Distinguished delegates, on behalf of Brookings welcome to the twelfth annual U.S.-Islamic World Forum

We are very fortunate this year to be joined by H.E. Shaykh Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al Thani, Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior of the State of Qatar, and H.E. Dr. Khalid bin Mohammad al-Attiyah, Foreign Minister of the State of Qatar. Without the government of Qatar and in particular H.H. the Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the Forum would not be possible. We are grateful to them for partnering with Brookings on this annual dialogue between the United States and Muslim communities around the world. It is truly a unique gathering of policymakers, academics, religious leaders, business people, and activists anxious to address problems of mutual concern. This is only one part of our partnership which also includes Brookings Doha and the Islamic World project at Brookings, both known for their independence, intellectual rigor and unconventional perspectives on Middle Eastern and Muslim affairs.

Every year, we invite heads of state to address the Forum. This year, President Ghani of Afghanistan had planned to attend but had to cancel at the last minute due to the terror attacks in Kabul. Our thoughts and prayers go out to the Afghan people. He has kindly sent a video message, which you will see shortly. We are pleased that H.E. Mohsen Marzouk, the Tunisian Minister-Advisor in Charge of Political Affairs, is here with us this morning to deliver a message on behalf of the President of Tunisia.

I also want to welcome Dana Smith, Ambassador of the United States in Qatar. And welcome to the six members of parliament here with us from Iraq, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Somalia. We are also pleased our friends from the United Nations could join us: Bernardino León, the head of the U.N. Support Mission in Libya, and Ambassador Ufuk Gokcen, Permanent Observer of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Welcome also to Shaarik Zafar, the U.S. Department of State’s Special Representative to Muslim Communities.

This year, two threats have animated political debate in the United States and the Middle East: the resilience of the so-called Islamic State or Daesh and the specter of a nuclear-armed Iran. Both have tested the American commitment to security in the region and prompted military intervention by Arab states. Both have also raised deeper questions about what sort of political and social order the people of the region want to live in. To share the U.S. position on these developments, we are fortunate this year to be joined by Colin Kahl, National Security Advisor to U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, and Gen. John Allen, the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL . Dr. Kahl will discuss the U.S. government’s negotiations with Iran, and Gen. Allen will assess the war with Daesh fresh from his meeting in Paris with the coalition.

At Brookings, we see these two developments as part of a broader challenge to the liberal international order that is changing our assumptions about geopolitics. For a quarter century, the world has experienced growing global interdependence and relative peace and prosperity, brought about largely through the leadership of the United States and in the absence of genuine geopolitical competition. Now, though, several fundamental challenges to that order have emerged: in Europe, for example, Russia seeks to undo the post-Cold War settlement through aggression, and in Asia, the rise of an assertive China is generating friction.

This intensification of geopolitics has been accompanied by a return to competition between democracies and autocracies. It also comes amid relative weakness in the Western alliance, characterized by political gridlock in Washington, double or even triple-dip recession in Europe, and continuing stagnation in Japan. In Asia and Europe, crises have both strengthened and strained alliances; in the Middle East, those alliances are badly frayed. All told, we appear to be at one of history's pivotal junctures, and again, the response of the United States and its allies will be critical.
The task is urgent and complicated: how do we reinvent the liberal international order in the face of so many centrifugal forces so that it can provide greater stability, peace, prosperity, and freedom? And how do we do it in ways that encourage cooperation from other world powers, reduce friction generated by competition with them, and, if necessary, contain or constrain their ability to undermine the order.

At the Forum this year, we have come together to deliberate on how to bring order from the chaos and mitigate the shocks of the geopolitical earthquakes shaking the world. We will discuss the future of the United States in the Middle East, the implications of the rise of Iran and Daesh, the prospects for peace and pluralism in conflict-torn countries, and the advancement of women’s rights as a way to bring about stability and political reform.

We don’t anticipate solving all the world’s problems over the next three days but the analyses and papers that have come out of the Forum over the past decade have contributed to addressing a few. We are also proud of the new initiatives that have been launched at the Forum. The Timbuktu Renaissance launched last year has raised the profile of the plight of northern Mali and galvanized support for the return of its cultural heritage. I’m sure the initiative this year to counter violent extremist recruitment in the United States will be a similar success.

The theme this year is changing assumptions, which requires being open to new ideas and revisiting old ones that no longer work. I look forward to hearing all your good ideas in the days ahead.

With that, please join me in welcoming the prime minister of Qatar, H.E. Shaykh Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al Thani.