Center for Strategic and International Studies

Press Briefing

"President Trump's Trip to the Middle East and Europe"

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COLM F. QUINN: It's 8:30, so I think it's time to begin. Thanks for everyone here who came on time.

And I just wanted to give a brief introduction. My name is Colm Quinn. I am the deputy director of communications here at CSIS.

Just a few points of order for housekeeping purposes. We will be taking a transcript of this, so as best as you can if you can use the microphones when you're asking questions, that would be great. In terms of run of play, Dr. Cordesman, on my left, our Burke Chair in Strategy, is going to take us through the first portion of the trip, and then followed by Jeff Rathke, our deputy director of the Europe Program and senior fellow will take us through the remainder. Following that, we'll open up for questions, so hopefully we can get to everyone here.

OK. Without further ado, I'm going to hand over to Tony.

ANTHONY H. CORDESMAN: Thanks very much, Colm.

Normally, when a president goes to Israel, you have a very pleasant public profile, and usually an announcement of some new form of U.S. aid or assistance to Israel. Now, the problem you have here is there are also a lot of underlying issues. And how many of these will actually either be dealt with publicly or during a presidential visit is pretty hard to estimate.

Some of them are fairly obvious. There is the question of what will happen about moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem. There are all the issues relating to the settlements. Will the U.S. take a stand on the two-state solution? If so, what? What kind of sequel will follow the Abbas visit and how will he be discussing what is a very tense situation, at least at the underlying level, between Israel and the Palestinian Authority and what is happening in Gaza.

There is the problem for Israel of what is happening in Egypt, which is equally important to the United States. And it's a problem, you know, of economics and stability. It's also a tangible impact on warfighting in the Sinai and the Gaza, where you have a low-level conflict, and one that has not been getting better. It's been getting worse. You have the problem of what happens – and it will happen fairly quickly – if you see Mosul actually liberated and ISIS driven out of its pseudo-capital in Raqqa, because for Israel that may well mean that it faces a significant and very different extremist threat somewhere on its border area.

There also is the fact that during all of these conflicts the Hezbollah has steadily built up its missile forces, effectively rearmed – gotten better capabilities, so you have a far larger Hezbollah threat in Lebanon than you had at the point where Israel fought a war over the threat in that area. And then there is always the question of preserving Israel's edge. There already is a memorandum of understanding which seems to give Israel what it would need for security posture. But it's always interesting to see what happens during a presidential visit.

The Saudis, I think, are always going to be more problematic. Every time we have a visit to Saudi Arabia, we then discover we have a major ally which has a very different political system and culture, and a very different approach to human rights. And I think here some issues are fairly obvious. One is that President Trump, like President Obama, raised the issue of burden sharing. The problem is, it's very difficult to see why.

Saudi Arabia is the fourth-largest spender in terms of military efforts as a percentage of its economy of any country in the world. It actually is competing with Russia in terms of total defense spending. In 2015, it was marginally higher than Russia. This year it is marginally lower. It is spending more on defense than any European power. And we are attempting in NATO to get countries to spend 2 percent. As most of you know it comes generally closer to 1.2 to 1.6 percent of the GDP. And I'll leave that to my colleague. The fact is, however, in the U.S., depending on how you define it, we're spending all of 2.8 (percent) to somewhere around 3.2 percent, which is less basically as a defense effort than a third of the U.S. effort in terms of defense spending.

The other issue how you compare it to local powers. It is about three times the highest estimate for Iranian military spending in terms of total spending in 2015. It's true that Saudi Arabia has cut this spending level – cut it fairly significantly between 2015 and 2016. But it's also important to note that Saudi Arabia's primary source of income, its oil-export earnings, dropped about 46 percent between 2012 and 2016. It is a country under very serious economic pressure, which is the reason for its 2030 plan, and its efforts to speed up detailed shifts by 2020.

We're talking about a Gulf which has never been particularly oil-rich, aside from Qatar and the UAE, when you look at per capita income. And from a Saudi viewpoint, to make the kinds of reforms and shifts it needs to preserve stability, it faces some fairly serious questions about future financing, even if oil revenues should recover. So the question for the Trump administration is going to be just how do you define burden-sharing, and why is Saudi Arabia not complying?

It is likely that you will hear that there will be a major announcement on arms sales. Some people have floated figures of 100 billion (dollars). I would give you all a caution, if you haven't worked these issues before, that first people always give you the figure which is the highest goal. Most of the time it isn't reached.

The second issue is to what extent this is spread out over a future period of years. And the third is, how does it affect Saudi Arabia's industrial base and offsets, because one of the goals that Saudi Arabia has announced is to stop spending on imports of finished goods and produce its own equipment.

But from a practical viewpoint, and particularly from a U.S. viewpoint, one of the critical shifts that is likely to come out of this announcement is that the U.S. has long pressed Saudi Arabia to improve the quality of its naval forces in the Gulf, to basically be more of a counter to what is Iran's major areas of buildup, which are the missile threat it poses to the Gulf region and the mix of naval, missile and air forces which it has deployed in the Gulf and has said it would potentially use in a crisis to shut off the export of oil.

There will be a very key issue in terms of reassuring the Saudis. Frankly, the Saudi reaction toward the end of the Obama administration was they were dealing with a U.S. ally that they felt focused far more on trying to change Saudi Arabia internally than on providing credible guarantees of its security. So reestablishing confidence is going to be a security goal. It also, according to at least a number of people, will come at the potential expense of pressure on human rights.

Tied to that, however, are some other issues. There are about 65,000 Saudi students in the United States that are basically standard undergraduate students. If you look at all of the people with some kind of course or academic tie, some relation that are here, it's possibly over 100,000. Some people put the figure at 125,000.

That raises some very real questions about the immigration policies, the vetting policies that the Trump administration is advocating. So far there's been no problem, but the Saudis may seek reassurance and the administration may say something about it.

There is, in addition to Iran, the question of the Yemen war, which has effectively become a stalemate. It's one where there is very little reporting and, quite frankly, where some of that reporting is extraordinarily questionable. Some of the worst data seem to be the data on casualties, because people are essentially often taking reports which seem to virtually take NGO estimates of air casualties as the total casualties.

If you look at the U.N. reporting on the war, it's fairly obvious that the major sources of suffering and casualties are coming on the ground. They are mixed between the Houthi/Saleh forces and the Saudi/UAE-backed forces and al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. And they are probably far higher than any of the casualty reports I've seen in the press because they deal with the real-world impact of a war which has been economically devastating, put about half the population at risk, sharply increased everything from infant mortality to malnutrition and virtually led to a massive degree of unemployment.

There will be the question of what happens in terms of Syria and Iraq. One of the key questions for the kingdom and, indeed, for the U.S. is: What happens in Iraq after Mosul is liberated? What will the U.S. do there? To what extent will it stay? What happens in terms of the potential conflicts between Arab and Kurd or Sunni and Shiite? What happens to the various militias? What is the role of Iran?

And how much of this is actually going to be addressed during a presidential visit is very hard to tell. These are the issues where staff usually prepare and sometimes staff finish the job, and it gets very little public discussion. But they go a lot deeper than simply having a meet-and-greet between the president and the royal family.

So with that, let me shift things over to Jeff.

JEFFREY RATHKE: All right. Well, thank you, Tony, and thank you, Colm.

And so nice to see so many people here this morning. What I would propose to do is just to sort of hop through the stops on the Europe leg of the trip and dwell in a little bit of detail on the agenda in a couple of areas.

So the president will go – will go to Vatican City, where he'll have a meeting with Pope Francis. From there he will go to Brussels. And there are three things that will happen in Brussels: There will be a meeting with the EU leadership in some form, probably a meeting with EU Council President Donald Tusk and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker; the exact format of that I think is – at least hasn't been publicly announced. There will be a bilateral meeting between the president and the newly elected French president, Emmanuel Macron. And there will be a meeting of NATO leaders. So all of that will happen in Brussels on the 25th of May. And then the president goes from there to Sicily, where he will participate in the G-7 summit.

Now, this trip is the first real test of the administration's multilateral engagement on economic issues, on security and defense issues, on foreign policy issues. You have this happening in multiple

places – the G-7, NATO, the European Union. And then this is all of course building up as well to the G-20 summit, which will happen in Hamburg, Germany, in July.

Now, measuring or managing multilateral relationship is always a challenge, and getting – making progress in a multilateral format requires painstaking effort. From what I understand thus far, it is not planned to have the sorts of formal declarations and communiqués at, for example, the NATO leaders meeting that you often see; also a question about whether there will be a formal declaration of the G-7 leaders at the summit. On the one hand, this owes to the fact that the administration is still quite new in office, and for any new administration, it is – it is sometimes difficult to engage at a level of depth when you are still assembling a leadership team. But I think also it's attributable to the fact that, you know, the ministerial-level, Cabinet-level agreements allow the United States to, in a way, agree to certain – a certain continuity in U.S. relations without having to put it, you know, in the – in the words or – of the president – so if you look, for example, at some of the agreements in the G-7 foreign ministerial declaration from a couple of weeks ago that supports the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, for example – the Iran deal – or in the Arctic Council ministerial at least some reference to climate change.

And so President Trump is one of four new leaders in the G-7. The host, Prime Minister Gentiloni of Italy; newly elected French President Macron; U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May; they will all be participating for the first time at a G-7 summit. And there are three or maybe four members of that constellation who will have elections soon: the U.K. on June 8th; France, which will have parliamentary elections on June 11th and 18th in a two-round format; Germany, September 24th; and possibly Italy having early elections, but at the latest will have them next spring. And while this trip may not directly influence the outcomes of any of those elections, it perhaps, you know, brings to mind the saying, you know, when America sneezes, the world catches a cold. So when President Trump shakes the foundations of the U.S.-led order, does the rest of the world feel an earthquake?

If we look at the agenda for the stops in Europe, there's a sort of incongruence in objectives, and managing this is the primary challenge of that – of those stops. On the one hand, for the United States the challenge is to show leadership, even if it largely has not worked out the policies are that it wants its allies and partners to follow. How do we reconcile President Trump's pledge as a candidate and also since taking office basically to renegotiate all U.S. relationships, or at least potentially to renegotiate all U.S. relationships, with the continuity that is a superpower's greatest interest? For Europeans, there is a wariness as they approach the Trump administration. They want to preserve the key elements of the transatlantic relationship – security and defense, economics and trade, foreign policy coordination, fight against terrorism and extremism – while at the same time hedging against the possibility of unexpected change in U.S. policy and a perceived shallowness in U.S. commitment to those elements of continuity that thus far have characterized a lot of the administration's approach.

If I can mention one or two items on the NATO agenda – there will be three main things. First is defense resources, defense spending, which the U.S. administration has certainly emphasized and put at the top of the NATO agenda. I think it's worth reminding there is this commitment NATO leaders made to spend 2 percent of their GDP on defense, and also to spend 20 percent of their defense spending on research and development and on equipment.

Over the last year or two, NATO has made progress on this. In 2016, NATO defense spending, Europe and Canada, rose by 3.8 percent. That's an additional $10 billion from European and Canadian allies, a rise of about 3.8 percent. About 10 countries meet the 20 percent target for spending on major equipment. And there are several countries that will be achieving the 2 percent target. Right now there

are five countries at the 2 percent of GDP target. Romania will meet it this year; Lithuania, Latvia next year. So that will be eight countries. Still not enough, but progress in that direction. If you look at the big – the big allies, you see increases in defense spending there as well: Germany's defense budget up by 8 percent this year, Italy's up by 10 percent, Canada up by about 6 percent, the Netherlands up by about 5 percent. The one major European country that's an outlier there is Spain, which has a flat – basically a flat budget for defense this year compared to last year.

But what NATO leaders are going to be looking to agree to is, you know, a mechanism or plans to implement this 2 percent target. Keep in mind the target date for achieving that is out in the future, 2024, because, frankly, a rapid rise in spending by major countries has a major risk of inefficient spending, of wasteful spending. It takes time to, you know, do this rationally and efficiently. So you expect to see that upward trajectory continue.

One comment about how NATO's defense spending works. This is national spending we're talking about when you talk about 2 percent. This is what countries spend on their own defense and those capabilities that they make available to NATO. This is not paid to the United States in any sense. There is no such thing as arrears at NATO or debts owed for past years. Now, there is some small amount of pooled or common funding at NATO. If you combine all those budgets, it's about $2 billion a year for infrastructure, for military spending, for the civilian budget of NATO. But if you compare that to overall spending, NATO allies together spend about $920 billion, at least that's what they spent in 2016. So NATO's commonly funded spending is very small by comparison. And of that, European allies spend about 242 billion (dollars).

The other big agenda – item on the NATO agenda is terrorism. NATO has had programs for many years to try to fight terrorism. So this is not a new thing. I would remind that Afghanistan – the Afghanistan mission is now, I think, in its 14th year. NATO has trained Iraqi security forces, has had programs to fight or combat improvised explosive devices, and to share knowledge and technology among allies. So this is not new. But the challenge has always been how to make – how to use or adapt NATO's primarily military instruments to the fight against terrorism. And this is, you know, a big challenge.

So some of the things that are under consideration is whether NATO will take a greater role in the coalition against ISIS. Right now, NATO does not have a seat at that table, even though all the NATO allies in their national capacities are participating. NATO is flying AWACS flights to help coordinate the air-space management and intelligence gathering. There's the possibility NATO could do more there and could step up. And there is a readiness, from what I understand, in the region for NATO to take on that greater role. But it's not yet agreed. They're still – it's still under discussion.

NATO could do more in training Iraqi security forces and build up the programs that exist outside of Baghdad as well as in Jordan, as well as providing more support to partner countries like Jordan and Tunisia in building up their capacities. And of course, the last thing to mention about the NATO meeting is, I think, that Russia is going to be, in a sense, the thing on many allies' minds. Both in the military sense – Russia's military modernization, its INF treaty violations, and its occupation of territory of countries in Europe like Ukraine and Georgia remains, in the eyes of many allies, the principal threat that they face.

And so how the – how the alliance is able to respond is a key – a key issue. The U.S. and NATO allies have got a forward presence now in Eastern Europe. And they'll be looking, I think, for the United States to reaffirm that commitment, to the presence of its troops and to its support for that

policy. And so I think that will play – that will be a major issue, even if it's not one on which they make any kind of declaration.

With the EU, we can come more to this in the Q&A, this is the biggest trade relationship in the world – the transatlantic trade relationship between the U.S. and the EU. It represents about 46 percent of global GDP. So clearly, this relationship will be a key one. And the administration has not yet articulated any kind of agenda for the relationship with the European Union. This is a big, glaring hole in their policy toward major partners. And so this meeting may an opportunity to start setting some direction on that.

And then just to look at the – what some of the countries around the G-7 will have on their minds. In Germany, Chancellor Merkel, her party just won a major state election yesterday in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, which is about 20 percent of Germany's population. So she will be feeling more confident and looking more likely to remain in office after the elections this September for the – for the Bundestag.

Emmanuel Macron makes his first foreign visit as president today to Berlin, where they will talk about how they reconstitute, if they can, the Franco-German engine in Europe, and what this means for European – the future of the European Union. They'll be – certainly Merkel will have Brexit on her mind as well. If we look at France, Macron faces parliamentary elections next month, and that will determine, you know, whether he is able to capitalize on his landslide – or you might call it a landslide with an asterisk – that he won just a week ago. So will he have a parliamentary majority or a workable coalition that will allow him to implement the economic reforms and other reforms that he has prioritized?

Prime Minister May faces a general election on June 8th. And Brexit, of course, is the principal issue going forward. And in Italy, Prime Minister Gentiloni, he'll be the host of this G-7 summit. But it may be also the last one that he hosts, because Italy is likely to have – well, will have elections before the spring of next year. And his party, Gentiloni's party, has reconfirmed as its leader Matteo Renzi, who was prime minister until recently. So when that election happens, it will be with Renzi as the principal candidate. And the big question there is whether early elections are on the agenda and, if so, what that means for the prospects of the PD.

So that was a bit long. I apologize. I'll stop there and look forward to discussion.

MR. QUINN: Still plenty of time for questions, so I'm going to open that up now. Just one point of order: If you could state your name and your outlet, it will just make it easier to find yourself in the transcript later on.

George, go ahead.

Q: George Condon, National Journal.

If I can start with two questions, what are the other leaders looking for from President Trump? What do they need to see? And secondly, we've all seen he has a tendency on his dealings with foreign leaders on the phone and in meetings at the White House to go off script and not do what the State Department and aides wanted him to do. How – what are the risks for that kind of style in these kinds of meetings and summits?

MR. CORDESMAN: Well, let me begin with Israel. I think that what Israel does not want, or particularly this prime minister does not want, is any issue or any attempt to force a clear statement on the two-state solution. It'll be interesting to see what position he takes on Jerusalem. The normal pattern is to want to move the capital, but not to insist on it, and usually get a quid pro quo of some sort for not doing so.

But above all, I think what Israel wants is to see that there is this commitment to preserving its edge in security, that they do have a strong ally that will not push them constantly on the peace process, that we will stay in the Gulf and we will keep our forces in a posture where they will deter Iran, that we will maintain support for the Iraqis and the Iraqi central government, and that the U.S. role in dealing with Syria but also Jordan and Lebanon will be one that reassures those countries. I've already mentioned Egypt.

These are all things which, from Israel's viewpoint, are key security issues at the moment and not likely to be ones that anybody can ignore.

I doubt very much if there's going to be any surprises at this point. Mr. Netanyahu is perfectly capable of dealing in very sophisticated ways with Americans. And in this case, there seems to be a good relationship and one he has no incentive to disturb. And I doubt very much if President Trump will push the envelope here.

With the Saudis, there is the fact you have both a king and a crown prince – and the crown prince is the more public, active, known quantity. I think, however, the Saudis also have been dealing with the U.S., and even the younger Saudis have about 30 years of experience in dealing with U.S. officials. We often tend to forget that there is an amazing degree of continuity and experience in dealing with the vagaries of American policy, which can be vague even when they're planned. It doesn't take a sudden decision by a president.

What I think is very hard to predict at this point is how well the president's been briefed, how clearly he will deal with the burden-sharing argument. I have to say that I may or may not differ somewhat with Jeff over this whole issue. I was part of the NATO force planning exercise several centuries ago, and quite frankly, I think this whole 2 percent and 20 percent goal are mutually ridiculous. If you actually look at what they buy, you can't find any explanation at all of what going to 2 percent will actually do to change the force posture. Twenty percent often simply means a country is going to spend more on subsidizing its defense industry. And the record to date on European cooperation is that it is remarkably expensive and remarkably inefficient.

It's also, I think, kind of interesting, I mentioned Saudi Arabia's defense spending. It's about $57 billion in 2016. What would you think Russia's would be, particularly when the U.S. is spending something on the order of 600 billion (dollars)? Well, according to the International Institute of Strategic Studies, which is about as authoritative as they get, Russia spent all of about $59 billion on defense last year. That's one-tenth of the American total. France spent 47 billion (dollars). It's not too far from the Russian total. The U.K. spent 53 billion (dollars), which is even closer.

Germany is further down, at 38 billion (dollars), but Germany basically in recent years has probably been the least-effective defense spender in the NATO alliance. Its force posture has shrunk far more quickly, and its readiness, than its defense spending. And of course, it's one of the most critical single countries in the alliance.

In contrast to that, if Saudi Arabia does what I think it will do, something we've been seeking for about 10 years, which is to improve its naval forces, will actually take place. And that should be at least a source of some consolation.

But I would have to say that we would all be better off if the president focused on the quality and meaning of what spending accomplishes rather than spending. I only have about half a century of government experience, but I can't think of a worse criteria than actually encouraging people to spend without tying it to very specific goals as to what you buy and the level of efficiency in the way you use the money.

MR. RATHKE: Thanks. Just to add to that, I think, you know, what do European leaders want from the Trump administration? I think what they would all love is continuity. On the one hand, there's been a reversion by the president to a – you know, supportive words with respect to NATO. I think a statement that the U.S. stands by its Article 5 commitments, and indeed that the United States sees its defense as linked to Europe, would be extremely important. You know, the U.S. defense relationship with Europe is not based on generosity, it's based on protecting U.S. security interests. And so a clearer recognition of that would be valuable.

I think if you look at the economic side, no major disruption to trade relationships would be a key goal. I think everyone realizes that the U.S. administration is going to focus first on NAFTA on its trade agenda, so people will look at that carefully to see what implications that has for TTIP or for the future of U.S.-European Union trade negotiations. It's worth pointing out that the president seems to have come around to acknowledge that the U.S. trade – whatever discussions the U.S. has with Europe on trade will be conducted with the European Union and not with individual member states, exception perhaps with the U.K. once it has left the European Union. So there has been also there a reversion to a more orthodox policy.

I think on Russia sanctions the Europeans will be looking for a coordinated approach. They don't want the rug pulled out from under them by a rapid change in the U.S. position. The U.S. has been edging in the direction of that kind of reassurance in the G-7 foreign ministers' declaration, for example, and in the way it's characterized its sanctions on Russia over Ukraine.

Same thing with Iran. Iran remains a controversial topic in the U.S., and the major European countries want to see the U.S. stick to the JCPOA and not engage in policies that could weaken it. That's a principal concern.

And that's without even getting to climate change and the Paris agreement, where European partners would be – would be greatly troubled by a withdrawal of the U.S.

I think – and this gets to this point about risks that you asked. You know, the – President Trump is not particularly popular in Europe. You know, a recent survey in Germany showed 22 percent of German – the German population considers the U.S. a trustworthy partner. That's 2 percentage points better than their view of Russia. And that's a dramatic decrease from a year ago. So the risk for European politicians is the closer they get to the Trump administration, and to the Trump administration's agenda, the greater the risk of some out of left field shift in U.S. policy, leaving them out on a limb. And so that's – that, I think, is the major – certainly if you look at Chancellor Merkel's position as she looks ahead to the German election. She wants a strong transatlantic relationship, but, you know, a few stray tweets or, you know, statements can leave her in an extremely difficult position.

You know, Tony said some very important and true things with regard to defense spending. So that would be a longer discussion. Two percent and 20 percent are unsatisfying metrics. They are the ones that the United States has focused on over multiple administrations. And it's arguable whether they're the best way to measure it. Certainly, there are some countries that spend more than 2 percent of their GDP who do not get much out of that, at least in terms of capabilities that are at the disposal of the entire NATO alliance and contributing to transatlantic security. The challenge has always been to find better measures of quality that are more meaningful, and that can be distilled into something politically powerful. So that's always been the challenge.

Q: (Off mic.)

MR. RATHKE: Well, going off-script, I think is – again, it's about the risks. You know, and that's why you have the benefit of things like declarations, communiques, whatever you want to call it, that come out of these major multilateral and sometimes bilateral meetings, is they give you sort of a ballast. So, you know, if someone says something down the road that is controversial, you can always go back to your piece of paper and say: Look, this is the declaration we agreed at NATO. We agreed on defense spending. We agreed on a unified stance with regard to Russia. We agreed to do more on terrorism. That's our plan. That's what – that's what I, as your national leader, am committed to working with the United States on.

If you don't have those kinds of things, then you have much greater – then these variations or these stray comments can have a much greater impact. And you can wind up churning not only the U.S. news cycle, but the news cycle in your – in your major allies as they scrambled to try to deal with the fallout of an, you know, unintentional or intentionally disruptive comment.

Q: My name is Adam Ereli. I'm a private consultant with C&O Resources.

Two questions. For Dr. Cordesman, can you talk about the Islamic military alliance to fight terror, which is, I think, one of three kind of confabs in Saudi Arabia? Simple question: Are they going to produce anything that passes the laugh test in terms of real meaningful action?

Second question, for both of you. The Russian shadow over the Middle East portion of the visit. There have been a couple of notable sidebar meetings between Mohammed bin Zayed in in Moscow a couple weeks ago, Lavrov in Washington last week, Mohammed bin Zayed back in Washington today – all reportedly dealing with Russia's role in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, protecting Jordan's flank from Syria. So question: Do you see Russia as being the – you know, one of the – one of the sort of powers behind the scenes in what will be discussed in – or what is being discussed before what is discussed in Saudi Arabia, and having an impact on the outcomes of those issues?

MR. CORDESMAN: Let me begin with the first question. I think it is nice to have complex alliances with nicely focused subjects, and it probably doesn't do any substantive harm. But cooperation in counterterrorism is extraordinarily difficult, even in the West. To actually cooperate in counterterrorism between very diverse, often conflicting interests among given Arab states is a lot harder.

And part of it is that when you really look at the data in sources like the START database, which is as close as we have to an official database that's unclassified, you suddenly begin to realize that terrorism is a country-by-country issue. It is not a matter of international terrorism dictated by ISIS central. It is a mixture. For example, in Yemen, you have the question of, first, who is a terrorist.

Then you have certainties, which is al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. How closely that is tied to al-Qaida anywhere else is extremely questionable. There doesn't seem to be an al-Qaida central in the normal sense.

We in the United States right now are focused on ISIS, or ISIL, as a key threat. Looking at the figures for the MENA region, ISIS is responsible for about – well, the figures go back to 2015, but all of about 5 to 6 percent of the total number of terrorist incidents in the MENA region. It's very different when you go from terrorism to counterinsurgency and war fighting in Iraq and Syria, but that isn't terrorism. And I think that you're going to find that these alliances may or may not produce some kind of benefits and of exchange of information. But several of the Arab states don't agree anymore on how to define a terrorist than we do with China.

So it's good to start. I think the issues which may be more serious where the kingdom, Saudi Arabia, has much more impact, is within the Gulf Cooperation Council because about 17 percent of the world's oil moves through that particular area in the Strait of Hormuz. And while we're no longer dependent on oil imports directly, we're far more dependent on the flow of trade from Asian states, which are critically dependent on Gulf exports. So actually, our dependence on oil exports has increased sharply and steadily over time, in spite of the increase in production. That's the kind of issue where the Saudi role in a different alliance could be absolutely critical.

The wild card there and the one which will be of great concern and much more to all of these supposed alliances is what happens to Iraq and, particularly once we have effectively helped them win in Mosul, how tied are they to us, to Russia, to Iran, what is Iraq's future position relative to other Arab states.

You asked about the Russian shadow, and it's a very good question. I think that one of the great problems we have is that so far, every time Russia has talked about focusing on attacking terrorist targets, it has continued to attack Arab rebel movements which are not terrorist. There are some good estimates that try to deal with this by the Institute for the Study of War, but the fact is there are no public data that really describe the pattern of Russian sorties that are reliable, but it's very clear where a lot of them go.

The other problem is the so-called de-escalation zones. What they amount to is effectively some form of separation of Syria on what seems to be a very temporary basis between the Assad-dominated areas and those which are now dominated by Arab rebel factions, again increasingly ones which are themselves dominated by al-Qaida or other Islamist extremist groups other than ISIS, and the areas still under control by ISIS, whose volunteers are going to go somewhere after Raqqa is liberated, a country where you also have a Kurdish problem, where Russia has been playing a game which goes beyond simply playing with states. It's also talking about dealing independently with the various ethnic and sectarian groups. And all of that certainly is something where, at least as yet, we have the much broader problem. And this is something that may get raised during the Trump visit to Saudi Arabia.

Understand that the Obama administration never announced a strategy or gave any statement whatsoever on what would happen in Iraq and Syria after ISIS was defeated. And the Trump administration is still under a 60-day effort to define that. So there may be questions.

MR. QUINN: Margaret.

Q: Sorry to dumb it down, but I'm going to go for it. So the Jim Comey situation has made a lot of news in the United States and created a – (comes on mic) – thank you, I really wanted to do this on mic.

The James Comey dismissal has made a lot of waves back home domestically. It's creating a political cloud over stuff like health care and tax reform and such. Does – are leaders in the Middle East or Europe even remotely aware of this? Does it have any bearing on the trip whatsoever? And do you think that it will have any impact on the message or the focus or, you know, how others look at the U.S., the administration's ability to get things done? Thanks.

I also have a pope question, but –

MR. RATHKE: OK. Well, certainly our allies and partners in Europe have noticed and are following the domestic developments in the United States. I don't think it is likely to change their approach to these meetings, whether they're bilateral or multilateral. And will the issues come up during the trip? I think that's probably dependent mostly on the traveling U.S. press corps in the various media availabilities that happen.

So I don't – I don't see it as being at the top of the Europeans' agenda, although they certainly, you know, are following the developments here.

MR. CORDESMAN: Just very briefly, I think one question everyone outside the United States has, and are not likely to ask the president, is what is his actual political strength relative to the divisions with Congress, the problems within his own party? Can he move forward with his own agenda? That will certainly be a question as he visits any country overseas.

MR. QUINN: Let me go over to the right-hand side of the room now, at the very back. Right here.

Q: Hi. Thanks. Thank you for the briefing. I'm Jeffrey Liu (sp) from Xinhua News.

Just now you said we are not expecting any kind of official declaration of any kind from the overseas trip. But we both know Mr. Trump: He likes to boast about – he likes to say something about his skills and his performance as a good leader. So what kind of – what kind of performance and what kind of goals for Donald Trump for this – for his overseas trip? Thank you.

MR. RATHKE: Well, first of all, I think, you know, I can't state with certainty there won't be a G-7 declaration. I simply said that it's – it appears possible there won't be one. So I don't know if there's any chance that might change.

But, you know, the objective – I think the objective for the United States and from the president's point of view is to show the United States active, but without pinning it down on any particular policy. And that's the tension in the stops, especially in Europe – NATO, EU, G-7 – because, on the one hand, the administration wants to show that it is engaging effectively with major global partners.

But, by the same token, as far as the policies that will guide this administration for the months and years to come, they largely have not been developed yet. So it's this – you know, any administration would struggle with this early on. I think it's an even greater struggle this time because

of the slow pace of constituting the nexus between sort of policy expertise and political roles inside the government. And it means that you've got a relatively thin agenda.

MR. CORDESMAN: Well, if I were the president, I would – and I was able to announce that there was a major new arms deal worth tens of billions of dollars, at a minimum I would probably note that that would be the answer to the burden-sharing issue and that I had very successfully completed a visit with a major Saudi increase in its security contribution to the sort of strategic partnership. I think, too, that if there was any announcement about U.S. cooperation with Saudi Arabia and creating a defense industrial base, I would probably take advantage of that.

Beyond that, I would probably want to announce that he had met, that we had agreed on a strong position relative to Iran, probably one more focused on the Gulf and Iranian influence than on the nuclear issue, which, quite frankly, to the Saudis, certainly the nuclear issue is one of concern, but it's sort of about fifth in terms of Saudi concerns over Iran, which are much more tied to Iran spreading influence in the region and the kind of threats it poses from its missile and asymmetric forces.

MR. QUINN: I want to keep it to this side of the room, but I remember that Margaret had a follow up on a Pope question and I forgot to invite it.

Q: Thanks. And I didn't say my name earlier. Margaret Talev with Bloomberg.

So President Trump is meeting with, you know, the Pope. And they didn't have the best relationship during the campaign. What is in it for President Trump to have a reset? What's in it for the Pope, if anything? And what should we look for?

MR. RATHKE: Well, I think both sides have been pretty circumspect about the agenda and any outcome. So I think it is, on the one hand, a, you know, an introductory, get-to-know-you sort of a meeting. I think, from the president's point of view, he'll want to come out of that meeting able to say that he's got a good relationship with the Pope and thereby to sort of undercut the direct and implicit criticisms from Pope Francis that came during the campaign and that may come in the future as the Pope takes a position on one or another policy initiatives that the administration rolls out.

And I think for the Pope, it is also a way of highlighting his role as a spiritual leader in commenting on issues that are, frankly, quite domestic and thereby preserving some ability to weigh in on those issues, whether it's on immigration or social issues, if he so chooses.

MR. QUINN: Jeremy, right there.

Q: Jeremy Diamond, CNN.

President Trump has really, it seems, reassured the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia in particular, with the way that he's conducted foreign policy, returning it to, you know, a very firmly pro-Saudi, anti-Iran U.S. posture in the world. To what extent do you think that's going to help the president extract certain concessions or support from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states when it comes to both fighting ISIS in the Middle East, but also with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process? To what extent do you think that on the peace process Trump might win new cooperation from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states on that issue? Thanks.

MR. CORDESMAN: Let me begin with the peace process. I don't know what concessions he would seek because, quite frankly, unless this visit to Israel is far more productive than I think most people estimate it will be, he will try, I think, to talk to Mr. Netanyahu about preserving at least the shell of an effort to keep the two-state solution going and limit settlements. But the fact is, Israeli domestic politics really don't lend themselves to reaching that particular conclusion. It doesn't seem to be one of the prime minister's priorities. You have a divided, weak Palestinian movement, which is not clearly in a position to make concessions that would move this process further any more than Israel is. You have the problem of the Gaza, where you now have its own political difficulties.

So trying to seek concessions from the Gulf states on a peace process, remembering that the official position of Saudi Arabia and that of Arab states is the peace proposal – which in many ways closely parallels the idea of a two-state solution, always subject to the uncertainty of the 1967 line. And because of the way everybody quotes this, we forget that the U.N. never endorsed the '67 line. It used the phrase, with adjustments, which is not exactly a line in the sand, by any standard. So how you sort this out in a presidential visit I would say is not going to be a particularly credible priority. You'd have to have the participants in a better position. And they're not ones that are going to suddenly be pressured from the outside without both sides being much closer to agreeing.

Within the Gulf you need to be really careful. We already are basing and operating out of most of the smaller Gulf states. We have cooperated closely with Oman, which is not a country in a position to spend more. It's actually spending more of its economy on security than Saudi Arabia. It's one of the highest spenders in the world. There is virtually no slack in that economy. And if you look at the situation in Oman, you'll find something very surprising about it. It's the only country where we do not report on the level of terrorism or internal security on the annual report on terrorism. I do not believe that is because it is the most secure country in the world.

What it comes down to what you can do in Kuwait or Bahrain, what you can do in the UAE, with Qatar. I think already have about as much as you can credibly get. And you need to realize that part of that is an immense backlog of interoperable munitions, equipment, spares, ability to operate U.S. forces in the event of a serious war with Iran. And already, a pledge to seek a common missile defense against Iran where, among other things, one of the key issues is what is the U.S. role in providing those systems and creating a suitable architecture, because you're talking an absolutely immense potential investment.

And this is not something that the president can go to Saudi Arabia and deal with because, remember, that you not only have the 60-days study to talk about solutions, in dealing with the war on ISIS, you have an executive order calling for a comprehensive review of U.S. strategy in providing that part of the 2018 budget submission. And here I'd be very cautious. To ask for really dramatic U.S. initiatives before you have agreed on what you are doing in terms of the coming budget submission, and before your strategy studies are completed, might be a little premature.

Q: Hi. I'm Nana Sajaia from Voice of America.

Going back to the NATO issue, President Trump has called NATO an obsolete organization. But at the same time, in Eastern Europe NATO is viewed as something that ensures their security, especially from Russia. And arguably, if Georgia and Ukraine were given membership action plan back in 2008, we would not have occupation of Georgia or invasion of Ukraine. Do you see the expansion – NATO expansion issue being revisited under Trump administration?

MR. RATHKE: Thanks. So, when the NATO secretary-general visited a couple of weeks ago, in the press availability they had after the meeting I think the president added, you know, a comment to the obsolete comment. He said, you know, I said it before. It's no longer true. You know, regardless how you – how you sort of judge that, I think it's important to start from that. So, with respect to Eastern Europe, I think, you know, NATO's importance to countries on NATO's eastern flank has been, you know, dramatically raised over the last few years. That's why also you have rising defense spending across the eastern flank of the alliance – Poland, soon Romania, soon all three of the Baltic states as well as in some other places.

The question of Georgia and Ukraine, first, I don't see NATO changing its policy on enlargement at this leaders meeting. I don't think it's going to be a top item on the agenda, frankly. It's a very short meeting. It's going to last a couple of hours. So it is not a full summit like you would have under other circumstances where you get into almost every issue. This one is not – this is – this is an introductory meeting. It's not – it's not a full-blown summit.

And second, I don't think – I don't think that anything has changed fundamentally in the alliance dynamics with regard to enlargement. They stand behind the open door. And in fact, they'll – you know, you have the admission of Montenegro as 29th member, with I think the ratification of that being complete, and – but I don't think there's any appetite to press ahead rapidly on enlargement in other spheres.

So the cooperative relationships with Georgia and Ukraine will continue. They may – they may intensify in some areas. The open-door policy isn't going to change.

MR. QUINN: We have time for a couple more questions here. Howard.

Q: Hi. Thank you. Howard LaFranchi with the Christian Science Monitor.

I had a question – Tony, you mentioned the – several times the differences with the Saudis on human rights issues. And we've seen some indication from the – from the president and the administration so far that there, you know, might be a different, perhaps a downplaying of human rights concerns in relations with other countries. The president received President Sisi at the White House. He's shown or expressed a certain amount of praise for strongmen around the country – around the world – President Duterte in Philippines and others. I'm wondering, to what extent – do we have any indication yet of to what extent maybe there is a return to a more traditional balancing of interests and values, human rights? Or, you know, are we seeing, you know, sort of a setting off in a new direction?

MR. CORDESMAN: I think that it's very difficult to tell because you have seen people like Secretary Mattis, General McMaster, Secretary Tillerson appointed, who are people who would see this, when you talk about concern with human rights, in very pragmatic terms. But that doesn't mean indifference.

I think you also have a question about focus. Human rights organizations in the West tend to focus on improving human rights seen from a Western perspective. When you look at Saudi society, and some of you I would suspect have lived there or visited there, it is an extraordinarily conservative population. What you have seen over the years is the royal family and a sort of intellectual elite, business elite, often modernizing Saudi Arabia from the top rather than somehow sitting on public demands for it. You have a society, one way or another, where the royal family was a catalyst in creating a country where there are now more women graduating from secondary school, colleges and

university than men. You are talking about a country which in terms of its social contract actually meets the social contract, in medicine, housing and serious efforts of job creation.

Now, if you go back to the definition of human rights, people tend to forget that the ability to actually live in material terms that are secure is one of those rights guaranteed by the U.N. Charter and by our policies. I think that this is not a casual issue at the moment in the Middle East. You have a lot of societies which in the course of the War on Terrorism have become much more controlling. You also have a lot of countries which, because of that struggle, have seen really serious economic problems and political turmoil growing out of the events of 2011 – Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco. Each of them has confronted not only the problem of dealing with extremism, but the very material problem of how do you preserve a social structure.

You're talking about countries where we tend to think of them as oil-rich, which is only credible until you don't look at – as long as you don't look at the amount of oil income per capita, which doesn't make anybody oil-rich except Qatar, basically, and where you've seen, again – and I think this is an important point to remember – when we talk about human rights and stability in countries which have seen on an average of a 46 percent cut in their petroleum export revenues in the course of a year, you have a lot of adjustment and planning problems like the 2030 and 2020 issue, which, in human-rights terms, are materially far more important to the population.

So I think, you know, what do you press for in today's world in the Middle East? Which countries can you really see as making easy advances? Is it a country like Jordan, under the pressure of a massive influx of Syrian refugees, with almost incredible strains on its economy and all of the security problems involved? You've probably seen advances in human rights in Lebanon, but they're not the kind that are normally advanced by human-rights advocates. They're the result of the fact you actually got a reasonably successful compromise and an actual government between its factions.

So I think the honest answer to your question is that in some ways we tend to focus on imposing one set and one part of our values in human rights. I think this administration may be somewhat more practical. But whether it, over the course of four years, is going to be any less interested in the rule of law, stability, the factors which also are critical to fighting terrorism, I don't think there's any way to tell. And again, I think sometimes you need to show a little patience.

Q: Hi there. Mike Memoli with the L.A. Times. Thanks as always for doing this briefing.

One of my questions was on human rights, so this will save us a little bit of time. But Jeffrey, you talked about the U.S. sneezing and the world catching a cold. Is it too early – will we ever really be able to draw any conclusions about whether the election of Trump has either advanced nationalist movements in Europe or in some ways provoked this kind of counter-response to it?

And related to that, do you think other world leaders fully understand what "America first" means? Is there – there has been some retreat from that now as we see this reformulation of what we heard from McMaster last week, that "America first" does not mean America alone, an embrace of these multilateral institutions that we might not have expected otherwise.

MR. RATHKE: (Clears throat.) Excuse me. I think if you – (coughs) – pardon me again.

If you – the question whether Donald Trump's election provoked similar movements, I think these existed before his election. I mean, the National Front has been a growing force in French politics, for example, for a long time.

So I think these have – they have some similar characteristics, but the extent to which one feeds or promotes the other – I think, perhaps at the most abstract level, the success of the Brexit referendum and Trump's election as president has given – you know, gave a sense to a lot of these nationalist and populist movements that success was actually possible and conceivable. And so it contributes maybe to a public recognition that change of that sort can happen.

And then it's a question of how much of their – how much of what's going on is a backlash against that. You could argue that the – you know, that the Dutch elections and the French presidential election, you know, represent a backlash against that and a reversion to centrism. And that's – I think that's an arguable point. The thing you need to consider, though, is the fact that center-right politics is moving to the right. So what you have in the Netherlands and also what you had with the Republican Party in France is, you know, a shift to the right in order to occupy some of that territory and to take away some of the oxygen from the far right, from the extreme right. So that's on the one hand.

I think, you know, if you look – and it's also differentiated. In places like Germany, for example, you have a far-right party which is scoring now in the single digits, maximum maybe 10 percent in opinion polls. Yesterday they got about 7 1/2 percent in North Rhine, Westphalia, so it's not the same everywhere. Whereas in Austria, you know, the Freedom Party is at the top of opinion polls, so this varies from country to country.

And then America First, I think as a bumper sticker, beyond it being a bumper sticker, I don't think our allies really understand what that means. And with respect to the national security adviser's explanation of it that he offered on Friday at the start of the White House press briefing, again, I think the strength of the U.S.-led multilateral system and alliances around the world has been the willingness of the U.S. to set its goals more broadly and to make contributions to an overall Western or alliance good and that's what's allowed leaders of very different persuasions and in very different cultural, social, political contexts to tie themselves so closely to the United States. So I think, you know, it's still a big question in the minds of most of our counterparts.

MR. QUINN: We have time for, I think, one final question.

Q: Thank you. This is Ibal al-Kutsi (ph) from Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper. I have a couple of questions.

To follow up with the fight against terrorism and radicalism, how far does the U.S. need Saudi Arabia? And there are some news about the Trump administration thinking of sending U.S. troops to Afghanistan. Will the Saudis ask the U.S. administration to increase the U.S. troops in Syria to fight ISIS? And will the Saudis ask for more troops, I mean, boots on the ground regarding fighting ISIS and regarding more U.S. involvement in the fight in Yemen? Thank you.

MR. CORDESMAN: I'm sorry, the latter, I –

MR. QUINN: Yemen.

MR. RATHKE: Yemen, U.S. role.

MR. CORDESMAN: OK. I think when I comes down to the fight against terrorism, if you look from about 2003 on at the State Department reports, country reports on terrorism, you will see Saudi Arabia identified as a critical partner in counterterrorism. A lot of that has been expanded to the point where we used to have two security and advisory missions in Saudi Arabia. One dealt with the national guard and the other dealt with the regular forces. We now have one for the Ministry of Interior, which deals with counterterrorism.

And certainly, when it comes down to finding security against terrorism in a, again, a critical country in terms of our economy, that is preserving the flow of Gulf oil exports, there's no question that Saudi Arabia has been a critical partner. And I think if you want to look at the details of that, you only have to look at the State Department reporting which basically, I think it's fair to say, reflects the views of the National Counterterrorism Center. So that part of the partnership is one that has not basically been at issue, even when there have been questions about the U.S. commitment to the Gulf and Saudi Arabia and even when there has been this strange sort of retrospective debate over the missing passages of a congressional staff report on 9/11, dating back to 2012, something that was a legislative issue last year.

It's very important to understand what the of U.S. forces is in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. We're not talking combat units. When you talk about additional forces for Afghanistan, it would be in the train and assist mission, and the potential support of counterterrorism forces that are Afghan forces. You also might see a significant increase in the amount of U.S. air support, which is not by any standard boots on the ground. I think that's been reasonably well-briefed by the administration, but it somehow has gotten translated into total manning rather than what the manpower does.

And just as a casual comment, there is practically nothing more meaningless in reporting on any security situation than total personnel, because if you don't ask what the men and women do and you only look at the total amount of people, that hasn't been relevant as a meaningful military metric for about the last 4,000 years. And one might consider how often you want to complete – continue reporting it in the future.

Syria and Iraq are different stories, but not materially. What we have done over the years is go from trying to train and assist from the rear, to trying to assist with combat units. We have provided limited amounts of fire support. These are small, mobile rocket units. And we have provided attack helicopters in addition to jet fighters. But there is no discussion of providing combat units. And part of the reason is, at this point in time, first you brought the Iraqi units to the level where the train and assist mission works.

Second, putting U.S. combat units in either country would immediately create the problem of resistance among factions, particularly the units that support Iran, the various Shiite militias. It would be politically destabilizing in Iraq. And exactly where you would put them in Syria, if you what you want is to develop Syrian forces that can actually occupy the area and provide some kind of political and civil stability after. You can't do that with U.S. troops. And I think the Saudis are as aware of this, at this point, as we are. We've already learned the hard way as to the limits of what kinds of intervention really work on the ground.

Yemen is an extraordinarily difficult case. The fact is that when this conflict started, and the Saudi-UAE-led coalition intervened, I think they counted on more outside ground troops than they got. They've ended up having to rely on airpower and limited ground forces. The end result has been a

stalemate. Basically, it is not the Houthi, which is another common misnomer. It is a combination of the Houthi and the Saleh faction of the Yemeni military. And a great deal of the Yemeni armed forces basically backed Saleh and the Houthi in this struggle. But it is also a very serious internal threat from Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula.

The U.S. basically – again, to try to put conventional U.S. ground troops into the middle of one of the most complex ethnic, sectarian forms of asymmetric war possible, at this point simply is not likely to be a demand or even a request. Help, in terms of airpower, maybe. How much the U.S. basically would like to see both Saudi Arabia and the UAE use airpower more carefully in collateral damage, civilian casualties, I think is fairly clear. We would very much like to see that improved.

But there is a problem here which also tends to get forgotten. There is exactly one country in the world that can actually conduct the kind of the surgical airstrikes the U.S. conducts as part of its operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. As became clear in Libya, France and Britain can't do it. They're highly sophisticated structures, but they don't have the mixture of reconnaissance, intelligence, communications that allows them to deal with this. Russia could certainly do better, but it is not a country with its defense budget which can operate air operations at the level the United States can.

Countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE have very capable individual air combat units, but they don't have the battle-management and ISR assets that the U.S. does. So, to some extent, we've created an expectation about airpower which is demanding enough for the United States, but how much you practically can deal with the Saudi and UAE on this issue simply is not clear. They will get, under I think the plans that already exist, more precision munitions. And this basically meets one basic criteria: if you don't give them those munitions, they will use non-precision munitions, and the end result will be higher collateral damage and a lot more civilian casualties. Not every arms sale is one which adds to the problem. Some of them actually add to the solution.

MR. QUINN: All right. With that, we'll call it a day. Thank you for starting off your week here at CSIS. Please take a look at your inboxes later in the day. We'll have the transcript out probably by this afternoon. If for some reason you're not on our mailing list, come find me and I'll make sure you're put on. Once again, thanks for joining us.

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