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QI Panel:

War in Iran: Regional Shockwaves and the Search for an Exit

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1:00 - 2:00 PM ET

Trita Parsi 0:22

Hey, welcome to the Quincy webinar titled War in Iran: Regional Shock Waves and the Search for an Exit. 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 a US national security strategy that is centered on diplomacy and military restraint. Trump's decision to initiate war against Iran has already reshaped the Middle East's strategic landscape. Trump thought that this war would be over with within 100 hours, so he never took into account the implications of a prolonged war for regional states.

But we are now one month into it. So how is this war reverberating across the region, and is there a viable path to de escalation? How are GCC states navigating the crisis, as they are bombed by Iran and also left unprotected, to a large extent by the United States? What are Tehran's calculations in in this war, particularly mindful of the increasing reduction of Trump's maneuverability and his options, and crucially, what diplomatic or political off ramps might exist with the help of the GCC, perhaps to be able to end this war? These are the questions that we will discuss in this webinar.

We are delighted to have some absolutely stellar panelists with deep expertise on this issue, starting off with Maria Luisa Fantappiè, Professor Bader Al-Saif, and also professor Hassan Ahmadian, who I hope will join any second. Right now, he's trying to fix his link. For those of you who are joining via zoom, please use the Q and A function to ask your questions. I will try to get to those throughout the conversation. For those of you who are watching on Twitter, on YouTube, you can ask your questions through the comment section, and I will try to get to those as well.

So with no further ado, allow me to introduce our speakers. Maria Luisa Fantappiè is the head of the Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa program at the Italian Institute for International Affairs. She has served in various positions at the Center for Human humanitarian dialog, the International Crisis Group, and at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with a specific focus on the Middle East. Professor Bader Al-Saif teaches at Kuwait University and is also an Associate Fellow at Chatham House in London. He has over two decades of experience researching and working in the GCC states, most notably as a Deputy Chief of Staff of a former prime minister of Kuwait. And soon we will have with us Professor Hassan Ahmadian, who is Associate Professor of Middle East and North Africa Studies at the University of Tehran. He has previously he was

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previously a postdoctoral research fellow at Harvard University's Belfer Center. His research and expertise are mainly on Iran's regional foreign policy, civil military relations, and Islamist movements in the Middle East.

So with no further ado, let me get to Bader right away, but you're sitting in Kuwait City right now. Kuwait was a country that was not in favor of this war, and to the best of my knowledge, expressed deep concerns and opposition to it, yet it has been one of the countries that have been hit the hardest. The Iranians have targeted numerous bases inside of Kuwait, as well as hotels, which the Iranians say American US servicemen have been staying at since they left those American bases. Tell me how Kuwait is seeing this situation right now, given the fact that it oftentimes is forgotten in these conversations, with the focus in Washington, primarily being on Qatar, on the UAE and on Saudi Arabia.

Bader Al-Saif 4:24

Trita, a pleasure being with you and with your with our esteemed colleagues, war is never the answer, and this is an illegal us Israeli attack on Iran that unfortunately also developed and produced an illegal Iranian attack on the Gulf states. As you rightly noted, Kuwait suffered one of the heaviest attacks across the board in the Gulf. I mean, the UAE came first, followed by Kuwait, and close third is Saudi and then Qatar. And these have hit places right and left. It was not limited to military sites. It went into. A whole range of sites, unfortunately. And the the issue is that we've been trying to communicate quite clearly before the war and during the war to our Iranian brothers that this is something that we condone. We never approved this war, nor did we participate in it. The whole argument that's coming from Iran is that there are US bases, and those count as US military assets, and this goes against the whole logic of us having sovereignty over these bases, and Kuwait's actual and very clear decision not to allow Americans to use these bases or air spaces, and that has shown across the four weeks, Kuwait has shot down three fighter jets from the US who crossed our airspaces because of that kind of order in place.

So to think that we're implicated in it and to go after the Gulf States doesn't help the case of Iran. If anything, Iran is falling into the Israeli playbook by pushing the Gulf states into pressuring them into going into the US Israeli camp, a position that they have very solidly stood against. So I think it's it behooves our brothers in Iran to stop the aggression. We are not naive. We see the big picture, and we understand that this is an illegal war on Iran, especially when Iran has shown its willingness to negotiate twice, in June 2025, and in Feb of 2026, and unfortunately, those negotiations which were mediated by the Gulf Oman in particular, were upended by wars. War again is never a solution. We mourn the loss of innocent lives. We've seen over 2000 dead in Iran, over 1000 dead in Lebanon, hundreds in Iraq, 10s across the Gulf States and Israel and Palestine. And this is not acceptable. This needs to end. And we can begin by insulating certain spaces from this war so that it doesn't drag further. And hopefully then direct negotiations can come in into place. And on this note, I encourage the Gulf States and Iran to go at it directly, and not to only count on any kind of brokered negotiations between the US and Iran. We need to

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protect our interests, and we are in the same neighborhood. We're not going to go anywhere, so we need to work on it together.

Trita Parsi 7:20

Thank you so much, Bader, and I'm going to get back to you on a couple of points, particularly the role that the GCC, in your view, should play in all of this, mindful of the fact that the center of gravity for diplomacy now appears to have moved to Pakistan rather than to any of the GCC states. But let me do just a quick follow up. Omar and Qatar have apparently struck their own deals with Iran and I think it's been now six or so days in which they have not been attacked. Has Kuwait tried to do its own arrangement with the Iranians in order to avoid those attacks? Has it not worked, or is Kuwait not interested in striking such a deal directly with the Iranians unilaterally?

Bader Al-Saif 7:59

I'm unclear on how accurate this assessment is and whether there has been a clear deal between Oman and Qatar. I mean, Oman, the position has always been clear from the two sides that it was not implicated in whatever drones that came through are supposedly not coming from Iran. That's the Iranian narrative. Whether that's true or not is yet to be seen. And we've heard, by the way, the same thing happened on certain targets that came I mean, earlier yesterday, we had our desalination plant hit in Kuwait, and one person killed as a result, no damages we were able to intercept. Yet, there was also that notion that Iran did not hit. This was a statement that came from the IRGC, and they blamed Israel for it. So for the sake of Iran's own public diplomacy, whatever that's left of it, and neighborly relations with the Gulf, it would serve them best to dissociate and to stop attacking, to not give an exit or not to not give an opportunity for other parties like Israel to play, play, a game, a spoiler, a role in the whole conflict.

Trita Parsi 9:04

Thank you Bader. Maria, you spent a lot of time in the region and very recently in Riyadh as well. One of the conclusions that were drawn before this war started was that unlike 2015 in which several of the GCC states were very skeptical, if not outright opposed, to the JCPOA. This time around, there was a degree of unity within the GCC states against war with Iran, including perhaps even the UAE. But then it has emerged reporting both from Washington Post as well as New York Times, that claims that Saudi Arabia may have been against the war, but its leader, or its de facto leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, actually had been lobbying in favor of it. How do you assess this situation? Is there any truth to that reporting based on your conversations in the region?

Maria Luisa Fantappiè 9:58

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Thank you, Trita, thank you for organizing this Well, I think it's, it's very important to shed lights on the doubtful credibility of those assessments we have no evidence for, for, for the fact that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman would have actually suggested to go on with this word, the feeling that we have actually from Riyadh is totally the opposite, is the feeling of a country that is trapped into being a victim in some way of this Iranian retaliation through a war that has been provoked by the United States, and that has been actually started against the Saudi suggestions and against the Saudi consultations with the United States officials. So the feeling that we have from Riyadh is the opposite, that Saudi officials at a high level actually consulted with American official and worked against this option of the war. And then that suggestion was actually not taken, and the United States embarked into into a conflict of which now the the Saudi Arabia has to in some way navigate through.

And so this on the first point that the second point, I will say that the question for for Saudi for Saudi Arabia now, is that one of in some way, also consolidating what is the way forward, especially when it comes to a sort of leading the way for all the GCC state and in consultations With all the GCC states, another thing that we have to consider is that the Iranian retaliations on on Gulf countries are also reshaping, in some way, the geography of the Gulf neighborhood. They are hitting some GCC states more than another. Some states had been more prepared than others. Some are suffering more, and obviously those one who are suffering more maybe might have a more aggressive posture.

For instance, that might be the case of the UAE versus Saudi Arabia, which has been able to redirect its oil, its oil flows through the east, west pipelines. So in some way, I think that now we are also in a moment where the strategic thinking in Riyadh is a try to navigate through this crisis and try to carve out and in some way consolidate some resilience into it, preparing also for a medium term, if not long term war, and at the same time, building the premises for for an offer that could actually, together with other middle sized power, maybe put an end to this war, if that is still possible.

And last but not least, I will say that one of the thing that it's in some way very dangerous, it's if this war actually drags longer and more in the medium term, and if there is more US actions on Iranian soul, as you all have seen, there has been threats for actually starting a ground operation that will even more shrink The margin of maneuvers in some way for for Saudi Arabia, and it will give more space for those other GCC states who actually want to be that, who have been more vocal in taking a stance against against against Iran or, like taking a proactive actions against Iranians.

But in so far, the line is very steady, is that one of of Saudi Arabia, is that one of trying to keep itself outside this war, and trying to carve out and build and consolidate resilience for navigate the weeks ahead, and also trying together with Pakistan and Turkey, and I guess we will end also to we will come to that in some way, to put forward the proposal that could also be an off ramp for this, for this conflict. By no means I have heard until now the idea that actually Saudi Arabia would like to join the war. Maybe there could be an option where Saudi Arabia, if really Iranian retaliation continues, could join on itself, but not with the United States, because joining

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with the United States would mean also compromising the strategic standing of Saudi Arabia and abiding to an Israel What is perceived as an Israel dominated regional order.

Bader Al-Saif 14:43

I fully agree with this assessment, and we need to keep in mind that all options are on the table for the Gulf states, and it depends on how the aggression from Iran continues and what kind of tolls are being paid. We've been very successful in intercepting most of the attacks. Tax over 90% interception rate in the past few weeks. So that's why, you know, sanity and wisdom should prevail from the Iranian side to avoid opening yet another front. And that differentiation between the US Israel and the rest of the Gulf, if and when they do join is key, because we don't want to be seen as part of a US Israeli front against Iran. If that happens, we're defending the main priority now is to defend the homeland, and that's what's been on display in the past few weeks.

And I'd be wary of the disinformation campaign that's always popular in DC when it comes to trying to frame where Saudi stands in this you remember this talk about them imminently joining the Abrahamic accords a few years ago, and, you know, Maria and I wrote a piece called The Saudi solution for Foreign Affairs a few years ago, countering that argument and showing that there has been always a space for Palestine and Saudi thinking. So on the same token, there is always that understanding that we need to be working with our colleagues and neighbors in Iran, because Iran needs to understand we are striving for a normal relationship. That normal relationship is premised on non interference, the end of militia activities across the board in the Gulf. We've discovered in the last 10 days, three Hezbollah related sleeper cells in Kuwait.

So this is again a continuation of worrying activity out of Iran, and it's not the first time. Bahrain just announced another sleeper cell yesterday the UAE the week before. So that's the kind of activity we want to stay away with, where we are mutually respecting each other and working on developing each other's best businesses together. I think that's how we need to move forward and look adding addressing the nuclear issue in a civil manner was something that I think Iran was keen on through mediation in the past few years. So that needs to continue. And the same thing on the parameters of the missiles weapons.

And unfortunately, a fourth issue has been added to the list, and it wasn't before an issue, except for the few years of the Iran-Iraq War. But not as intense as today, is the Hormuz straight and how it's impacting freedom of navigation, and we would like to go to that notion of international waters integrity and trying to fend off these pressure points to increase the toll on the war that's happening right now. This doesn't serve anyone's interests, including Iran's.

Trita Parsi 17:25

So let me follow up on a couple of these points. So both of you are strongly arguing that this is a bit of a fiction, that the Saudis have not been pushing for this war, that they are not in favor of it. They were not in favor they're not in favor of prolonging it, which is one of the key things we're constantly hearing in Washington, that even if Trump wants to find an exit, that some of the

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GCC states, including Saudi Arabia, are worried that if the war ends up right now, it will put Iran in too strong of a position, and as a result, they would like the war to continue a bit longer in order to further weaken the Iranians. If your position is that this is a bit of a fiction, where is this fiction coming from? What is the basis of it? If it's something that has been going on for quite some time, as you pointed out, Badr with the Abraham accord, etc. Why? Who is behind it, and why is it so successful in saturating the conversation here in Washington?

Maria Luisa Fantappiè 18:22

Ideology does wonders Trita, and if I were to source it, I'd go back all the way to Israel. That's been very consistent in its messaging concerning regime change in Iran. It's been consistent within the mindset of Prime Minister Netanyahu and other factions in his coalition. And there was always that thinking that this is something that's achievable, which goes against the assessments of American intelligence, the assessments of Gulf states, and it would create chaos and fragmentation in Iran and across the region. And it's something certainly that we do not want to see, and it goes arguably against American interests that we don't know what the objectives of the US is, even the loosely defined way of looking at regime change that President Trump displayed in the last two days concerning him fulfilling that goal by killing everyone, which is again a war crime and an illegal thing to do to begin with.

But look going back to the basics of what happened here, we need to work with what's in place in Iran. The change of regimes is an internal Iranian business. They decide what's best for them, and we need to operate with it. Iran is in its weakest stage, so to claim that there could be even more threats from Iran, after all this bombing of this past month, after the last two years of direct confrontations between Israel and Iran, is a bit of a stretch, so let's, let's, let's have some breathing space. Let's allow for the regional actors to take a central, central role in all of this, and let's try to solve our own issues together

Trita Parsi 19:54

Thank you so much. I think we finally are joined, or perhaps not, by Hassan Professor Ahmadian before he comes in, Maria, if you wanted to say something.

Maria Luisa Fantappiè 20:04

I just, you know, in my my own methodology of working, also is that I try to to hear, to listen from all side, to engage from all side. And the fact that I'm a European, maybe an advantage in this. And one thing that I have noticed is that many in Israel have a very poor understanding of the decision making processes and the discussions that are happening in the Gulf. So, you know, it's, it's, I will put it as, you know, as in some cases, for instance, when there is a lot of the situation where there is a diaspora, no that is informing the US on what should happen in a certain country. Is the same logic here whereby, you know, maybe certain groups, certain like discussions, are created, and they are shaped the narrative and the information flows.

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And this could explain, from a very like sociological perspective, why there is so much certain why certain time you feel that this discussion about Saudi Arabia normalizing has been so dominant, and maybe some people also in Jerusalem in Tel Aviv believe in it. But that is also the results of the gap, of the lack, in some way, of also communications between the side and all over the past years in Saudi Arabia, I always have felt very much the instead the another position, which is that one of threading very careful with the idea of normalization, both because there was obviously a strong pro Palestinian element, but also for from a very strategic point of view, because in some way normalizing, it will be a challenge itself to Saudi Arabia, strategic Standing. So one South interlocutors once said, the Palestinian issue is not only an a symbolic issue for us, is not only an issue that relates to to our Muslim identity, but is also a strategic matter. So I will put it in that, in that, in that way.

Trita Parsi 22:17

Very good. Thank you. Professor Ahmadian has joined us. I hope you can hear us. I think you're muted right now, but I want to just give you a bit of a summary of what the conversation has been so far. But they're open up by saying that the American Israeli attack on Iran was illegal, but at the same time that Iran's response by targeting several of the GCC states US bases there, but also beyond that is also illegal.

Could you give us an understanding of what is Tehran's calculation behind these different strikes against the GCC, but also with the angle that I think both was raised in this conversation, but I also saw it from one of the questions in the Q and A which is, there is a desire on the Israeli side to expand the war and bring the GCC states into this war by striking the GCC states, presumably to pressure the United States. Nevertheless, the Iranians are arguably getting closer into walking into what would perhaps be described as an Israeli trap. Iran Strikes Back at the GCC, and then eventually the GCC enters into the war. Which would I assume, from Tehran's perspective, not be a good development to end up having a conflict with all of its Arab neighbors in the GCC? So what is Iran's calculation behind this? What is the balancing act that is trying to achieve with all of this? And this is setting aside the illegality or immorality of any of these different moves? Professor Ahmadian?

Hassan Ahmadian 23:54

Thank you, Trita, do you hear me? Yes. Okay, good, good. It's It's good to be with you and my really good friends. Unfortunately, I couldn't join earlier due to some technical problems that I had. So as you said, legality aside, because nothing in this war has been legal. There is no legal grounds for attacks on Iran, on the civilian infrastructure, on the school in the beginning of the war. And of course, some of aspects of Iran's retaliation have been also illegal, I would say. But you know, the legal system internationally is not monitored by those who have attacked Iran, so the Iranians are looking at talking points on the Strait of Hormuz as being illegal with really a bit of a mockery that is whatever the Americans and Israelis are doing is illegal. But still, when Iran retaliates, talking points come up as Iran acting illegal.

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Legally, I think we're past that point. Priorities are not dictated by international law due to the aggression itself. It happened twice in less than a year, and the Iranians look at it, looked at it. I think from the beginning of the war, the Iranians have passed that point before that, the Iranian talking points have always been that the United States is acting illegally transactional law doesn't support them in imposing maximum pressure on Iran, in violating the JCPOA, in attacking the country and assassinating Iranian scientists and doing all these things they did in the past two decades, but nothing happened. International international law didn't protect them. Diplomacy didn't protect them. Legal frameworks that they came up with and agreed with the United States and other powers did not protect them. And all ergo, we see the war. And so Iran.

Now going back to the war, Iran is the underdog. It's the weaker party. There's no match with the United States. Iran has one the United States has 100 fold a military budget of that of Iran, and it's attacking the country with with the support of Israel. Iran is facing two wars, one from Israel, one from the south, and these are simultaneous, coordinated and so Iran is really in at a disadvantage when it comes to military actor action. And so from the beginning of the war, it decided that it's not going to play according to the aggressors plans. They wanted Iran to retaliate against Israel. Iran before the war. I mean, whatever Iran did during the course of this war was announced initially. Before the war, Iranians said, we'll expand it. We will go for you know, US bases. We will go for us assets. They crossed that red line before the war that no American lives are to be targeted. They went for American lives.

So your argument that Iran wanted to pressurize the GCC to for them to channel that pressure to the US, I don't buy it myself. I think the Iranians went for U.S. forces, attacking U.S. forces, casualties on the part of the United States is the main source of pressure that the Iranians were after. And I think they were not capable of reaching many of them due to their, you know, their movement in the region. And then, you know, the New York Times five days ago was, you know, said the same thing. Iranian officials said, from the beginning of the war, they use the bases, and then when Iranians hit them, they move to hotels and office spaces. Now that legality aside, Iran doesn't have the right to attack them in hotels, but the other the flip side of it is that they are using these lands. They are using Office Spaces. They are using hotels, and they are attacking Iran from there managing the attacks on Iran.

I mean, I mean, I don't want to get into controversy on who's right or wrong, but to the Iranian strategic mindset, this war wouldn't have happened without the CENTCOM infrastructure around Iran's southern borders, the United States wouldn't have thought about it. They have this infrastructure. They made use of it, and so the trust is gone with Iran's neighbors. I know that Badr and other of my friends who I've been in contact with, some of them are very much, you know, furious about why Iran is attacking. But what I hear from Tehran is the same thing from the other side. They're saying no trust left. They're allowing us, and even if they don't know, they're announcing that we're not part of it. The US is doing that, and it's using there. I mean, knowing or not knowing is something that is not, you know, taking the responsibility out of these countries. And so I think there will be a lot of, you know, back and forth between Iran and GCC moving forward, after the after the war. Now, of course, there are different countries, different attitudes, different ways of dealings. Of course, Oman is a different, whole different category.

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UAE and Bahrain were basically, according to Iranians, were the main parties involved in this, in this war. And there go the Iranian attacks on them. Now, of course, civilian infrastructure is illegal to attack them. But remember, Iranians decided to fight their own fight, not to let the United States and Israel dictate the course of war.

Trita Parsi 29:54

Thank you so much. Just one quick thing though, what about the argument though, that the. More Iran does this, whether it is just used to pressure the US or not, it pushes the GCC states closer into joining the war, which is arguably what the Israelis are looking for. And as a result, rather than this actually benefiting the Iranians, this is walking into an Israeli trap. How does Tehran see it?

Hassan Ahmadian 30:18

Yeah, it's about priorities first and capabilities second. Priorities for Iran, under aggression that sees it as existential threat waged from two sides are to shield itself against this attack. And the priority is not basically, you know, clinging to these diplomatic smiles anymore. They're seeing a threat. They're going for it. They're trying to stop us moving forces into the region that they have did they did in the past few days, in order for them to increase the, you know, capability for a land landing invasion or land operation on Iranian soils, they have been this is the priority treaty. It's not basically any diplomatic off ramp. It's not about what plan the Israelis and the United States have.

And the second is capabilities. The Iranians are fighting two nuclear powers with the mightiest air force in the world, with the mightiest Navy in the world. They don't care if and other countries to join them. They don't want to see that. But of course, they are fighting the mightiest armies that are, you know, waging a war of aggression against them and whomever is added to them. See, the United States president is calling on other parties to intervene, to open up the Strait of Hormuz. Iranians know from practice that that is not a not a serious threat, because it's the mightiest Navy that is not even getting close to the strait, because it will be attacked. What other capabilities can be added to this mightiest army to attack Iran with? Of course, it will complicate things for Iran, but I think that's that's of secondary importance to Iran.

The first, the primary importance, important issue for Iran is to bug the United States down to deplete its capabilities. The main capabilities that are being used against Iran, those are the main target. Now, of course, politics, other parties, their views, their complaints. Of course, they are. They are. They are of concern, but are secondary. Iran is under existential threat, and I think that's what the Iranians are thinking of. They're thinking about as the main priority. And secondly, the outcome of this war, the relationship with the GCC is about the outcome of this war.

Trita Parsi 32:56

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I want to unpack a lot of these different things, but I want to throw one thing to father and Maria, which is that, to the best of my knowledge, and Mother, you pointed out earlier on, Kuwait apparently did shoot down a couple of American planes that was using its airspace. And you pointed it as evidence that Kuwait is not allowing Kuwaiti airspace to be used in this war. But we also have now evidence that a lot of American planes are landing in Saudi air bases, and the Iranians have hit them in those Saudi air bases. Iranians have been given daily military intelligence both to the GCC states and to the UN Secretary General, with details of the use of American airplanes and assets inside of the GCC states.

So my question to you, Bader, it may very well be that Kuwait is not doing this, but some other states, UAE, Bahrain, perhaps Saudi, has allowed some of this to happen. What does that do to any effort to have a united GCC position externally, when actually the position is not united, if some of the states are allowing for some of this to happen, and as a result, is in the eyes of the Iranians justifying their attacks. I want to start off with you brother, and also have Maria come in on this question.

Bader Al-Saif 34:13

Thank you, Trita. Let me. Let me respond to these many points, along with what has been stated by my brother Hassan. Look, I agree with him that everything that's happening is legal when, when pinpointing the actions of Israel, the US and Iran, as rightly noted there, but the Gulf states have been working in a very legalsque manner. We've stuck to the international rules based order. We went ahead and we we worked on issuing a United Nations Security Resolution, 2817, co sponsored by 136 states that castigated Iran's attack on the Gulf. We've done the same thing in the Human Rights Council, and there is a draft that's underway with the safety of passage and consideration, we've also maintained that responsible line by not evicting the Iranian ambassadors across the Gulf. The UAE is the exception there and within Qatar and Saudi only the military and security attaches have been asked to leave after those attacks have only increased those lines of contact are there, and we made it very clear with demonstrable proof that we are not part of any attacks on Iran, and those attacks are not only going after Americans in these different Gulf States.

We just mourned the death of an Indian worker today in a desalination plant. The last time I checked the desalination plant is Kuwaiti. It has no US fingerprints on it, and we mourn the death of an 11 year old Iranian girl in her home when debris fell into her house because of the interceptions, because of that kind of attack that's coming out of Iran. We also had 10 injured Kuwaiti military officials in the last two days. We mourned the death of four of our member forces, also in two separate attacks.

So this is beyond going after Americans or American assets and interests. These are six sovereign nation states, and they are free to decide on how they formulate their defense partnerships, and that goes to your point. Trita, no, these are not being used to have any kind of offensive action against Iran. We have defense partnerships. They stretch long with the US and with other partners across and they've come in, primarily in the 90s onwards, to fend off the

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occupation of my country Kuwait, and that process didn't have Iran in mind at the time. Now we live in a different time. Of course, it's 2026 many things have happened, and we need to reassess the partnerships, but I think the partnerships have also helped us deliver a robust military response. We would not be able to fend off daily attacks from Iran for the past five weeks if we didn't have these partnerships with the US, with the West, with Eastern countries.

And that is key to understanding that, yes, we've had replenishments from the US and other countries, but they serve defensive means, and we've asked our colleagues in Iran to demonstrate, to prove for us, wherever it is the case that these things are happening from our lands, so that there could be corrective action. We do not want to be part of this war. This is not our war, and look to maintain that restraint for five weeks and to have the Iranian ambassadors in place, I think, demonstrates maturity that we would like to see across the board in the region. This maturity, unfortunately, is not on display by Israel, by the US and by Iran.

Maria Luisa Fantappiè 38:00

I just wanted to actually add a slightly different dimension, because I do think that for some years, especially after the Saudi Iranian normalization, we applied analytically the framework of rethinking GCC Iran relations and how the Gulf could man ties with the Iranians, and how trust will be rebuilt. I do think that, and some of this has been already discussed by both Badr and Hassan and both have shed light, I think, on how actually little has remained of the trust between the two sides. In my view, we have to jump to another analytical framework.

Honestly, the bad news here is that we can no longer apply the thinking that diplomacy, or like mending ties, will be the exit. We are too far, I think, into the war for that to happen in the fact that the ambassadors, as mother was mentioning, are still in place. It's a good news, but I just don't think that that will provide an exit, because I think that the Iranians are too much now into the thinking, as Hassan has said of any way, not prioritizing what will be the future of the relationship with the GCC and more into a survival mode. So from a gulf perspective, I think, or at least from a Saudi perspective, what it seems to me happening is that they no longer, you know, bet on the fact that the Iranians will return to their senses and think about again, how if we can reestablish relationship, but they're actually proactively working to consolidate alliances with other powers, both in the region and beyond further in the east, that could. Could counterbalance both Israel and Iran at the same time.

And here it's why there is so much effort into strengthening defense ties with the Pakistanis, who are nuclear power. This is why there is also defense discussions with the with Turkey, all these powers in some way, they are not just a counter balancing to the Israelis, but also to a potentially unraveling Iran. One of the key question that has been discussed, I think, in some of the Gulf capitals, is also to understand whether Iran at this stage as a centralized decision making still, or if the military decisions is taken in a dispersed way. So they are preparing also for the option whereby Iran is actually step by step, taking a more decentralized decision making when it comes to military threat. And so in some way, the issue of diplomacy to diplomacy

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doesn't apply anymore. What it applies is actually to have allies in the region, and beyond that, actually have the military and defense means to stop and put a break to both Israel and Iran.

Trita Parsi 41:13

Thank you, Maria. So if, if that is the case, and there is that, sure go ahead.

Bader Al-Saif 41:18

The pity that Iran is doing this at this critical juncture, because there was a point in time in which we were going regional in our thinking in the Middle East, and that regional vision was one that wanted to integrate Iran.'

Trita Parsi 41:33

Yeah. So that's exactly what, yeah. This is exactly what I was going to ask you about, because you're right. There was a moment you had the Baghdad dialog. There was an effort for a much more inclusive model that was not based on balancing Iran Iraq or Israel or anyone else. It was not targeting any particular country. But when you take a look back for the last couple of decades, the bottom line is the overwhelming majority of the efforts of regional states have not been integration. It has been balancing Iran, containing Iran, whether actively involved in the American policy or as a supporting country in that while at the same time, several of the GCC states also open up their own channels, et cetera.

And there was some engagement, but the lion's share of the effort was not on integration. It was on balancing. And all of that has now contributed to the scenario we are in today, in which that balancing did not prevent the war. In fact, the war was created, started by the country that was supposed to provide the balancing. And on top of that, in that war, the US bases, etc, did not provide a defense. You're right, brother, that much else of the weapon sales, etc has provided a defense, but the basis itself ended up becoming magnets for attacks. So now in this new effort, is the reaction solely towards thinking, Okay, we have to triple down on containment, or is there a realization that the balance before was already overwhelmingly in favor of containment, and it is actually the integration that was never truly pursued, partly because of us, sanctions did not allow for it. Can you go first rather? You want to go first? Rather? I want to get Hassan's perspective on this as well.

Bader Al-Saif 43:39

Containment and isolation is not the right approach. And you can go back in time two different contexts, but I'm thinking of the isolation years of Saddam's Iraq in the 90s, up to the 2003 war, and that's not the approach that we need to work on moving forward. Nor are those very conventional, tried and lazy and you know, failing tools like sanctions would be also worth pursuing, because, look, they don't serve any purpose. They create alternative mechanisms for the countries that are under sanctions. And we should pose this question to the US as one of

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the main, primary upholders of sanctions, they moved from 900 sanctions in 2000 to 9400 sanctions in 20 years. And what do we end up with? We end up with sanctions relief to Iranian oil a few days ago, because, to their point, it doesn't work. So you know, you need to have other measures that you can work with.

I think we need to be clear headed in terms of having integration as a goal post, there will be a lot of confidence building that needs to come with it, unfortunately. And as you said, we live in a very diverse region, so opinions are not the same. We need to build up the momentum for that integration, but we need to also understand what integration entails. And here, this is key for all the various countries to come in on how they can develop an ecosystem that serves their interests best. It doesn't mean divorcing ourselves from the outside world. I think we will continue to have partnerships with countries east and west, but with the importance of putting our national interests first.

And look this whole notion of. So the Gulf states being badgered for US bases all across U.S. bases are all over the place. And no one said that South Korea or Japan or Germany or Spain or the other countries are satellite states for having these bases. These bases serve different functions. They don't mean to strip sovereignty, but they work on capacity building, on training. Yet, I think there is a time, in an age right now that we need to rethink that model as well, to serve our interests and to also serve the American domestic interest, because they're also focusing on other issues and other regions in the world, with the pivot to Asia and what have you.

So I think there is a way for all of us to come together. I might seem optimistic here, but I think it takes a lot of diligence. It takes a lot of patience. And we've gone through very bad times with Iran in the 1980s during the Iran Iraq War, we've had assassination attempt against our ruler in the 1980s bombings, hijacking of planes, but we've come around, and we've had a robust relationship in the 1990s and in the 2000s so I think while we are not at the best of moments between our countries, there will be a time in which we can come to a mechanism to cooperate and to work with one another.

Trita Parsi 46:20

Hassan, I pose the same question to you, but with a twist, there has been a desire from the Iranian side for that type of integration with the GCC, particularly with Saudi Arabia, for quite some time. But you're now seeing also a change in the leadership of Iran as a result of assassinations by the United States and Israel. And it appears to me that those who are replacing the previous voices tend to be more on the hawkish side, more skeptical of integration and other models for security, and much more focused on hard security. Do you see that that's new leadership in Iran post this war would explore the opportunities for integration with regional states in a credible manner, or do you think that the new leadership in Iran will go in a different direction?

Hassan Ahmadian 47:14

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Yeah, thank you. I think that's a good question. Well, I think on containment, I'm very much. I would second my friend Bader that we need to go towards the integration, actually, for someone like me who has spent years in working and trying to promote, you know, close relations between Iran and Arab countries, it's heartbreaking to see what is unfolding at this point, but at the same time, with regards to your question, integration never materialized, actually, from where Iranians, many of Iranian strategies come, actually, it was never in the mindset when Iran and Saudi Arabia struck a deal in Beijing. The results was meant to be for a more integrated efforts towards integration, specifically in terms of economics, nothing materialized, though the war in Yemen stopped, and many, actually, analysts, have pointed that that deal was actually is Saudi pocketed the results and benefits and didn't do much in return.

Now you could, you could counter argue, of course, there are many arguments in there. But you know, whenever the Saudis were asked, why aren't they following through with the with the basically commitment on getting closer in terms of economics, trades, etc, they would say there are sanctions, and when they the sanctions are lifted, then we will talk. That wasn't the essence of the Beijing agreement, but still, they had a case to make based on the sanctions to the Iranian mindset all the way, because Bader also mentioned it in the 80s, and then then into 90s. We had but a brief period of time that things were getting better than we hit the 11th of October, of September, back in 2001, that wheel stopped, and then into small steps of integration, basically were derailed, and we are where we are after. After that came the occupation of Iraq, where Gulf countries, majority of them, decided that they are not in for supporting this new regime in Iraq.

And then, of course, the Arab Spring, and we know all about it. And now, of course, the wars on Iran. Now, in all this, this time the Iranians, if you look at the track record, there is no efforts for integration. The Iranians have talked time and time again about neighborly relations, but I think there are, there are really strong incentives to go against it in the region, at least. In the 80s, and nowadays we see it now. With regards to the points that were mentioned by my friend better as well, I want to highlight some of them. What was the last time that Iran attacked any of its neighbors? I think you can't remember, because history tells us three centuries ago, and that was, that was really why was? Why wouldn't Iran attack its neighbors? It became part of its strategic culture not to attack neighbors, because, from history, the Iranians learned that attacking neighbors is not going to bode well for their future, themselves and their neighbors, and if they want to leave peacefully with that within their neighborhood, they shouldn't go for that, for that.

Why are they doing it now? I think their answer is US bases US forces. Now, better mentioned, of course, the desalination plan. The first desalination plan that was hit was in pesham Island. 30 villages in Iran were deprived of water. In that island, they had to move to the mainland. People were moved to the mainland. Forced to move to their mainland because there was no water. The first school that was hit in Iran, we have in, you know, information I don't know. I mean, the talks are about Russia and China providing Iran with them. They are pinpointing the attack on the school came from a buffer in UAE. The missile that was launched against a desalination plant in Iran came from this base or that base. I don't know to what extent that's

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correct, but that's what the Iranians are talking about. Also the US President thanked three times our neighbors, five neighbors in the in the GCC three times. He mentioned them by name. These are the only country that are back in our war. He said that.

And I think the Iranians are pointing to that as well, in addition to the fighter deaths that better mentioned, in addition to the people or the forces, American forces injured and killed in the in Saudi in UAE, in addition to the refueling planes that were hit in the Sultan Amir, Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia, lots of things that are pointing to the other side. And I think, you know, placing it in a legal framework that Israel, Iran and us are doing illegal things, the GCC doing legal, I think, defies that logic, because being part of an aggression, a war of aggression, which is we agree is illegal, is illegal. So you can't just say that it's not, you know, the that party is not is acting legally.

I think one, one other factor that is important to mention is that whatever we do in this time will stay with us for a lengthy period. Moving forward, Iranians are really looking at what is going coming and where it is coming from, from the beginning of the war, and they didn't start just shooting at those bases. They had the 12 Days War. And the 12 Days War told them that the radar in that country is the main one covering Iran and connecting with Israel for it to intercept Iran's defenses or Iran's missiles. The base there is used as a pivotal point for aerial operations against so it accumulated over the past eight months, and we see the results of that. So only defying it, saying that Iran is attacking these countries with them being innocent, I think that's a controversy we don't need to get into at this point, but we have to think about it moving forward, because both parties need to have answers to one another if they are to live peacefully and integrate. Inshallah, moving forward. Thank you.

Trita Parsi 53:52

Quick one, because I want to get Maria and also add a European angle to the conversation. Go ahead, Bader.

Bader Al-Saif 53:58

I mean, look, I think Hessen, you know, our friendship lasts before this war and will continue after this war, so maybe we'll agree to disagree on the points that you raised. I find it interesting that you're citing President Trump on something related to the Gulf, and I don't need to tell you that this is a source that shouldn't be trusted or it should be verified further in terms of the attacks on desalination plants and in other sites in Iran, we condemn them. This is not the right way to go, and it's a US Israeli attack that, as I said, is illegal, but it doesn't mean that then we reciprocate on such plants in the Gulf, because it's coming from Iran.

So that that's just, I think, a twisted logic from our end in terms of attacks, I don't need to remind you of the June 2020 25 attack on Allah date. Yes, you'll say it's choreographed. It's in response to an American illegal attack. Yet that was an attack. And we also define attacks differently when we have sleeper cells and we have interference and internal. Affairs from Iranian trained Hezbollah operatives and others across the Gulf for many, many years, that defies, you know,

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the notion of not having attacked those countries. And these are the hard things that we need to work on together, because at the end of the day, we're neighbors and neighborhood rights need to work on together. We need to converse with one another directly and not mediated. Not have it mediated through other sources. You have claims that there are certain shots coming from the Gulf. Those needs to be put on the table. They need to be on display. And I think the Gulf States and Iran need to discuss these, because through them, we can insulate the Gulf from that if we can show that these are not coming from the Gulf states. Thank you.

Trita Parsi 55:43

Thank you, Bader, Maria. I want to bring you in to particularly address the European angle. Despite the fact that Badr said that this would be resolved by the states in the region themselves, let's give a small exception for Europe here, Maria. In the last couple of days, in this morning, actually, we saw significant attacks by Trump against France. I think there was something about Italy as well, because Italy is not allowing a basis Sicily to be used, at least without a parliamentary vote. The French are not allowing airspace to be used. Spain has already prohibited its basis being used. Are we seeing a shift on the European side, compared to what it was 30 days ago in which Germany essentially came out in support of this war. And if so, what is the root causes for this shift? And do you think Europe can bring itself back in to not play the leading role, but playing a supportive role diplomatically in all of this?

Maria Luisa Fantappie 56:40

Thank you. Well, I do think that the Europeans should be part of the discussion, because this, in my view, is no longer actually regional war. It's day by day, is becoming more of a global, global conflict, especially as we see that both China and Russia are actually active in different ways, alongside the United States. So having said that, the EU sensed, well, there is been a shift in the last weeks on the from the European positions, different European capitals, I think, have really in some way shifted towards a more critical stand, vis a vis of the US administration. And this, you could feel it in different ways. I mean, in some, in some cases, the very, the very source of this has been actually the economic prices that that Europe is paying for this war, if the Gulf is hit by missiles, we are also hit by, you know, economic consequences of the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. So this also has political implications. For instance, in my own countries, we have lost Hassan, but I hope it's okay.

This has incredible like political consequences, also at I mean economic consequences, but also political implication. Meloni, for instance, it's a long standing ally of the Trump administration, and precisely because of the consequence, the economic consequence of this war, also she has slowly, you know, she's slowly changing her position, taking a more staunch stand, saying that Italy is not part of this war, and trying to navigate through and I think that if you find that from Meloni government, who is one Of the, you know, closest ally of Trump. You can even, like, see how this is even stronger from Sanchez, Spain, which was always, you know, against, against the war, this war.

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So I think the step by step, the key powers of Europe are finding themselves in a very, in a very close position to what is actually the Gulf States position. Because, on the one hand, they feel that that the United States has created in some way of war in which they are paying the economic and potentially political consequences. Second of all, they are feeling that they can no longer actually rely on the United States, even for their own strategic security interest. And the recent statement of Rubio on Ukraine actually showed that. So we find ourselves in the part of what I call like a middle sized powers.

And so I foresee that this conflict one of the transformation that will engender is that it will create more synergies between at least some European state and Gulf states, precisely because, both for different reasons, will have to navigate this crisis through and also geographically they are both concerned because I mean the closure of Ormos and a potential crisis also on the Red Sea. So. Strongly impact, especially in Mediterranean countries. So no matter if right wing or left wing, I think that European powers are slowly moving aside and away from standing with the United States. And I think this is captured in the Gulf, where people paid attention and took note of the fact that European powers actually said that do not want to be part of the war a game changer. However, Trita could be, if Russia will become more heavily involved with in Iran, that could, I think, be a game changer.

And so we have to really closely monitor this moving forward, because also, let's remember that, okay, we have mentioned Italy, Spain, Germany, but there are also Eastern European countries who they look at Iran through the Russia lens, and would Russia become more involved? They could actually push Europe to take a more proactive stance with the United States and I will, I want to leave you with this point, but also with the second point, that if we say that Russia stepping into more I mean stepping into the crisis in a more proactive way, called shift and tip the Europeans on the US side when it comes actually to the Gulf, I think that we have to closely monitor what the UAE position will be, if there will be a US ground invasion, because also that, and also on the other side, if Iranians will actually cross some red lines with Saudi Arabia.

These are all things that could, you know very well, tip the positions of this, of this power. I still think that when it comes to the Gulf, the Gulf country will try not to be in a binary stand, either with the United States of Israel or, you know, with Iran. They will try to, they are trying to, actually, to carve out their own Third Way. And this is why there are synergies with Turkey. They try to have synergies with the European powers that we have synergy with, with Pakistan. But still, you know, we have to take pay attention moving forward to this, game changers, especially as the conflict prolongs and it becomes larger and involves more actors.

Trita Parsi 1:02:13

Very interesting, particularly the Russia angle. Thank you all so much. Is a fantastic and a very honest conversation. We didn't get to all of the questions, but that's because the conversation itself answered so many questions in and of itself. Thank you to you Bader from Kuwait City to Hassan, I think you're sitting in Doha right now, and to Maria for participating in this and

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illuminating us before I let everyone else go. Let me just pitch our webinar tomorrow, which will be a conversation with Quincy non resident fellows, Asli Bali and Aziz Rana on their must read article in The Boston review on the Trump doctrine, in which they trace back a lot of what the Trump administration is doing to what the Biden administration did in Gaza. For those of you who have not joined our mailing list, please go to quincyinst.org sign up for the mailing list so that you get invitations to all of our webinars events, as well as our different reports. So with that, thank you all so much, and hope to see you tomorrow. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much.

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