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA has undermined the agreement to the degree that Iran is now reconstituting a stockpile of façade material. It is rebuilding elements of its nuclear program that were capped by the JCPOA. So there are very complex trade-offs here. So how should the Biden administration approach this multifaceted issue of Iran? And then equally important, the Arab states have always complained that they were not part of the process, to begin with. Supposing that the Arab states, and the Gulf states in particular, were given a seat at the table in future negotiations process, what would be their contribution in any tangible approach to address the Iran threat?

Mohammed Alyahya:

I think that's an excellent question, and it doesn't need the complicated issue. And the Iranians are doubling down on restarting their nuclear program in order to rebuild their old leverage they also lost as a result of their militias being weakened in the region. But to answer your question more specifically, I think the next administration of the United States, the Biden administration, should not take for granted

the leverage that the United States has, and the goodwill that it has with its partners in the region. It has tremendous goodwill with Saudi Arabia, with United Arab Emirates, with Gulf actors, with Israel. And it has a tremendous leverage with adversaries of the United States, and US partners like Turkey that it finds are acting in an undesirable way on various arenas. All of that shouldn't go to waste.

Mohammed Alyahya:

A more comprehensive agreement, something that deals with Iran's expansion in the region, would be beneficial. And it's also important to note that sanctions, and this is something that's controversial, it irritates lots of people when I it sometimes, can be an end in themselves. If there's a bad actor in the region, an actor that is using the windfall from sanctions relief, that is using its access to US dollars to the international financial market, to build dozens and dozens of militias in the region, then limiting its ability to do so is a pretty good end in itself, even if it is not the ideal end. That said, of course the door should never be closed in the face of Iran if it wants to come in and negotiate. And I don't think that Gulf actors necessarily want this conflict to last forever.

Mohammed Alyahya:

I think actors in the Gulf and in Arab world in general, all want to see a resolution to this problem with Iran, want to see stability in the region. But we have to always consider that there is a fundamental mismatch in the way that these Gulf countries operate and the way that Iran operates and the way that these Gulf countries view the world and the way Iran views the world. Saudi Arabia spreads its influence when there is a strong sense of government, when there is economic prosperity, when there is security in countries. Iran by definition cannot spread its influence when any of these conditions exist in any given country. If there was a strong central government in Iraq that monopolize the use of force, that exercise complete control over Iraq's borders, what kind of leverage would Iran have? It would have very little, almost no leverage. What kind of leverage will a country with immense capital, that can come in and build infrastructure and develop a business environment like Saudi Arabia have? What kind of leverage would the UAE have?

Mohammed Alyahya:

So, there are very opposing interests in approaching states strength and approaching bilateral relations with countries like Iran. It's in Iran's interest to keep Iraq corrupt, to keep it weak, to keep it sectarian and to keep it beholden to political Islam, and that takes us to another point. Iran's formula in the past, and the same formula that has been used amongst Sunni as well, I mean if you look at the mobilization that was used by groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, even the mobilization used by the Sahwa movement, in corporation with the United States and Saudi Arabia in the 1970s and '80s to mobilize young people to go fight in Afghanistan, all uses a mixture of economic incentives and a very powerful ideology that is fundamentally at its core, a political ideology, it's an anti-imperialist ideology, anti Western ideology. And this is something that's very strong. It's very powerful and it manifests itself in different ways. But I think the DNA is the same.

Mohammed Alyahya:

If you look at the Syrian Ba'ath, that's a secular party, the Iraqi Ba'ath, a secular party, Al-Qaeda is Sunni, Qatar has [Balandan 00:08:00], and the numerous Shia militias are all Shia of course. But they all share this underlying worldview that there is a fundamental clash between the Arab world and the West led by the United States and that resistance is a requirement and that mistrust is the default. And this is a very valuable sentiment that is used by all of these actors; Sunni, Shia, secular, you name it. And that's



why they cooperate by the way. That's why [Abu al-Masri 00:00:33:31] is walking around in the streets of Tehran. And that's why the Iranians are backing a secular regime that is fighting an offshoot of Al-Qaeda in Syria. It's bizarre, but they all share this exact same DNA.

Mohammed Alyahya:

What's interesting is what happened in Iraq over the past protest that we saw over the past year there. We saw young people, many of were born after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. So these people don't remember the Abrams tanks going to Baghdad. Coming out in the States, young Shia, observant Shia youth, carrying photos of Khomeini and burning them, carrying photos of Qasem Soleimani and burning them. The formula stopped working. It stopped working with young people in Saudi Arabia. Nobody cares... If you go and talk to young people in Saudi Arabia right now and you mentioned the authorities of the Sahwa movement, the most famous sheikhs of the Sahwa movement that one day could flip public opinion in Saudi Arabia over the weekend. Today they say, "Oh, that guy from Twitter..."

Mohammed Alyahya:

This type of political Islamist gimmickry doesn't resonate with people anymore. It stopped resonating with people in Iraq, it stopped resonating with people in Syria, it stopped resonating with people in Lebanon, even among Shia Arabs in Lebanon. In the past, it was unheard of to see a Christian or a Sunni in Lebanon ever utter the name Hassan Nasrallah in public. Now you're seeing young Arab Shias do that. If there will be a fundamental change in the region, it will be at the hands of the Arab Shia populations that have long been exploited by Iran to spread its expansion in the region, and they have been the victims of poor governance in countries like Iraq and elsewhere. But there is a fundamental shift in the way young people view the world. And I think time is on their side. How long this will take is a question that we should be asking ourselves, but time is on the side.

Mohammed Alyahya:

And I think this is something that Saudi Arabia today recognizes, that the United Arab Emirates recognizes, and that's why they are making the moves that they're making today, away from this archaic ideology of political Islam, away from this idea that the West is fundamentally against the region. And let's call a spade a spade. I mean, the Saudi-US alliance is one that brought immense benefits to Saudi Arabia. If you look at Saudi Arabia as... look at the metrics that make one state a better than another, look at literacy, look at public health, look at Saudi Arabia as a defense industry, look at all of these things. Saudi Arabia has emerged a victor as a result of its relationship with the West, with the European partners, with the United States. And the idea right now is to eliminate this ideology that that has plagued region. And-

Tarek Masoud:

So Mohammad, if I could interrupt you because you've opened a couple of very interesting lines of inquiry. So one is, political and how the Saudi and other governments are dealing with it and how Biden administration should deal with it. But before we get to that question, I did want to just wrap a ribbon around the discussion of Iran, which is where we were. And let me ask this question in a little bit of a cheeky way, but it's in order to get you to refine a point that I think I heard you make.

Tarek Masoud:

So somebody might listen to you and to other Arabs and say, "What is the obsession that these people have with Iran, a country whose GDP is slightly smaller than that of Belgium? Why can't these guys

handle Iran by themselves? Why do they keep on needing to try to drag the US into this?" And I think you have an answer and you articulated an answer, but I'd just like you to sharpen that for us. What's your answer to that American who says, "You guys, look. Iran is the great bogeyman? You guys can't even handle that?"

Mohammed Alyahya:

That's a good question, but I think it's a deeply flawed question. The problem, fundamentally isn't between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it's not fundamentally between the Gulf States here. The problem is fundamentally between the United States and Iran. I think if you go to Tehran and ask them what the main national security threat for the Islamic Republic is, nobody's going to tell you it's the UAE or Saudi Arabia or Kuwait or whichever state in the Arab world. They'll tell you it is the United States. The recent the deaths of the revolutionary guards is to append what it perceives to be a US-led, a Western-led regional order. An order in which countries like Saudi Arabia, like Bahrain, like the UAE, like Egypt are all agents of corrupt West.

Mohammed Alyahya:

So the idea that was very popular around the time of the signing of the Iran deal, that, "We should leave the region alone, this is an irrational 1400-year-old struggle, these people have been fighting for a long time, these Sunnis and Shias. We are not going to change it today." This is rubbish, frankly. Let's remember what happened during the cold war. I mean, if you look up the Omega project, it's a project in which Saudi Arabia supported the Shias in Lebanon against the Sunni street because the Sunni street was allied to [Abdel Nasser 00:39:33]. The idea that there is an eternal Sunni-Shia struggle is false, its a rubbish idea. And the idea that there is this struggle in the region between the leaders of the Sunni world and the leaders of the Shia world also is a very false idea. On the ground, when you look at where the guns are, where are Saudi Arabia and Iran fighting? Iran is not trying to reclaim influence from Saudi Arabia and Iraq, it's trying to reclaim influence from the US and Iraq. And the same can be said of Syria-

Tarek Masoud:

Mohammed, sorry to interrupt you. I apologize. But Muhammad, you're not calling and leaders in the region are not calling for the United States to impose sanctions on Iran because they have a tender concern for American national interests. This is because in the Gulf region, there is the deep concern that Iran represents a threat to their national interests. And they're not able to defend those interests without the United States. And I guess for me, the question is why is that the case, given that when you look at Iran on paper, this is not a massive economy. This should not be the kind of country that could bedevil the Arab world as much as it seems to be bedeviling it.

Mohammed Alyahya:

Sure, but you can't split those interests. Those interests are extremely intertwined. I mentioned in the last talk we had that, I did lots of [inaudible 00:41:06] discussions with Iran. And then one of the discussions, there was a very interesting point. We had European interlocutors and I was in this very heated argument with a member of Iranian delegation. And I said exactly what I said, just, "No the fundamental problem is between Iran and the United States. The issue with Saudi Arabia is not because of Saudi Arabia specifically, because it's perceived as an agent of the West, that it's cooperating with Western powers." And that person said, "Precisely." If Saudi Arabia would turn around and say, "We want to sever ties with the West and we want to join the axis of resistance." I think Iran would welcome Saudi Arabia in open arms.

Mohammed Alyahya:

So that's one point of the question. The other point is the interests are not things that can be split. Maritime security in the Gulf, maritime security in the Gulf of Aden, these are interests that are intertwined. The stability of oil markets is an interest that both the United States and Saudi Arabia share. Saudi Arabia's ability to act as a central bank of oil, to increase production by several million barrels or decrease it by several million barrels at will because of its spare capacity, because of its low operation break-even cost, because of its fiscal health, the fact that it has the lowest debt to GDP ratio in the G20, all of these things mean that protecting US interests and protecting the interests of its partners and the Gulf often mean the same thing.

Tarek Masoud:

Right. And I think part of what you would say is that part of the reason that Iran is such a troublesome actor is because Saudi Arabia is playing by certain rules, globally accepted rules, and Iran doesn't play by those rules. That would be your claim.

Mohammed Alyahya:

Yeah, I think that'd be a fair characterization characterization.

Tarek Masoud:

Mohammed, if I could take you back to the issue of political Islam, because you are one of the few speakers to actually bring up this issue. And I think it's very important that we pause and get your take on the degree to which political Islamist groups present a source of appeal or otherwise to peoples of the region. I mean, you mentioned that these groups affiliated with political Islam are declining in terms of their overall appeal in the region, but it's still clear that they still represent a source of deep anxiety for governments in the region. I mean, we saw just recently the Saudi religious establishment reaffirm the designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. We see that the issue of the Muslim Brotherhood is still a constant feature in Egyptian political discourse, for example. And Egypt, of course, has also designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.

Tarek Masoud:

But more importantly, a lot of the anxiety stems from what was perceived to be this opening on the part of the Obama administration to the forces of political Islam, to the extent that even some attribute responsibility to the administration for the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, in Libya, in Tunisia, as a very influential actor in the Syrian opposition against the Assad regime. So, to what extent does this issue of political Islam... Or your expectations in terms of how this issue will figure in the relationship between Arab countries and the Biden administration. Because it's interesting that given the focus on this issue in the region, it doesn't seem to figure very prominently in the thinking in opinion circles and foreign policy circles in Washington, in terms of their approach to the region. In other words, the Middle East or the Arab world may still be fixated on this issue of the Brotherhood, but it seems that the United States and Washington has turned the page on this issue of political Islam as a factor in regional politics.

Mohammed Alyahya:

Well, that's a good question. First of all, I don't think that they are ignoring it. I think it's an issue that, if anything, has become an object to debate more in recent times than it was in 2011, especially among conservative and right-wing groups. There was a right-wing resurgence in Europe and elsewhere. So that has sort of brought back that debate in different terms, if you like. But I think we should ask ourselves

why governments in the region are fixated on that. A lot of people like to see that it's hypocrisy by the Saudis that they are opposing the Muslim Brotherhood now and they supported them in the past. And that has to be explained to understand precisely why there is this enmity towards the Muslim Brotherhood. Let's go back to the support of the government of Saudi Arabia and the United States for the Mujahideen in Afghanistan. Young Saudi, Kuwaiti, Emirati and Arab in general, young men went to Afghanistan to fight atheist criminal Soviets who were invading Afghanistan.

Mohammed Alyahya:

As soon as they came back from that battleground, they came back with a sense of entitlement to politically participate in Saudi Arabia. They came back having been politically charged in that base and having joined a transnational network of like-minded young people who are controlled by a clandestine group called the Muslim Brotherhood. And this is something that's well documented and reached its heyday in that time. The problem for a government like Saudi Arabia is that as soon as they left Afghanistan and came back to the Kingdom, they had a whole new project. The project was remove the infidels from the Arabian peninsula, [foreign language 00:23:13].

Mohammed Alyahya:

If you're sitting in a Saudi government office, you're realizing that one of your top and most important relationships is with the United States. And you have a bunch of young people in your own country being controlled by a leadership that reports to and is answerable to a transnational group that is trying to target your most important strategic relationship. That's when the relationship started getting very difficult with the Sahwa movement or the chapter of the [inaudible 00:48:53] in Saudi Arabia. They were too strong to be eliminated head on. They had to be co-opted and they had to be managed to a certain degree. But when they did get weak, the government would push back. So there was always this push and pull. But the currency that was important for them, the reason that they could operate, was their ability to influence young people in the street, their ability to create grassroots mobilization.

Mohammed Alyahya:

Today, they've been stripped of that ability. That doesn't mean that the ideology that they represent is antithetical to what Gulf governments and various other Arab governments consider to be their top strategic priorities. That's still the case. They still do pose a threat, but everything they stand for is something that goes against the strategic, the domestic, the interests in general, of Gulf monarchies. And I think demographics are on the side of...

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Mohammed Alyahya:

... and I think demographics are on the side of Pro-Western anti-Islamist forces in the region.

Tarek Masoud:

Is that right though, Mohammed? If I look at, for example, Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen and the alignment that exists between the Muslim Brotherhood, affiliated to Islah, and the Saudi national interest in Yemen. It's not clear to me, the claim you're making that the Islamists are on every dimension opposed to the national interest of these Gulf countries is right. In fact, you pointed out of course to the politics making strange bedfellows in the case of Al-Qaeda, and the Iran, and the Muslim brotherhood, et cetera. But we also know that these Sunni Islamist movements are at their core, very anti-Shia and

they have been in the past a strategic tool for countries like Saudi Arabia, et cetera. So maybe you could speak a little bit to what the... I lose track of what the relation between Islah and Saudi Arabia is on a minute by minute basis, but my read of the situation, it is not the open warfare that one would infer from your comments about Muslim Brotherhood movements.

Mohammed Alyahya:

No, of course not. And the Islah and Yemenists are also an exceptional case and Muslim brotherhood groups in different parts of Arab world are different. The Al-Qaeda, itself, is an offshoot of the Muslim brotherhood. Al-Qaeda is a bloody criminal group that killed thousands and thousands of innocent people. And now in Tunisia, it's not a terrorist group that killed thousands and thousands of people, although its ideology is one, that Gulf actors find extremely problematic. One that drives its world view from the same texts that traditional Muslim brotherhood groups derives their world view from. And so far as that, it's considered a problematic movement.

Mohammed Alyahya:

But in Yemen, Yemen is a very different place. I mean, Yemen is very tribal even when it starts getting split up along ideological levels. At the end of the day Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar is a tribal leader who has tribal sensibilities. Even among other groups in Yemen, the tribal mentality and politics of power are something that are very important there. Are there supporters of the Muslim brotherhood that are members in good standing of the regional organization in Yemen? Definitely. Are all the members of the Islah party and the political actors that are part of that party, are these members? Certainly, not.

Tarek Masoud:

Mohammed, while we're on Yemen? Of course, this is a major issue for Saudi Arabia and is one of the key pillars of president elect Biden's foreign policy platform that he has been very clear on. He has said that he will reconsider arm sales to Saudi Arabia in relation to its intervention in Yemen. And of course the Saudi military intervention in Yemen is perceived to have implicated the United States in that war, in a very problematic way. The United States is now seemed to be implicated in the humanitarian situation in Yemen, which is very dire. And from a strategic perspective, there does not seem to be a clear pathway to end this conflict in Yemen, to end the war in the Yemeni civil war. How, does that affect Saudi Arabia's relationship with the incoming administration, given the centrality of this issue to Saudi Arabia's national security?

Mohammed Alyahya:

I think Saudi Arabia will be open for any help that it could get and any cooperation that gets to end the war in Yemen, either via political process or via winding down the military operations in Yemen. But it's important to consider also that there is a feeling that the brunt of preventing it on from establishing a foothold in Bab el-Mandeb that's being shouldered exclusively by Saudi Arabia. And that's something that shouldn't be the case. At the end of the day, it's in the US' interest, it's in Egypt's interest, it's in Western Europe's interest, and the entire world's interests, to make sure that an important pathway like Bab el-Mandeb is not controlled by the revolutionary guards. Imagine a case where almost the revolutionary guards are only one switch from... almost Bab el-Mandeb is only one switch away from being blocked by the revolutionary guards. That would render the Suez canal more or less relevant, that will cause energy prices to skyrocket.

Mohammed Alyahya:

Take Bab el-Mandeb for example, Somali pirates in Bab el-Mandeb have created a security situation that has the French Navy, the German Navy, the British Navy, sending groups of ships that are mothers of ships on pretty determined trips, so that commercial vessels can follow them for protection. Imagine if that Bab el-Mandeb was closed by the Revolutionary Guards, that's something that would be problematic for the world's economy. So, the Saudis, I think, do want to see an end to this war, but there are certain things that they will not accept and they will not negotiate, which is, the freedom of Bab el-Mandeb and they will not negotiate on things like having a group similar to Hezbollah on the Southern flank, lobbing rockets in Saudi Arabia, and continuing on this war of attrition at a low heat over many decades. But sure to that, they want to end the war.

Tarek Masoud:

Mohammad, I want to move now to talking about Saudi Arabia, and then we do want to open it up for our audience. And so, a few minutes ago, I put some words in your mouth and said, you would say Saudi Arabia plays by the rules when Iran doesn't. And that's why Iran is such a problem. One person who doesn't think Saudi Arabia plays by the rules is the president elect, and Khadim already alluded to the fact that president elect Biden said that they're not going to sell more weapons to the Saudis. The president elect spoke about the killing of Jamal Khashoggi and said, "We're going to make them pay the price and make them, in fact, the pariah they are." He said, there's very little social redeeming value in the present government of Saudi Arabia. So I'd like to ask you, do you think we're about to witness a major restructuring of the US-Saudi relationship? And if so, how should the Saudis respond.

Mohammed Alyahya:

Judging by the history of US-Saudi relations, I don't think that we should be expecting any major disruptions. I mean, during election time, there's a lot of heated [inaudible 00:58:11] that is thrown around on Saudi Arabia, on Iran on many foreign policy files, but it's not necessarily implemented after whichever president reaches office. The same can be said about Hillary Clinton when she was running for office, or president Obama, president Trump, we discussed earlier in this talk, what he was talking about.

Mohammed Alyahya:

I don't think that president Biden is going to have a reckless foreign policy that does a way with traditional US allies that upends traditional US interests in the region that serve as important counter-terrorism relationships that shreds the US interests in terms of geopolitics and the Gulf overnight. The idea that all of this would be lost overnight, is a short-sighted one, and it's something that we see in the discourse in the United States today. And I think we see it because of the spectacle of the Trump administration. Everything that the Trump administration did, people are starting to consider as a new something that is against the norm when in fact, if you look closely, not all of it is.

Tarek Masoud:

Do you think that the Saudis will try to make a peace offering to the United States or some dramatic gesture to get in the good graces of this administration?

Mohammed Alyahya:

I don't think they need to make a peace offering. There's no war with this current administration. President Biden is... and it's important to note for context, despite all of the tactical disagreements, and there were some serious tactical disagreements with the Obama administration. President Obama

visited Saudi Arabia, more so than any other president in history. Actually, president Obama cut short his trip to India to attend King Abdullah's funeral and to congratulate King Salman on becoming King. That trip was supposed to be attended by a president Biden, but it was attended instead by president Obama and Stephen Hadley, and several other US officials that represented former administrations attended that funeral. That tells you all you need to know about the institutional quality of the relationship with Saudi Arabia.

Mohammed Alyahya:

So, there's a lot to it. What we see in the media as the war on Yemen, we see a select number of issues of contention, issues where there are disagreement, but those issues are the tip of a very huge iceberg that includes counter-terrorism cooperation that is extremely a close cooperation on defense matters, cooperation on geopolitical files. I mean, the history of Saudi Arabia-US corporation, whether it did good or bad is something that I'm sure many people have various opinions on. It's a very vast history and a very deep history. So, I know-

Tarek Masoud:

So this is just in your view, overheated campaign rhetoric from the president elect, and we shouldn't expect, for example.. And you wouldn't advise the Saudi government to engage in any grand gestures to build the administration's trust. For example, normalizing with Israel or some other such gesture.

Mohammed Alyahya:

I don't think the Saudis have to... as you put it, I mean, they don't have to make peace if there's no more.

Tarek Masoud:

So maybe if we could just ask a final question on this issue of normalization with Israel before we open it up to our participants. So, Saudi Arabia has so far opted not to join the bandwagon of Gulf normalization to Israel. It's has not followed the UAE or Bahrain in making such a decision. Can you give us your sense of the Saudi outlook on the Abraham Accords and the whole issue of normalization with Israel? Because on the one hand, it seems to have broken not only the Arab consensus on the issue of normalization with Israel, but also the GCC consensus on this very central issue.

Tarek Masoud:

And secondly, this whole issue of normalization with Israel goes against the very core of the Arab peace initiative, which tied normalization with Israel in exchange for full peace and full withdrawal of Israel from the Arab occupied territories. And of course, those of us who are familiar with the history of the Arab peace initiative, know that it originated primarily from an initiative by the late King Abdullah who first proposed this issue of normalization in exchange for full peace. You mentioned in response to Tarek that Saudi Arabia would not consider normalization in relation to its ties with the Biden administration. How would the kingdom look to this issue of normalization? What would be its considerations when it comes to the issue of normalization with Israel?

Mohammed Alyahya:

I mean, I can only go by what the Saudi officials have been saying time and again, and the foreign minister in Saudi Arabia has repeatedly stated that Saudi Arabia's policy towards Israel is unchanged. It's steadfast in support to the Palestinian cause and it will not take any decisions in that regard without

consulting the Palestinians and without following the Palestinians deed. But that said, it was very clear that the decisions taken by Bahrain and by the United Arab Emirates are sovereign decisions that are right. I don't think it's publicly, but I mean, that's the implication. And I think it's important to consider that... And first of all, the Arab Peace Initiative offers a consensus based recognition of Israel is still on the table, and it's something that can be pursued. But, the change in this cause is something that's important in the region.

Mohammed Alyahya:

And I think it's a very important change of... And what specifically is important is the idea that... So what I think the normalization and Abraham Accords are achieving today in the region is that they're splitting the idea of subscription to the resistance industry in the region with support for the Palestinian cause. And what I mean by that is, if you're a young Arab, you can be supportive of the Palestinian cause. You can condemn Israeli aggression of Palestinians. You can have very firm positions on these issues, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you have to subscribe to a region wide resistance industry and support actors like Hamas and support actors like Syrians or actors like Hezbollah Iran, et cetera. The link in those two things is, I think, highly beneficial for the region. And this is something that we're seeing throughout the Gulf.

Mohammed Alyahya:

Nobody's being asked to change their sympathies, nobody's being asked to ignore their support for a just cause, the idea here is to emphasize the importance of the modern nation state in the region. And that's something that has been always suffering. I mean, in the past, the region has been taken by storm by political Islam. Pan-Arabism has taken the region by storm. The political discourse in the region was never built around the idea of national interests. You never talked about national interests, you talked about the Islamic nation Muslimiyah [foreign language 00:16:59]. What's good for the Islamic nation, what's good for the Arab nation. Today, people are starting to talk about what's good for Iraq, what's good for Saudi Arabia, what's good for the UAE, and I think that is a long overdue change in the region that we will only see expand and develop even more.

Tarek Masoud:

That's great. Okay. We definitely do want to open it up for questions. Before we do, let me just ask one last question. What we've heard from you and from others throughout this series is that, many very smart people, what they're looking to the United States to do is to maintain its involvement in the region. To continue to help solve the regions problems, at a time when the appetite for that in the United States, is that the lowest, I think, it's ever been. I guess we wanted you to tell us what you think the best case that era bleeders could make to American audiences. What's the best case that you Mohammad Alyahya could make to American audiences for continued engagement in the region? And bonus points, if the answer doesn't mention Iran.

Mohammed Alyahya:

I think, it's important to see that the region has already fundamentally changed, that there is a common link between the world views of young people across the region, whether they are Arab, Iranian, Shia, Sunni, and that this is something that will only improve over time. And these bygone and the expired ideas that groups like Hezbollah or groups like Hamas are just a fixture in the region's politics. They might be bad groups, but we have to deal with them because they are part of the region and their organic [inaudible 01:09:03] solution. Is it a problematic one? No. They are being rejected from inside



the region. Young people are rejecting the ideologies that they're putting forward to strengthen their own powers, and all of these dynamics are being redefined and they're changing on a day to day basis.

Tarek Masoud:

That's great. Okay, Mohammed. Thank you for that. We're now going to open it up for questions. I just want to remind everybody how we do this. We ask you to raise your hand using the Zoom raise hand function, which you can find if you click on the participants' icon at the bottom of your screen. A panel will open up on the right hand side of your screen, and you'll have the option to raise your hand. If you ask a question, you will be consenting to having your voice and face, if your camera's on, recorded and these recordings will be available on our website. So you will be immortalized in that way. So, the first question I have is from Dr. Gary Samore, former colleague here at the Kennedy School, a great mentor and role model to many of us and the director of the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University. Dr. Samore.

Dr. Samore:

Thank you, Tarek. Hi, Mohammad. Good to see you again.

Mohammed Alyahya:

Hi there, Dr. Samore. Good to see you. How're you?

Dr. Samore:

Please call me Gary. And thank you very much for your very clear presentation. I have a follow-up question about US-Saudi relations. I agreed with you that campaign rhetoric is not a good guide to policy, and I agree that there's an underlying strategic rationale for the US and Saudi Arabia to remain partners. But I do think the situation has changed a little bit because so much of the critique of Saudi Arabia is personalized. It's directed against the crown Prince because he's associated with the Saudi intervention in Yemen, he is associated with the murder of Khashoggi, and I think it creates a political impediment for Biden to just forget about all the campaign rhetoric and invite MBS to the white house, or even get on an airplane and go to Riyadh.

Dr. Samore:

So I think we're operating in a situation where the personal relationship between leaders is going to be very constrained. And that's important for countries like the US and Saudi Arabia, where the leaders have such a dominant role in foreign policy. So I've been thinking about what joint project can Riyadh and Washington collaborate on, to amend or improve relations. And ending the war in Yemen is the obvious one but I think that's hopeless because, as far as I can tell, the Houthis don't want to end the war, they're winning. So why would they want to have a peace settlement unless Saudi Arabia is prepared to capitulate.

Dr. Samore:

The Abraham Accord would be great, but maybe that's a step too far. What about [Gutter 00:01:12:17]? I mean, resolve it, it's not a huge issue in the US but if you resolve the dispute with [Gutter 00:01:12:21], that would be a positive step that people in the US would see that as encouraging. Maybe there's some common effort on Iraq, which would be in both Washington and Riyadh's interest as a way to counter Iranian influence. But there have to be smart people in Riyadh thinking about what can we do to

rehabilitate our image in Washington and make it easier for the Biden administration to work with us. So I just want to ask you to talk a little bit more about what you think options are for Saudi Arabia.

Mohammed Alyahya:

I think that's a great question and I think there are plenty of smart people in Riyadh that have already been working on, the [Shovera 01:13:09] for example. The border of Iraq has been opened for the first time in 11 years, and there is a movement between it up and Saudi Arabia, there are investments that are due to be made in Iraq. In terms of infrastructure, Saudi companies that already being established there, and there is complete alignment between US interests and Iraq people's interests and Saudi Arabia's interests and Iraq. As we mentioned earlier in the talk, Saudi Arabia doesn't have the tools to extend its influence in the chaos that erupts up right now. It doesn't. Those tools are all Iranian tools and that's important. But on the issue of image, every country's image is very important and every country should be wary of what its images is and try to improve its image here. But image is not everything at the end of the day.

Mohammed Alyahya:

Absent real work on the ground to improve people's wellbeing in one country, image can only go so far. And the reality of the matter is, the Saudi Arabia of today looks nothing like the Saudi Arabia five years ago. If you were to look at Saudi Arabia today and look at how societies and look at the changes that have happened just in the last two to three years, you would say that there's a 30 year difference between 2015 and today. And that's what people in Saudi Arabia have on their minds all day. Should they pay attention a little bit more to that image? Probably. But what they're prioritizing over all of these considerations is something that's nothing short of a life changing. A young woman in Saudi Arabia right now can decide on her own to go live by herself. She can, and all of these things that I'm about to mention, she wasn't able to do just a few years. She can decide to go to university. She can choose what major she wants to...

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:15:04]

Mohammed Alyahya:

You can decide to go to university. She can choose what major she wants to in university, without going back to her guardian. She can get a driver's license and drive to university. She can get a job while studying the major of her choosing and paying her way through university. All of these things happen, not gradually, incrementally, so that society can accept them over 10, 20, 30 years. They happen very quickly over just a few years. And you've visited Saudi several times, I encourage you and I encourage everybody who was interested in Saudi Arabia to go to Saudi Arabia and walk around, in the street and see the changes that are happening.

Mohammed Alyahya:

People are really preoccupied with what's happening in the country, in that sphere. And yeah, of course, I think image should be focused on, but it's not the be-all and end-all. At the end of the day, investing and keeping this transformation going and reversing the influence of groups like the Sacra movement and the Muslim brotherhood in Saudi Arabia, opening up society to the world. Allowing whoever wants to go visit Saudi Arabia to visit by completing a five minute online visa is testament to the fact that the Saudis wanted to show exactly what a kind of transformation they have.

Mohammed Alyahya:

I mean, the coronavirus impeded that now to a large degree, but that's something that would be possible going forward. And let's remember that where it not for the coronavirus you'd have the leaders of the top 20 economies in the world and Riyadh as we speak right now. So, the idea that Saudi Arabia's somehow isolated I think is far from the truth.

Dr. Samore:

So, just to be clear, I, wasn't talking about the image of Saudi Arabia. I think the issue is the image of the Crown Prince personally. And I just think that's a difficult hurdle to overcome in Washington. And that all I'm saying is that imposes political impediments on Biden, that haven't existed in the past. To have to have a personal relationship with Mohammed bin Salman.

Mohammed Alyahya:

I mean, I think cooperation will still remain. I think the personal relationship will persist and it will thrive in the same way that it thrived under the Trump administration. Will there be disagreements? Will there be issues? Of course there will be issues and disagreements, but when you look at the fundamentals of the relationship, I don't think they'll change. They're quite solid.

Dr. Samore:

Thank you Mohammed.

Tarek Masoud:

Thank you Mohammed. One question could be, is there ever a point at which somebody like the Crown Prince becomes so much of a liability in the eyes of the sort of broader Saudi leadership that they feel a change is necessary. But it sounds like you're saying that's very far from where the Saudis are right now.

Mohammed Alyahya:

No, I think, I mean the conferences our leadership it's so... And I think that's as far. And also it's important to consider that Saudi Arabia has always been under extreme scrutiny by the media. Let's look at 2014, 2013, every single headline in the newspapers that you would read in London or in Washington or New York would say that, Saudi Arabia is funding either ISIS, Saudi Arabia is funding Al-Qaeda. Saudi Arabia is a bad partner we should sever ties with Saudi Arabia. The United States is self sufficient in its oil production. So the idea that attacks on Saudi Arabia knew, or that the strain in the media and the strain on the US, Saudi relations is something that is limited to the past five or six years, I think is a problematic idea.

Mohammed Alyahya:

It's been there since the seventies and eighties and throughout the nineties and even today. And the relationships that are important to Saudi Arabia strategically have persisted because of their value of strategic relationships.

Tarek Masoud:

No, I think Gary's question was more-

Mohammed Alyahya:

That Saudi Arabia could have done much more to tell a different story or to improve its image in the past.

Tarek Masoud:

But what's new, as Gary said, I think is the personalization. But I take your answer to that question. The next question we have is from Nadeem Shahidi, our dear friend, Dr. Nadeem from the Lebanese American university. Go ahead sir.

Tarek Masoud:

This should work. You just need to unmute yourself Nadeem.

Nadeem Shahidi:

That's it. Thank you. Thank you. Nice to see you all. Hi, Tarek good to see you. Gary. Actually, my question has been asked twice, so. But I'll formulate it in a slightly different way. I mean, I was in Washington last week where 92.8% of the vote went to Biden. You're talking about an alliance, a perceived alliance with Donald Trump, which has the whole of the establishment against it. Including most of the mainstream media, most of academia, and most of the bureaucracy. I mean the infighting within the bureaucracy, the resistance, if you like.

Nadeem Shahidi:

So I mean, I was joking saying that the real Arab-Persian divide or Sunni-Shia divide is not in the middle East, it's in Washington, D.C., really. Because it's unreachable in Washington, D.C. in the middle East, we talk to each other at least on. So, I just wanted to emphasize that the backlash, I guess, Saudi, I expect it to be much bigger than your presented. And Biden himself was attacking Saudi before. And his manifesto to the Arab and Muslims in the US is also very specifically anti-Saudi. I mean, but the Democrats in general, you will find huge hostility. It's like a beauty contest between Iran and Saudi and Saudi loses. They don't see anything wrong with Iran. They see everything wrong with Saudi Arabia. So I'm just emphasizing two points that were done. And it's not personalized against Mohammed bin Salman because it spreads to the region. Even in Lebanon, they are... I mean, there was a report by the ICG yesterday, almost taking a Hezbollah position. So it's much more serious than.

Tarek Masoud:

If I, could just riff on what Nadeem said. I mean, if I were an uncharitable person, I would say the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia has so mismanaged Saudi Arabia's image that it's losing in the beauty contest to the state sponsor of terrorism, par excellence Iran, at least in Washington, D.C. And is there no recognition of that fact in the circles that you move in, in the region? Because it really doesn't sound like it to listen to you.

Mohammed Alyahya:

I don't think it is losing in that beauty competition at all. Actually I think if you look at Saudi Arabia's image in 2013, 14, 15, it's very easy for us to forget that Saudi Arabia was being blamed for every single terrorist group in the region. That Saudi Arabia was being blamed for Al-Qaeda, for [inaudible 00:08:42], for ISIS. That attacks in Europe, we're being blamed on Saudi Arabia and by Saudi Arabia allegedly funding groups in Europe and supporting terrorism, and doing all sorts of things. Today, there is a realization that Saudi Arabia has nothing to do with these groups in Europe. That Saudi Arabia is not in any way, shape or form funding Al-Qaeda or funding ISIS. That Saudi Arabia on the contrary is fighting

these groups. And on the other hand, you have the leadership of Al-Qaeda sitting in Iran. Is there a backlash against Saudi Arabia as a result of several problems?

Mohammed Alyahya:

The issue of course, being chief among them? Of course, there is a backlash as a result of that. And that's a natural backlash. I mean, it was a horrible grisly murder that happened to Jamal Khashoggi to expect there not to be a backlash against it is something that is extremely unreasonable, I think. But Saudi Arabia is much more complicated. There is much more to Saudi Arabia, and I think that's something that people realize. I think that the general tide is a very anti Saudi one, sure. Would it always last in the way that it is right now? I don't think so. And I always remember what an Emirati friend in Washington once told me. He said that, "Saudi Arabia right now is like a piñata in Washington, D.C. Everybody's wearing a blindfold and carrying a stick and trying to smack Saudi Arabia, whatever it is, but nobody really wants to go after Saudi Arabia. This is partisan politics, and people want to go after president Trump."

Mohammed Alyahya:

I'm not saying that that people don't have their issues with Saudi Arabia, they should too, but let's not discount the extent to which Saudi Arabia has become a piñata for partisan politics. And normally that does subside after elections. And it will subside when there is no ax to grind in terms of partisan politics. That's my prediction, at least for the next 4 years.

Anat Berko:

So just Mohammed, to bring to closure this issue, because this very important. It seems, as you mentioned, that the issue of Saudi Arabia's relationship with Washington has not just become personalized, as Gary mentioned. But it's become a partisan political issue, that there is no longer the bipartisan support for the US-Saudi alliance. That there is a very pervasive perception that Saudi Arabia was aligned with the Republican party and president Trump in particular. Does that erode the basis and the strategic sense of the US Saudi relationship?

Mohammed Alyahya:

No, I think it doesn't erode that basis. And I think that the unprecedented polarization that the United States is in experiencing right now, manifests itself on foreign policy issues as well. Even coronavirus is something that's extremely polarizing right now. Today, you either stand behind the Saudis and support president Trump with them, or the Saudis are the worst possible actors ever in the history of the Middle East. Today, if you look at masks, when it comes to coronavirus, you either have people that will never touch masks with a 10 foot rod. And think that coronavirus is a hoax, or people that want to wear their masks while they're sleeping alone in their bedrooms.

Mohammed Alyahya:

That's a huge exaggeration, but on every single issue you have in the United States, you have an extremely polarized, very angry group of people that are shouting over each other. Saudi Arabia's no different. And I think hopefully all of these issues start getting a little bit calmer in the United States. Discourse starts getting calmer, people start getting less angry. And I think when that happens, things will be seen as they are. For their advantages, for their disadvantages, for their weaknesses, for their strengths. I think we're going to see at a period of more calmness that everybody needs.

Tarek Masoud:

Mohammed. We have time for one more question. And so we have a question from Anat Berko. I'm asking her to unmute herself. Is this the Anat Berko, who's a former member of Knesset, counter-terrorism researcher?

Anat Berko:

Yes, sir.

Tarek Masoud:

Great. Please ask your question of Mohammed Alyahya.

Anat Berko:

Thank you so much. It's a great pleasure to participate in this panel and thank you so much Mohammed, it was very interesting. I would like to ask you something about the Abraham Accord in the region. Which is changed the whole perception, I think, and the attitude about Israel and about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And I would like to ask, how do you see Israel as a game changer in the meaning of security and stabilization of the region, the Middle-East. And actually not just security and I'm speaking about security, also exchange of knowledge, academia, culture, and security, as for your security, because I'm coming from this field of counter-terrorism. That is also very, very important. And it's not just now to see in a polarized attitude of Sunni-Shia, Jewish, or the Jewish state, or Christians, or just the pure interest that everybody, every state, every region. Thank you.

Mohammed Alyahya:

That's a good question. Thank very much. I think you made a good distinction at the beginning when you said Israel versus the Israeli-Palestinian issue. I think the way Israel is perceived in the region has changed, but the way the Israeli-Palestinian issue has changed much less or hasn't changed very much. I think it's no secret that people see that they are threatened on a daily basis in various Arab countries, by Iran and by Iran's proxies. Israel is not a threat to their livelihoods.

Mohammed Alyahya:

Day-to-day is there is not a threat to their wellbeing. Israel is not a long-term threat to the stability of their countries. Does this change their sympathy for Palestine or Palestinian cause? No, it doesn't, but does it shift the priorities of threat priorities? I think that's something that definitely has changed in the region. And in terms of avenues of cooperation, I think there are many avenues of cooperation with every state in the region. And, we've seen that the trainees and their modalities have opted to, with relation with Israel, that could expand. We could see other countries doing it, but there wouldn't always be this elephant in the room, which is the Palestinian issue.

Mohammed Alyahya:

And the idea is that we've seen decades of dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli crisis in the same way, with very little results. Perhaps we'll see that extending more communication and opening up might create an environment that is more conducive to finding a lasting solution for the Palestinians. But I still think that this is something that cannot be ignored. That's something that cannot go on the back burner, regardless of how willing the Israelis are. And regardless of how serious the Palestinians are. Or the Palestinian leadership rather.

Anat Berko:

North on the Palestinian issue, we're not ignoring that, but we need to look that if they are looking for a solution, it couldn't be a solution that actually delegitimized our right to exist under a Jewish democratic state. So the whole citizens in Israel. So perhaps we will help all the Arab countries around us. [inaudible 01:32:36] a very positive peace agreement. [inaudible 01:32:43] and I assume that will be other states that will join this agreement. It will be more influential to come with a reasonable offer also that the Palestinian accept it, because the Palestinian denied every offer that they got.

Anat Berko:

And I not speaking just from the right wing. From the left wing. Actually, they didn't want any solutions. We want a solution that made [inaudible 01:33:12] as well. We don't have a problem, Israel. You have 20% are Arabs citizens, a lot of Jews from our country, like myself, I'm from Iraqi-Jewish origin. Both of my parents were born in Baghdad. All my extended family are from Baghdad. So it's like for us it's obvious. That must be much more reasonable. And I think that in this ethically, that we opened up the floor to everybody to talk about, it will be much easier.

Tarek Masoud:

Thank you, Dr. Berko obviously we could probably spend another 90 minutes talking just about the Palestinian-Israeli issue. But Mohammed, if I could just wrap a ribbon around this little inquiry and then we'll end. I mean, what are we to infer from the fact that Saudi Arabia hasn't normalized? I mean, you've actually made a very powerful case for normalization in your remarks. And yet we're seeing that the country hasn't. So are we to infer from that, that in Saudi Arabia, there is actually a debate about this? And that there are some pretty powerful arguments happening in Saudi Arabia against following the Emirati lead.

Mohammed Alyahya:

I mean, I don't think I made the powerful case for normalization. I made very strong statements about-

Tarek Masoud:

I mean you talked about the resistance industry.

Mohammed Alyahya:

How the dividends tended to be beneficial to a lot of people. Look, I think this year took everybody by storm. I think many unexpected things happen. So I don't know for sure, but from my reading, from my conversations with Saudi officials, Saudi Arabia's involvement in this, and the Israeli-Palestinian issue has always been to play a leadership role on finding a solution to the crisis. The idea of unilaterally or normalizing relations with Israel independently of the Palestinian issue, seems too sharp of a turn from its historic role. And Saudi Arabia's sort of [inaudible 01:35:44], that's what it seems like to me at least from now.

Tarek Masoud:

Okay, well, we've been going for 90 minutes. We could probably spend another 90 hours talking to about these various issues. So all that's left for me to do is to first thank you, Mohammed for this really wonderful, thoughtful discussion. And to thank our audience for their engagement, for their great questions. And Kerim, any last comments before we close this one out?

Kerim Haggag:

Just to add my word of thanks to Mohammed. Mohammed, you've been not only very thoughtful, but very candid in your conversation with us, so thank you.

Tarek Masoud:

Absolutely. Absolutely. We'll have to do this-

Mohammed Alyahya:

Thank you very much Kerim, and thank you very much Tarek. I appreciate being here and it's a privilege.

Tarek Masoud:

We'll have to do it again. So thank you everybody. Again, hopefully all of these conversations will soon be online where you'll be able to listen to them and relive all of the joy and the drama. And we will reconvene in the spring with a new series. So thank you Mohammed, thank you everybody. And we'll see you again soon insh'Allah.

Mohammed Alyahya:

Bye. Thank you. Bye bye.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:36:57]