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QI Panel:

Should Washington Revive Nuclear Diplomacy with Pezeshkian's Iran?

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1:30-2:30 PM ET

Trita Parsi 0:38

Good afternoon and welcome to the Quincy Institute panel discussion titled, Should Washington revive nuclear diplomacy with Pezeshkian's Iran? My name is Trita Parsi, I'm the Executive Vice President of the Quincy Institute, a think tank in Washington that promotes ideas that move US foreign policy away from endless war and toward rigorous diplomacy. We favor and national security strategy that is centered on diplomacy and military restraint. Nuclear diplomacy between the United States and Iran has effectively been put on pause since October 7. This is in spite of the fact that the Iranian nuclear program has continued to advance and the IAEA has complained about having increasing lack of insight into what is happening in that program. But does Massoud position surprise election victory provide an opportunity to revive nuclear diplomacy between the United States and Iran, his foreign policy team is likely going to be some of the same people that negotiated the nuclear deal in the first place. Biden officials have said that they will use the last month of their term to push for a ceasefire in Gaza. Should they also lay the groundwork for renewed nuclear talks with Iran? And is the nuclear issue the natural starting point for a dialogue between the US and Iran on their possession? Or is it better to use that to prevent the further escalation of violence into an Israeli Hezbollah war that unfortunately seems to be increasingly likely?

To address these and many more questions, we are bringing back the gang for those of you who have followed our work for some time, and I know that we have on numerous occasions brought together Suzanne DiMaggio, Aaron David Miller and Professor Vali Nasr precisely because of their expertise and excellent reading into the tea leaves in Washington and then in Tehran. So without any further ado, let me first tell all of you who are watching this on zoom that we will take your questions if you ask them through the q&a function. And if you're watching this on Twitter, or on Facebook, we will try to get your questions as well if you put it in the comment sections. So let me introduce our excellent speakers. Aaron, David Miller has dealt with US foreign policy in the Middle East for longer than anyone should be allowed to. In my view, he has served as an adviser to six secretaries of states, both Republican and Democrat, and has written five books on the region. He is currently a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment. Suzanne DiMaggio is also a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment, where she focuses on US foreign policy toward the Middle East and Asia. She is one of the foremost experts and practitioners of diplomacy with countries that have limited or no official relations with the United States, especially Iran and North Korea. And she is uniquely positioned to speak on the behind the scenes diplomacy between the United States and Iran in particular, she's also a co founder and former board member of the Quincy Institute. And last but not least, we have Professor Vali Nasr from Johns Hopkins SAIS who has served both as senior adviser to US Representative for

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Afghanistan and Pakistan, Ambassador Richard Holbrook, as well as Dean of Science. He's one of the foremost experts on Iranian policy foreign policy in the United States. So let me start off with you,

Suzanne, you have played a crucial role when it comes to track two or track one and a half between the United States and Iran in the past, including during transition periods in Washington. If there is a desire for renewed diplomacy down the road, in the Biden administration, how do you think they should play the period from now until January? And what are the do's and don'ts and the lessons learned that you have gathered over the course of the years?

Suzanne DiMaggio 4:42

Thanks so much Trita. And thanks to Quincy, for organizing this webinar. It's good to be back with the gang to discuss this, which seems like a critical moment. So first, let me just look when I think about the suggestions for the Biden administration over the next several months. The most urgently, of course, is to secure a Gaza ceasefire agreement. As we saw during the brief humanitarian pause in Gaza in late 2023, every Iranian proxy and aligned group stood down during this period. In addition to ending the bloodshed and massive suffering a ceasefire would calm the situation in the region more broadly. And of course, it would also create a more hospitable atmosphere for any diplomatic initiatives between the United States and Iran. So my understanding of the administration's approach to around at present is to try to keep a lid on escalating tensions over the coming months through the elections. And then, if they won, this is why Biden was still running attempt to forge a path to negotiations, particularly nuclear diplomacy. I believe the administration will continue with this approach in the coming months. But the big question now is now that Biden has dropped out of the race, would an incoming Harris administration follow through with this plan? We don't know for sure. I'm fairly persuaded that there will be an element of continuity. But of course, there are some wildcards, which we can discuss later if there's interest.

So for now, through US elections, I see several key around specific priorities for the United States. One is preventing a war between Israel and Hezbollah, which could easily expand into a direct US military us around military conflict. diplomatic efforts seeking to defuse this escalating border fire into Lebanon, or being led by us envoy, Amos Hochstein, who has been traveling back and forth to the region and to Europe over the past weeks. A second priority is ensuring that around aligned groups do not attack us troops in Iraq and Syria. There have been no such attacks over the past several months, indicating that some elements of the de escalation understanding that was negotiated in Oman, that that's holding perhaps by a thread, but continuing for now. A third priority is avoiding a nuclear crisis. And the Biden administration continues to believe that diplomacy still is the best path forward to address Iran's expanding nuclear activities. And my understanding is that there are quiet efforts behind the scenes to maintain space to restart nuclear diplomacy. Following the election, diplomatic strategic options are being seriously considered and weighed. So how might diplomacy unfold over the next several months? One way would be to pursue a return to the Oman 2020 agreement and

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solidify the escalation efforts. Just by way of background as a reminder, this agreement was facilitated by Oman, it was indirect us around talks. Some progress was made towards stabilizing relations. Notably, no American troops were targeted or attacked in Syria and Iraq for extended periods on the nuclear front around slow to tie level enrichment and also down blended some of its stockpile. And then in September 2023, a long awaited prisoner exchange finally occurred. So the expected next steps included efforts to try to set a foundation for talks aimed at restoring constraints and monitoring of Iran's nuclear activities. And then, of course, the Hamas attacks interrupted this process. So I think the timing of the election of Mr. Pezeshkian as Iran's new president offers a better outlook than what was anticipated only a couple of months ago, when the Iranian presidential election was set for mid 2023. And at that time, it was expected that Raisi would be elected. During his campaign, Pezeshkian indicated an intention to get out to get around out of its isolation. He specifically mentioned reentering talks on the nuclear standoff. Interestingly, Iran's current chief nuclear negotiator and now acting Foreign Minister Ali McGarry, Connie in New York City last week made similar statements. So to be sure, this is not going to be an overhaul of Iranian foreign policy that's not in the cards. In fact, most of what we have heard from this Pezeshkian aligns with common A's national security and foreign policy Outlook. So he'll likely continue Raisi's priorities of deepening relations with China and Russia, working towards normalization with Arab neighbors country Anyone support Iran's Axis of Resistance and so forth. But even so I think his election presents an unexpected opportunity for the Biden team. And then perhaps warning coming Harris administration. So this is now a chance to test a potential opening to pursue a new nuclear understanding. With an Iranian team that you mentioned Trudeau they have experience working with former foreign minister under ohanaeze. The Reef Terrazza reef is a key adviser to the new president. Abbas around she's name has been floated as a potential candidate for foreign minister. So I'm not suggesting it will be easy, it won't be.

But keep in mind, this is the team that not only successfully negotiated the JCPOA. But they also implemented the deal. And as the IAEA confirmed time and time again around met its commitments while this team was in office until the Trump administration withdrew from the agreement. So between now and the election, what I hope will happen is there'll be a continuation of the Oman meetings. There have been two such meetings since October 7, a third was actually scheduled, but was postponed due to the sudden deaths of President racing and Foreign Minister in a helicopter crash. So those meetings should be started as soon as possible. Also, the New York channel has provided opportunities for direct discussions, which is very important. So both of these tracks should continue with the aim of setting the table for an incoming Harris administration. Now, I haven't mentioned the T word. But perhaps that's a topic for another webinar. So just to conclude, I see potential opportunities to try to advance some key US interests over these next months. But if there are serious efforts to forge paths to us around diplomacy, it will be a difficult road, a lot can go wrong, numerous obstacles, which I'm sure we'll get to during this next hour.

Trita Parsi 12:06

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Very, very helpful. Thank you so much, Suzanne, let's focus on some of those obstacles. Vali, from your standpoint in how do you see Iran read of both the situation and Washington? It is, under all circumstances, a tricky period to engage even in quiet diplomacy, but perhaps particularly tricky, given just the recent developments, with Biden stepping aside from the ticket, and Harris taking over xi being somewhat of an untested card unknown quantity for the Iranians, as well, as you know, the degree to which position really has much leash and maneuverability on this issue. Some of the previous concerns of the Iranians I presume, and you correct me if I'm wrong, are still standing, which is, you know, how reliable is an agreement with the United States? If presidents don't respect the previous presidents commitments and signature Valley? How do you think the Iranians are reading situation?

Vali Nasr 13:09

I mean, sort of building on excellent points that that Suzanne raised, and also there is a track record, of course, in relations between Iran and the Biden administration, not only do Amman talks, but the Vienna talks, I have to say that, despite what we hope that Iran is basically during the campaign, when a lot of the talk about the nuclear issue was unfolded, we're operating on the assumption that Trump will be president. And I will stay still, you know, if you read the Iranian media, if you listen to, you know, what the talking heads, the policy people in Iran are thinking, is that yes, Harris's you know, imminent assumption of the candidate of presidential Democratic presidential candidacy is a bit of a monkey wrench in their thinking. But still, the assumption is that it's not a given they were equipment, Biden and his team, but are also preparing going forward dealing with with Trump, in fact, positions chief of his campaign very forcefully said that, you know, Trump's a businessman, we're businessman, we're ready to cut a deal. I mean, that was, as you mentioned, Biden at all. So I think it's important to keep this conversation also in the sense of if there is a new administration, how should the United States actually carry the torch forward? From the Biden administration? Hopefully, they will be open to you know, moving forward. I think that Iran, and I also want to say at the outset, this has become an American practice that when you have a reformist become president in Iran, all of a sudden a Iranian president is completely irrelevant. And all of a sudden, unless the Iranians totally cave in, voluntarily give up their nuclear program, all of a sudden become Liberal Democrats. or version of Saudi Arabia, for instance, or UAE, then nothing really matters.

I mean, the only Iranian presidency I remember has mattered to the west is when Ahmadinejad became president, then nobody really thought that there was any other power in Iran. Other than and that's a problem that because I think it complicates the way we think about things. Iranian presidents do matter. It was Rohani, who made who took responsibility to go to Geneva to negotiate. He took responsibility for forcing the issue of signing the deal, which ultimately the Supreme Leader accepted. He took responsibility for Iran not leaving the deal. When Trump did under another Iranian president, Iran might have left the deal. And in Vienna, it was open secret among all the people I've seen that the Iranian president and his representative Bobby Kennedy in Vienna had authority to sign at the end. And probably had Rohani been President and had Biden not made the catastrophic mistake of postponing negotiations with Iran so far after he came became President, that probably Rouhani would have signed a deal in Vienna,

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and would have taken the responsibility back. So this idea that that, you know, nothing makes it there's no difference between Iranian presidents is actually an issue that we have to deal with. But it's not a given so so potentially on a started, essentially, not only by making clear that, that he believes that stabilizing Iran society, stabilizing Iran's economy, things that also the Supreme Leader IRGC, everybody wants as they're going into succession demands lifting of sanctions and lifting of sanctions means talking to the United States. So talking to the United States is argued is not a foreign policy want. It's not a foreign policy issue, is now fundamental to stability of Iran as a country. And this argument was socialized on public television in Iran during presidential debates very, very forcefully. And it became almost ubiquitously accepted by every faction other than the hardliners in Iran. And even the Supreme Leader a few days ago said publicly that I asked the Iranian parliament to cooperate with the incoming president in resolving sanction pressure, not saying you should lift it. But he basically endorsed the effort of the new Iranian President, at least that he would like to find a way to lift sanctions.

Now, the obstacle and in the eyes of the Iranians is not their own system. Is the United States. The is the United States willing to engage in a serious way? The way it did in Vienna? Right? Yes, I think the online channels that Suzanne mentioned, are extremely important in maintaining your momentum. But let's not forget, there was one point at which it was the United States that actually canceled and Oman meeting because of October 7, it was the United States that refroze the \$6 billion. That was was it made a deal with Iran in for a prisoner exchange, as much as we don't like that idea. But it was a deal. And it was the United States who backtracked on it. So what what is the Iranians is, is that Biden administration actually committed or can basically engage Iran? Will a Harris administration be committed to engage Iran in a serious way? And then would the Trump administration be be willing to engage Iran in an important way? So to them that, yes, there might be obstacles to a deal and selling a deal to Iranian parliament, conservatives back home to the Supreme Leader, but we're not at a deal yet. Question is, is there a serious path to to diplomat or to nuclear diplomacy at this point in time? And the question is, is that the US is obviously not in a place to do this, you have a lame duck president now. America's internally focused, and, and at the same time, as Suzanne mentioned, you have many other things going around in the region. And I think the Iranian view is that the US cannot compartmentalize the region, it cannot think that it can have a Gaza deal, or it can avert a war with between Hezbollah and Israel, and sort of park the Iran issue to the side that it has to have the broad breadth of vision to be willing to engage on all three fronts. All three fronts involves Iran. And ultimately, the nuclear path is a way of helping the Gaza path and helping the Hezbollah path because it actually gives the new administration in Iran, a sense that there is a roadmap with the US and I have to say that the European and American reactions to to positions election as actually have sent the opposite signals Iran, that, that they're dismissive that they don't see any relevance in engaging Iran at this point in time. And that position can very soon have to explain to the Iranian public and to the Iranian parliament and to Iranian hardliners, why was he so enthusiastic about talking to the United States, if there is not a sense that there's a there is a there's a there there. And if we watched the Iranian elections, it's very important to know that there is a public political public in Iran. These were not like Arab elections in which sort of they were rubber stamped, there was intense campaigning, the outcome was some places unpredictable, if previous candidate of the Supreme Leader and IRGC didn't make

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it to the second round. And so positionally on one to 50% plus participation rate and one on the back of that, that he presents a window, solving Iran's problems. And he has to show that actually the assumption that there's a diplomatic track, and that the way he presented it actually has validity, otherwise, his task of selling this in Iran will become more difficult.

And I would close with this, that, you know, when Biden was running, the Democrats made all kinds of noise that they were going to go back to the nuclear deal. In a presidential in a in a debate, all of them raise their hand with the exception of one saying they were going to go back into it. And that was very, very important to the Rouhani administration and to the reef and others in maintaining the momentum, Biden came in. And I would say very bluntly, Biden reenact it decided maximum pressure was just fine and dandy, and the United States should stick with it, and kick the can down the road. And that's and that did cost the advocates of nuclear diplomacy with the United States, even after the United States had left the deal very dearly. And it did contribute to the election of race in Iran. And so the US has to be very careful not to make the same mistake again.

Trita Parsi 22:09

Thank you so much Vali, so, Aaron, on to you what Vali is saying on the one hand, this is now an internal economic issue for the Iranians is not just foreign policy, which means just talking about the escalation in the region as necessary as that is, is not enough, because de escalation in the region is not going to get the type of sanctions relief, the degree of sanctions relief that the Iranians are looking for. So it seems then that they're looking for quite a bit more. I know, you're skeptical about anything really being able to be done in the next couple of months, given all of the political factors here in Washington. But some things may be necessary to be done, given how the region is already going in an escalatory direction. So what would your advice be to divide administration given everything that Suzanne and valley said on the one hand, there is an opportunity missing that opportunity can create an even worse situation for a potential future? Harris administration perhaps, what are your thoughts?

Aaron David Miller 23:14

Thanks. Thanks for having me today. It's great to be here with Valley and Suzanne. Look, I'm a determinist. When it comes to these matters, governance is about choosing. And the strategic imperative for this administration, has nothing to do with foreign policy. It is because the threat to the Republic, this republic does not come from President Xi President Putin, what happens to the Iranian nuclear deal one way or the other, even what happens in Gaza. The threat to the Republic comes from the lack of success. And having worked for Republicans and Democrats and voted for both of them, I'm going to make this clear: The strategic threat to this administration and to the republic demands and compels the election of Kamala Harris. Anyone who disputes that anyone who believes that any foreign policy issue should be allowed to intrude, detract, expose both the president, current president and the putative nominees and she is tethered to him for the next four months. I would argue he's not thinking clearly about what the priority of the Biden administration really is.

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Everything Suzanne has said I think is absolutely elemental and correct. There may be all kinds of Things that can be done quietly and discreetly, in order to avoid escalation, and perhaps further cement, the Oman channel and the understandings anything more than that, in my judgment, risks, this risks bringing to the surface the toxicity with which the Iranian issue is tethered in Washington. It is one of the few foreign policy issues on which Democrats and Republicans can actually agree. And Iranians image, Pezeshkian notwithstanding, over the last several years, has simply further ensconced the notion of a pariah outlier regime that, frankly, is not interested in any sort of transformation or change. And I think here, it's an important point to acknowledge that we have a strategic problem with Iran on so many levels, but we do not have a strategic solution. And because we do not have a strategic solution, which is to alter the behavior and the character of the current regime. We are left with transactional approaches, everything we do with Iran is a transaction. Transformation, in my judgment with this regime is almost impossible. It's an ideological regime, which has deployed pragmatism and practicality in a way that has allowed Iran to punch way above its weight in terms of its own regional influence, it's now expanded its relationship with Russia, even before this sort of semi Alliance on the issue of drones in the war in Ukraine.

So I think it's, it would be very hard to do much more than the kinds of things that the Biden administration has been doing in an effort to, to deescalate the situation. And I don't I only add, introduce, you know, this as well as I do. The entire strategic conception that the Biden administration has in the Middle East is not does not make Iran, the political center of gravity. This administration has tethered itself to a regional peace initiative, which essentially, even though its risk averse, in many dimensions of the region, it is focused on the Gulf and and Saudi in particular, as the sort of I don't know, you haven't you scrapped linchpin of a regional initiative. And even to the point where the administration is actually considering constructing an enrichment facility, although they blackbox it to make sure that the Saudis would not have access to it. Perhaps even with the remote capacity dismantling if the Saudis sought to nationalize it, to allow the Saudis to control their own fuel cycle. The South Koreans have wanted to do that. We said no. So this administration, and I suspect, if Kamala Harris becomes president, I think, more likely they're going to continue first to get a ceasefire in Gaza, because that's the policy and political problem for the administration. That is what the President's priority is going to be between now and November to stop the war. Build on the possibility of further arrangements between Israel and and Lebanon. And based on the notion that the Iranians and again, I'm not to say that I'm not an expert on Iran is the understatement of the century. I don't play one on in zoom or on television. But common sense would suggest to me, despite the economic pressures under which Islamic Republic is under that their approach is going to be well, we've seen this movie before. And we're going to wait around to see exactly who or what is going to emerge in Washington. So, I mean, I just I think it's It's unrealistic to believe that we could do anything more than what Suzanne has outlined in the course of the next four months. And I, I'm highly skeptical. Given the focus on Saudi and the Gulf, because of Abraham Accords, because of Arab hydrocarbons, because of stability, the Gulf survived the Arab Spring, as five other Arab states, were inactive phases of dysfunction. All of these things made the Gulf

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and because of Iran, all this has made the Gulf, the political center of gravity for the Biden administration, and I suspect if there is a Harris administration, that that's likely to continue.

Trita Parsi 30:49

Very interesting, Aaron, and I think you're quite right, you are pointing out clearly, the administration never prioritized Iran, it's always been Saudi or some other entity that has been at the center of their focus when it comes to the Middle East policy. And that actually, I think, has done something that may contradict one of the things you said you mentioned earlier on that the politics of Iran in Washington is horrible. And whether you're Republican or Democrat, it's it's it's closed, and it doesn't allow the president much maneuverability. The exception to that, of course, is that what Valley mentioned earlier on, when Biden was coming in the politics on the Democratic side was actually squarely in favor of engagement and diplomacy and to a very large extent that was squandered. And now we're back into a situation in which the politics is very negative on both sides. You mentioned the the Saudi deal, which is interesting that they will be pushing for that particularly mindful, but you said earlier on about the importance of saving the democracy and the Republic right now. What do you think the impact would be if such a deal is clinched? In the next couple of months, on any prospects for any future president, whether it's Harris or its Trump, in a couple of months, to be able to take advantage of the opportunity that may exist with Pezeshkian, I'll start with you Aaron, but, Suzanne, and if you want to chime in on that question, as well, please come in, I think.

Aaron David Miller 32:16

The ambitious notion of an Israeli Saudi normalization agreement, presage by a set of bilateral assurances that the US would provide including a mutual defense agreement. And let's be clear for you, to your viewers understand clearly, we have not signed a mutual defense pact with any nation since the revision of the 1960 US-Japan treaty they wanted an MDA was Saudi, they want to somehow create a a symbolic us Saudi nuclear civil nuclear nuclear program, which would allow somehow the Saudis to enrich uranium on Saudi soil. And they're prepared to essentially provide highest weapons grade, latest US technology to Saudi Arabia with respect to their defense requirements. The MDA would be ratified by the Senate, it would require for it would acquire the force of law, it would require 67 seats, the only way that package can get through the Senate between now and November is if you had a robust Israeli Saudi normalization process. And even then, if there wasn't, something's significant for the Palestinians, you'd find any number of Democrats concerned over MBs? Is serial human rights abuse, opposing it.

So I think the I think it's very unlikely between now and November, than anything like the ambitious undertaking that the administration can see don't before October 7, is going to be possible they could pick it up. Today, and just normal additional point. It may seem paradoxical, and Farfetch. But I would not dismiss the possibility that should trump become president, given his interest, his leverage. And should Netanyahu remain Prime Minister, that Trump would pursue the same Israeli Saudi deal but perhaps with a with a greater sense of pressure on Israel

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to cough up some set of Some initiative on the Palestinian issue that would allow you to get more out of Benjamin Netanyahu in Biden is everybody again, between now and November, I would you saw the letter that Trump posted the letter of congratulations from Mahmoud Abbas. And Trump's comment together, we're going to make these peace. Can you imagine what Benjamin Netanyahu must have how he must have reacted when he saw that Trump is unpredictable, and since he does not conceive of anything remotely resembling the national interest, it is all tethered to his personal politics and his personal needs and requirements. I wouldn't put it past him. Iran is not going to be his favorite, go-to country, should he become President?

Trita Parsi 35:53

Well, Trump seems to be seeking a deal. Could be with anyone as long as he can be that dealmaker. You mentioned the Saudi deal. One thing that should be said though, is that the deals Trump struck in the Abraham accord, none of them included any security pacts, none of them included any nuclear fuel cycle concession from the US. So the Biden ministration is offering way more for this deal than the Trump administration did when it struck similar deals with UAE, Morocco, Sudan, and Bahrain. But Suzanne and valley, let's say forget about this period, up until November, is it compatible to be able to go forward with that type of a deal, mindful of the fact that at least at its original conception, it was an idea about building a Sunni Arab Israeli pact against Iran, which would divide the region further, is it compatible to have that type of deal while at the same time be able to get some form of a nuclear agreement with the Iranians, particularly mindful of the fact that according to what's in the press, and what Aaron said, what Biden is offering is actually the nuclear fuel cycle to the Saudis, whereas the US did so much to prevent the Iranians from even having any of that enrichment. Are these two things compatible to happen at the same time or coexist?

Suzanne DiMaggio 37:18

I think Aaron's assessment is correct. I agree with what he said, I'm highly skeptical that this will come through in the next coming months or even beyond Much will depend on what happens in the elections with where the Senate lands and where the house lands. But I do think, even if something does come through, it may provide some impetus. I mean, it's interesting, if you go back a little and time and read some of the writings on what's now the Biden team's Middle East team on Iran and Saudi, what they were aggregating for, including Jake Sullivan, was to strike some sort of strategic balance in the region, where the administration pursued relations in deals with both Saudi and Iran, including getting back into the nuclear deal, you know, on day one, or maybe day 10 Or day 20. Of course, that didn't happen. So perhaps some sort of deal along the lines of what you're talking about would open up a glide path to coming back to that idea of strategic balance. I'm not so sure it might be too far stretch.

But I do want to say, this brings me back to a thought about the incoming Harris administration, no matter what happens with the Saudi deal. I think a key lesson that they should learn from the Biden administration's approach, if indeed she does come into office is to pursue engagement

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toward an agreement that revives constraints on Iran's nuclear activities early as Vali said, you know, the Biden team had the opportunity to reconstitute the JCPOA during the first couple of months following President Biden's inauguration. They didn't do it. I mean, it was teed up and instead they delayed. I would say they did. The delay. Was it clear miscalculation. It was a miscalculation, then and looking back today, it's an even bigger one. And the history of us around relations over the past four and a half decades, is littered with missed opportunities, as you know, try to as we have learned the hard way. It's difficult to recover missed opportunities to gain traction on diplomacy when it comes to around. So I would say that is a key lesson lesson act faster, especially with the team that you've already worked with. You've already reached agreement with and you've already I saw could deliver on a deal. You know, after the JCPOA. Another lesson, I think would be to build on anything that's reached even the knee constituting the Oman understanding, you know, after the JCPOA fatigue set in on the part of the Obama administration, it was an origin was set of negotiations, and I thought, I think everyone was tired. And they didn't really seek to build on what was accomplished, beyond nuclear. So that would be another lesson, I think that we have to learn.

It's a long way to get to what I'm talking about. But I think it's important to think through, if we're going to go down this road, how can we do it better? And on that point of view, just one thing for the ratings? I think a key lesson they've learned is on sanctions, really, I think they are probably regretting that in the JCPOA. They didn't insist on a similar mechanism to monitor sanctions relief, the way we had a mechanism to monitor their commitments to the what they agreed to on their nuclear activities. So I think if negotiations got underway, again, this would be a key part of it. What kind of guarantees would the Iranians be looking for, and I think some sort of mechanism to ensure that sanctions relief is being followed. I don't know how you would enforce that maybe put in but at least monitored and being more transparent.

Trita Parsi 41:37

Thanks so much Suzanne. You mentioned, you know, some of the challenges that Harris administration would face coming in and, and plenty of issues to focus on and Iran would probably not be a top issue within the first year. But Jonathan Tyrone from Bloomberg, ask a question that is very important that that points to the fact that you know, some of these schedules, some of these choices are not necessarily in the hands of the President, the snapback, sanctions, UN Security Council to 231, the snapback in that expires in October 2025. Does this not force the next administration, whether it's Trump or Harris to have to do something on the nuclear front beyond just the escalation in the region? Because otherwise, you may have this resolution expire. This is obviously what the Iranians are waiting for. And it's significant point of leverage, arguably will be lost unless there is something that is done on this front Valley. How do you see it?

Vali Nasr 42:49

I mean, I agree. There's some some issues that that are out there that unless the you get ahead of it in an effective way averted, you may end up in a bigger crisis and look, United States and

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Iran when they met in Oman. I mean, part of that agreement was to was that in exchange for things that the United States wanted from Iran, that the US would enforce a snapback sanctions over the exploration of embargo, un mandated embargoes on Iran's on Iran's sale of arms and and which was part of the JCPOA deal. And the United States actually abided by it's part of the Oman deal, even. And that vote was after about two weeks after October 7. So the US has a track record of actually avoiding one of these sort of landmines. The one in in coming up in 2025 is a big one. And in fact, yes, it does force the issue for the for the Biden administration. I think everything that Aaron said is absolutely true. I mean, one of the issues is that yes, the United States right now is in a place where its mind is on his domestic issues. It's in a place that it hasn't been before, even with the passing of the torch. And if you're sitting in Tehran, you're sitting in Riyadh, actually being able to capture us attention and sustain momentum or push policy in a particular direction is extremely hard. But you But I do think there are there are pieces of this that fit together that ultimately, once the election is done and the Harris administration, the Trump administration has had time to think about it, even if they want to deep prioritize the Middle East and focus on Russia and China. There are these things that they need to do. I mean, Aaron is absolutely right, that the priority will be this deal with Saudi Arabia, and he laid out very well how Washington thinks and approaches this. But you have to also look at the other side of the picture. I mean, partly in the region is very clear that this deal is not so much about Iran anymore. It's a lot about China. And if the if the United States wants to sort of maintain their hold on Saudi Arabia's technology, investment, etc, and avoided, basically moving closer to China in critical ways, then it has to sign this deal. And yes, it cannot pass through Senate unless there is the Israel normalization component. Secondly, Iran and Saudi Arabia have already carried out the rapprochement they're entering the second year, neither sides as is showing any appetite for for going back to where they were before normalization. neither side wants the Persian Gulf region to be a hot zone of war. They want to maintain the stability that they have. The Saudis are enjoying a peace with the Hutus, the Houthis are shooting in every direction, except that the direction of reality. And I think those imperatives suggest that the Saudis don't want any normalization or a strategic partnership, to basically reignite all of their problems with with with the, with the United States. And yes, the United States going to make a commitment to Saudi Arabia's events, but the United States doesn't have a really reassuring record with the salaries. I read. Last time when the Iranians attacked oil facilities in Saudi Arabia, President Trump was nowhere to be seen was missing in action. And ultimately, the Saudis would like everything that comes with a strategic pack, except I don't think they would like to trust America's resolve to actually defend them.

Secondly, in all of our conversations about normalizations, we factor out that there's actually real street politics in the Iraq War, there is extremely angry about what's happened since October 7, the idea that Saudi Arabia could actually enter into normalization with Israel, without Israel giving a lot more than what is being said that it should get, I mean, the Saudi foreign minister has said very clearly a Palestinian state, or an irrevocable ironclad path to a Palestinian state, along the borders of 1967. with Jerusalem as its capital, even though that looks sounds very unrealizable. But unlike the Abraham Accords, were UAE did not put similar kind of, you know, red line on the table, the Saudis are and the reason they're doing it is because they know they are upstreet, they don't want to deal that actually will delegitimize the monarchy, or weaken its

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hands in the Arab world or increase the cost of governance, even with their own population, majority of Saudis will not support a deal that would that would basically sell out the the Palestinians completely, somehow, Washington doesn't think there is politics in the Arab world, whereas the Arab dictators, even though they're in control, are much more right now skittish about this, and a bad deal, a deal that will give Saudis, Israelis everything they want, and, you know, basically, not give the Palestinians what the region is expecting from a deal would basically give the region over to Iran, and ultimately, would make the region more unstable, it would raise the cost of the United States of having to actually enforce the normalization or protect the Saudi Arabia or protect other Arab states in the region. And, and in fact, that all of that suggests to you that you need to engage Iran at the same time, as you are engaging Saudi Arabia and Israel on normalization.

For the United States not have to think about a war with Iran in the region means that you cannot have deals for the region or visions of the future in the region, which explicitly exclude Iran, and then hands over the Arab Street to the Iranians in the same process that will be fully strategy on in the United States. And then finally, we can wax poetically about everything about the nuclear issue. Iran is on the verge of going nuclear and an Israeli attack and American security deal with it with Israel, that with Saudi Arabia and Israel, that that would be threatening to Iran could push them over the line. Now, what are the choices here for the United States? You either accept a nuclear Iran and say, you know, that ship it, it's like Pakistan, in India, we accept that their nuclear, you go to war with Iran, or you have to engage them diplomatically to avert that outcome. And so the, I think, yes, the United States can say, I have no time for anything in the Middle East right now, which makes perfect sense. But you can't say we I only have time for forging a deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel, but I don't have time for everything else. Because then you're setting up your yourself for having to go to the region and actually put boots on the ground one way or the other, to defend Saudi Arabia to a Berta nuclear Iran, which means that then Iran will become your topic number one. And so So I think, you know, yes, every restriction, every impediment is accepted at face value. But end of the day, we are at a very critical place where they're wrong. You either you either, you know, you find ways diplomatically to reduce tensions, or we're going down a very, very dangerous path with Iran, which I don't think looks at all, you know, promising in the next few years if the current trends continue.

Trita Parsi 50:37

Yes, I want to, I want to give you the word, but I'm going to just put one finer point on it, Aaron, which is take everything Vali said here, which is that you know, whether you like it or not, this is going to come up on top of the agenda one way or another, particularly if there is a Saudi Israel deal. Now, share with us your view and your read, not just of you know how things have happened in the past, but particularly with an eye on who are the people that are likely going to be in Harris administration. We do know that Phil Gordon is the current national security adviser to Harris. He served in the Obama administration, he left in my view, reading and talking to him rather humbled about the limitations of what the US can do and cannot do and left with a very strong skepticism against regime change wars. Given the personalities that you think will be in a

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Harris administration, how do you think they will handle the exact scenario that valley just painted for us?

Aaron David Miller 51:39

My view, and it's prevailed on Iran, it's prevailed, with rare exception is that Democrats and Republicans, basically, their policy strategies, tactics are very risk averse. I've yet to see with the exception of the JCPOA, a risk a risk readiness on the part of any administration, or any senior American official, Secretary of State National Security Adviser, let alone the president to try to do something truly ambitious and bold. And I was going to pose the question, we should have another discussion on this question. But my whole view is that transformational diplomacy between the US and Iran is not possible. It's just not possible, which is why everything that we do is transaction. We're not going to pursue regime change. We're not looking for a major confrontation, a major regional war with Iran. And between those two parameters, we, we take we maneuver, we look for de escalation, and an expedient way to reduce the price prospects of conflict. Am I wrong to believe that transformation of diplomacy and fundamental change and the creation of what you and I normal humans would describe as normal, peaceful relations between the US and the Islamic Republic are possible. Am I wrong to believe that that is a hugely difficult lift? We can apportion responsibility for why that so many obstacles in that path. But is that an accurate point of departure?

Trita Parsi 53:59

Well, let me throw that to Suzanne. Because I mean, I think you're right, with the exception of the JCPOA. There wasn't any deliberate effort or transformation. The administration itself does paint the Saudi Israel deal as transformative as the Trump administration when they started off with Abraham accords. Suzanne, you also dealt extensively with the Trump administration? How do you see a second Trump administration handling these issues? What did they learn? Are they going to go back straight into maximum pressure again? Or do would they, despite their rhetoric, recognize that perhaps there is a much much better effective path that they can pursue if they're actually interested in some form of a deal? And again, with Trump, as big and shiny and perhaps even transformative seems to be attractive?

Suzanne DiMaggio 54:52

Let me just touch upon this transformational diplomacy point. I mean, it really begs the question had we not really Big John the JCPOA. Had we not reneged on our commitments, where would we be today? Where would that relationship be? I don't have a crystal ball to tell us for sure. But I'm pretty damn confident it would be better than it is today. Transformational? Maybe, maybe not. But I think we have to think about that and the cost of that epic blunder committed by the Trump administration and then Biden administration not getting back in when they could have. Now, I don't pretend to be a Trump whisperer by any stretch of the imagination. But it's interesting, Much will depend on who Trump has around him. If it's some of the names we're hearing, which are quite alarming, then chances are there probably will not be room for any

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serious diplomacy. I work closely with the Trump administration during their outreach to North Korea. And we saw senior members of the team actually tried to sabotage diplomatic efforts. But keep in mind, though, I think we'll all remember that during the Trump administration, he himself made a number of attempts to reach out to the Iranians. There's one pretty famous story where during UNGA, here in New York City, he sent an official to Rouhani Hotel. At night, knock on the door, Trump wants you to come to his hotel right now to have a discussion. Of course, Rouhani didn't do it. It just shows how limited and uninformed they were about how to actually deal with the Iranians. So do I imagine those sorts of efforts would happen again? Yes, I don't think Trump could control himself. That's his impulse. He also dispatched Senator Rand Paul to do something similar with Syria to try to bring him down to Washington, all of a sudden. And of course, as a read, couldn't get authorization to do that.

So with Trump, you know, it's just going to be chaotic. It's just there's not going to be it's not so much that there's not even just strategy. Like there isn't what the Biden administration, there really isn't even a basis word, some tactical, cohesiveness are commonsense. So who knows what really will happen. But I want to get to another point. You know, you talked about the timeframe between now and October 2025. I see that as a critical period. That is when if, after that period, the ability for the remaining parties to the JCPOA will not be able to impose international sanctions that will expire. So that is a critical window for negotiations. And the other thing, I really think it's important, another reason I feel like there's urgency to this, you know, the the Iran issue is not to something we can keep kicking down the road, we can't keep kicking that can down the road. That's what we did with North Korea, and look where we are now. It's estimated they have perhaps 60 Or so nuclear bombs and delivery systems. There is a debate in Iran now over whether to seek an agreement that would reapply constraints on Iranian nuclear activities, clearly Pezeshkian believes that Iran should do that. But there are others that see the advancements that the Iranians have made in their nuclear capabilities, since Trump abandoned the deal that have resulted in Iran becoming a nuclear threshold state, providing Iran with what some Iranians have come to view as an important to deterrent capacity that they don't want to give up. We've heard a steady stream of comments but by various Iranian officials, former officials boasting about Iran's advancing nuclear capabilities. So we it's not only that the capabilities have advance, but also we're seeing some Iranian decision makers or personalities, view those capabilities. That also has appeared to evolve now, is this a deterrent that they will want to give up? I don't think we should have the luxury of time to find out. I think, before Iran works to solidify itself as a permanent threshold state. I'm not saying crossed the line to weaponization, but as a permanent threshold state, we should be more urgent and pursuing the kind of diplomacy to prevent that.

Trita Parsi 59:56

Thank you so much, Suzanne and that will have to be our parting words. Very wise words and recommendations from you. Let me Thank you Suzanne Valley and Aaron for a great conversation. As always, it's been a pleasure to have all of you back here with us. And before we leave, let me just remind everyone who is watching that if you haven't signed up for the Quincy mailing lists, please go to www.quincyinst.org, sign up for our mailing list so that you get

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invitations to all of our webinars as well as get emails with all of the research and products that we are producing here. So without thank you so much and hope to see you all soon again. Thank you. Thank you so much, everyone. Thank you.