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### **QI Panel:**

Breakup: Will the Iran War Accelerate US Efforts to Craft an Independent Foreign Policy?

June 23rd 2026  
12:00 - 1:00 PM ET

### **Ahmed Moor**

Good afternoon, and welcome to the Quincy Institute and Foundation for Middle East Peace's webinar. Breakup: Will the Iran War accelerate US efforts to craft an independent foreign policy? My name is Ahmed Moor, and I'm a fellow at the Foundation for Middle East Peace, whose work is to is designed to ensure a just and secure future in Palestine, Israel. I'm delighted to co-host this webinar with the KYC Institute, a trans-partisan think tank in Washington that aims to build a world where peace is the norm and war is the exception. Today, it's my great honor to welcome, in alphabetical order, Barbara Slavin, distinguished fellow at the Stimson Center, Lara Friedman, the president of the Foundation for Middle East Peace, and Trita Parsi, the co-founder and executive vice president of the Quincy Institute.

The context for today's discussion is the ongoing negotiation between the US and Iran. Donald Trump announced this morning that the US blockade of the Strait of Hormuz has been lifted. Israeli soldiers killed two people in Lebanon, which Hezbollah described as a quote blatant violation of the truce in that country. Iran's top negotiator, Mohammed Alibaugh, has said that the US will release \$12 billion in frozen Iranian assets, and Trump has said that Iran will permit the IAEA to enter the country, enter Iran, which I believe hasn't been confirmed by the Iranian leadership. Finally, Joseph On, the Lebanese president, who's been a bystander for the most part, said on Twitter this morning that he seeks the end of the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon.

So that's the update. It's a very dynamic situation. Possibly by the end of the hour things will have changed, but this conversation seeks to transcend all of the moment by moment developments, we're talking about the impending possibly breakup in the relationship between us and Israel, and so the title of the webinar embeds within it a premise, and the premise is that the US policy in the Middle East is tethered to Israel's preferences. Is that a sound claim? And maybe we can start with Barbara, and just go alphabetically, and I think the 20 year term here is maybe instructive thinking through Obama one through the present day.

### **Barbara Slavin 2:51**

First of all, it's a pleasure to be with you all, especially with such a great panel. You know, I think we are seeing a clear distancing of the United States from Israel, and it's, it's something that, that has been a long time coming. I remember when I joined the Stimson Center back in, gosh,

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2023 I actually went and had a long talk with Laura, because I wanted to bring myself up to speed on what passed for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, of course. There was, was none, and I had, I think, like a lot of people who had supported Israel, a kind of vague sense of disquiet and a kind of growing alienation because of the lack of a peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, and all of this has been supercharged now since October 7, 2023 and the multiple wars that have been touched off, and what began as sort of vague disquiet is now real alienation.

I mean, you look at the polls, it is incredible that 60% of Americans now say they are not supporters of Israel, at least under this current leadership, young people in both the Democratic and Republican parties support Palestinians, whatever that means, more than they do Israel. And, of course, we have JD Vance's comments last week when he said basically, Israel can't criticize us because we are your only friend in the world, and you have alienated everyone else. Now, that's that's perhaps a little bit of an overstatement. So, I think, yeah, we have seen a major change, and I think that this, the way the this war has turned out, has reinforced a desire on a part of the majority of Americans to go a different way. There were some new polls that were put out just recently that shows 78% of Americans want the conflict over, and that included 60% of Republicans. So maybe I'll just. Stop there to start the conversation. Look forward to hearing what my co-panelists have to say.

### **Ahmed Moor 5:06**

Lara, please.

### **Lara Friedman 5:12**

Years into this, and I'm still having trouble finding the unmute button now. Look, I want to echo Barbara's thanks, and this is a timely conversation. I'm deeply honored to be here with two of the people who I consider the most wisest on everything related to Iran. On the question of untethering, is this an untethering moment? I mean, on the one hand, I think this - this is clearly I keep thinking sort of a Nixon to China moment. Trump is able to do things that I think no other president can do or could do, so far mainly I would argue for the worse for US policy, but also potentially this is an opportunity to see some some changes that will be very positive. What we're seeing with this Iran MOU is, you know, all of us were old enough to remember the JCPOA, and what Obama went through for that. It's, it's pretty amazing the kind of language we're hearing right now from the Trump administration towards Israel is language that even out of a different Republican administration would have sparked, you know, absolute hysteria from the pro-Israel sector, which really doesn't have anywhere to go.

There are folks in Israel who are clearly very upset and making their, their views known, but there's nowhere else to go, right? The pro-Israel and Israel sector has has hitched their wagons so completely to President Trump and this administration. There's really all they can really do right now is hope to ride this out and hope that something changes, I think, if you listen to Israelis and if you listen to Lindsey Graham, and that sort of analysis, their hope is that

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eventually the war will restart, and it will be even more than it was before, and they will blame it on Iran, and and get to an outcome that they like better, but that's what they're hanging on to, and they're hanging on to that in the face of a president who is very interested in his own personal legacy and in the legacy for what this means for the Republican party in elections and you've got an electorate which has changed, I'd say it's changed, it's a combination of the aftermath of October 7, and many years now of livestream genocide, and now a war that was never popular. Americans didn't want to go back into a shooting war with Iran, didn't want to go to a shooting with Iran at all. If you can do it in three days and finish it up, great, everyone feels good about that, but that's never what this was.

So, you've got this domestic political change, and going into a midterm cycle that is, you know, showing a lot about what those cracks are. I mean, if there is ever a moment to say that this is the very least setting aside whether or not it ends up being untethered, and we can debate what you mean by tethered, but all of the foundations of the US, Israel, the deep connection in foreign policy in the region. All of those foundations right now are crumbling. That is the new reality. Whatever happens going forward, if there's going to be a continued tethering, it's going to be either based on the remains of those foundations, like laws that have not been repealed, but it's not going to be based on AIPAC making it too scary for members of Congress or candidates or White House to disagree with Israel publicly, for example. It's simply changed. I'll stop.

### **Ahmed Moor 8:37**

Thanks, Lara, and Trita, I'm glad you're still with us in the United States. I hope that continues to be true.

### **Trita Parsi 8:44**

Thank you. And great to be with Lara and Barbara as well. I find myself in strong agreement, of course. I would put it perhaps by saying that we are in a particularly stark, unfettering moment within a larger unfettering period, because this is not going to be a single moment in which it happens, although this moment is going to be one of the more important ones, but we're going to be in this period, in this phase, for some time, because of the demographic shifts that are taking place, but also because reality is there is a stark divergence of interest between the United States and Israel, and it was only for so long that lobbying efforts and other types of things would be able to cover that up and hold this thing together, despite the fact that they are geopolitical gravitational forces that are pushing the two countries in different directions.

The United States, for a long time, has realized, for the last 15 or so years, that the Middle East is not that important any longer, and that the US needs to exit from it, not commercially, not in other ways, but militarily. This is no longer something that the United States needs to be involved in, in this, in the manner that it has been so far. For the Israelis, this is something that they see as a nightmare, they want. The United States to constantly be dramatically present in the region in order to help artificially create a balance in the region that is favorable towards Israel, and that's been the case for the last 15-20 years, but it's not going to be the case going

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forward, and the more the Israelis push the US deeper into the Middle East, the more the disaster intensifies, and the greater the desire of the American public on the left and the right will push against this type of involvement, and as a result of what the Israelis are doing against the type of relationship that the United States has with Israel, that allows for this to happen.

So, when I hear JD Vance say that Israel is a friend, and it is an ally similar to the UK and France. We should not mistake, we should recognize that this is a very deliberate effort to despecialize the US-Israeli relationship, because even though the Brits think they have a special relationship with the US, no one here thinks that they do, so essentially it is saying that this is a relationship that is just an alliance amongst many others, and this will play very well amongst JD's own base restraint-oriented Republicans who already have a problem with this web of alliances the United States has created over the course of the decades, it has a lot of positives, but he has also a function of dragging the US into all kinds of different conflicts at times that it doesn't, that doesn't have an interest in being in, and to so starkly and directly take on the greatest of these problematic alliances, as he is now doing, by demoting the Israelis by saying that they can't kill their way out of this, and a lot of host of other things that he said in the last couple of days alone.

I think that is a very clear and deliberate policy and strategy to signal to the Israelis where this can go if they continue to try to sabotage this deal, and where they will, the Trump administration is willing to take it, perhaps a week from now, he will say that the alliance with Israel is as good as the American relationship is with Albania. Who knows? But the direction of travel has been set.

### **Ahmed Moor 12:17**

Thank you for those comments. And there's a lot of follow up there before we get to it, though, I want to examine kind of the seeds of the current moment in 2015 Barbara, Trita, Lara, you all were observing, I think Trita, you were probably a little bit closer to the action, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the way that that all came together. Did Netanyahu, did the Israelis expend most of their political capital in that bipartisan address to Congress, in which Netanyahu tried to bully Barack Obama, was that is it right to look back 10 years and say that may have been that that speech may have set the stage for for where we're at today.

### **Barbara Slavin 12:58**

Yeah, in a way, certainly, it did. I mean, it was extraordinary to have a foreign leader come and give us a speech to a joint session of Congress against the sitting US President's policy and his signature foreign policy achievement. I mean, look, Bibi got his way initially, it seemed when Trump was elected. He failed, obviously, in 2015 The JCPOA went into implementation, despite him and his efforts, and despite APEC spending 30, \$40 million to try to block it in Congress. And we, and Trita and I, and others were all involved in trying to get the JCPOA through Congress, but he did succeed, you know. When Trump was elected, Trump ran on a pledge to get rid of the JCPOA, and he eventually did that.

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So, I mean, what we're seeing, you know, is a culmination of efforts by Netanyahu to destroy any possibility of reconciliation between the United States and Iran. He's worked on this forever, for as long as I've been following him. So, having now succeeded, he has colossally failed, because we all see what the result has been in terms of this devastating war, and he, he is homeless now, he is discredited, absolutely, but the one thing that could, could save him is if these negotiations fail, and, and Trita can speak to this, perhaps a bit. I mean, if the Iranians overplay their hand, which is a pretty good hand, it is still possible that we do get back into conflict, which is what Bibi wants. The other possibility, of course, Israel is having elections, and Lara can speak to this: that Israel gets a better government, and it's hard for me to imagine a worse one coming out of Israeli elections. Possibly they get a government that is willing to work with the United States. And that is willing to change this disastrous policy of, as JD Vance put it, trying to kill their way to peace.

### **Ahmed Moor 15:10**

Well, so let's, let's do compare and contrast real quick. And Lara, I do want to invite you to talk about Israeli interest in a moment, but Barbara and Trita, and maybe Trita, you can speak to this. How do you compare the Israeli response to JCPOA, \$40 million spent, a diverse and focused lobbying effort in 2015 as compared to where we are today? What are the resources that people who are opposed to the negotiation able to marshal? What does their position look like as compared to 10 years ago?

### **Trita Parsi 15:40**

Ahmed, you want me to go first?

### **Ahmed Moor 15:42**

Yes, please

### **Trita Parsi 15:42**

Okay, so I think it's important to understand that there's been some fundamental changes that have taken place in the US since then, and I'm referring primarily to the policy process. Since 2015 we have had a complete breakdown of the policy process in the United States, and it's all about whether you have Jared Kushner, Witkoff, or the president's cell phone these days, rather than an actual process in which things have to go through. So, the Israelis did not at all spend the amount of resources that they did back in 2013 to sabotage the talks as they're doing now, because they're just going straight to the president, and they don't have to play that game. I've not seen them do a lot in Congress, for instance, Laura would follow that much closer than me in terms of putting forward bills, etc. that would sabotage this, whereas that's what they did constantly back then, because it mattered.

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Today, for whatever reason, we can have a different seminar at the policy process that just completely collapsed, and it started with Trump, in my view, Trump won. It didn't get fully rebuilt under Biden, and it is now further deteriorated. So, it's just really about the access to a couple of key individuals, and that's where they put all of their resources, and it's also part of the reason why they succeeded. If there had been a proper policy process, knowing the other people that are in this administration and their views of this, and their views of this back in February 2025 when they put a stop to this, I suspect that they would have likely been able to put a stop to it in January and February 2026 as well, or at a minimum be able to reach Trump, but they weren't, because the circle of people that Trump was listening to had become narrower and narrower, and everyone else, despite very senior posts in the administration, simply didn't have the access any longer, but the Israelis did, and they completely circumvented those voices, so I think part of the reason why it looks different on what the Israelis are doing, and their lack of focus on Congress and other things is because how to get a decision through, or how to sabotage a decision today, is dramatically different from what it was 2015.

### **Ahmed Moor 17:53**

Lara, could you build on that? Would you describe the legislative process, because we have seen, for instance, and it emerged through a Quincy Institute webinar, really, that where I learned about it, the commingling of DoD initiatives with Israelis, so moving away from the MOU and trying to embed the Israeli military into the DOD process. But please go ahead, Lara.

### **Lara Friedman 18:15**

Let me put a pin in that piece of it, the appropriations, what's happening with the new MOU, and just follow up on what Trita is saying. I think, I think, looking at how, how AIPAC and others have dealt with the Iran stuff so far with the Trump administration, this goes back to the question of being sort of homeless, like, where do you go publicly fighting this president is not, it doesn't work from people you know, from people who are on the, in the other party, he doesn't care, and people in his own party, he doesn't care, and he punishes, right, that's it's just, there's no path there for public constructive engagement, you can even see in Congress just the question of authorities, authorizations of use of military force, you know, we've had efforts to have, you know, war power resolutions now since the beginning of, since the first time they attacked Iran, and that's a pretty, that's a pretty low bar, just, and not just war powers resolutions, there have been resolutions and letters calling for briefings from the administration, Republicans are unwilling for all sorts of reasons, which we can get into, to publicly be seen as dissenting from pretty much anything this president does, and the ones who are willing, the Marjorie Taylor Greens and the Massies, have paid, you know, significant prices for doing so.

So again, this speaks to the question of, like, what is different between Obama and the JCPOA, and now you know, part of it is there's really nowhere to go for people who would have been the sober voices. It's not welcome. There's no interest, and if you, for those of us who were around in the last round of this, you know, we saw, you know, just a deluge of legislation that was intended to tie the hand. Is of the president to demand that anything be brought to Congress to

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be approved, and to be there's none of that. There's simply none of it. Congress is not, you know, there's been there's been noises from Democrats, but Democrats want the war to end, so they're not seeking to find ways to prevent an agreement the way the Republicans were last time as opposition, and the Republicans who are in opposition to JCPOA don't want to publicly take on this president at all, so you basically have a Congress which has taken itself out of this largely, except for, you know, you know, strings of quotes that you see largely in the Washington Times or Jewish Insider, where you can see a narrative of well, we'd really like to know more, we're a little uncomfortable, sort of like the APAC statement when this news first came out. We look forward to learning the details and studying them closely.

It's hard to imagine like a more anodyne statement, except maybe you know the ADL calling Elon Musk's sigh an awkward gesture. I mean, we're in that territory, a different piece of it, which is what you brought up, and I don't know if we really wanted to get into this. Here is what's going there is forward-looking movement seeking to bypass all of this political noise and set into law a new US-Israel relationship. We were talking before about whether this is the moment when we, this when we untether it. There are certainly efforts to put into law a new paradigm of US-Israel relations that will further or continue and maybe expand the tethering of US-Israel relations into the future, irrespective of what happens in Congress or the administration, and make it very, very hard to unwind. That's what you're seeing now in the efforts in both the House and Senate National Defense Authorization Acts, which are must-pass legislation, and that's what you're seeing in an absolutely extraordinary provision, which was stuck into the Senate version of the annual Intelligence Appropriations Bill, which is not must-pass legislation, so authorization bill, so we don't know if that one will pass, because it's not must pass, but that's a, that's a whole webinar in itself.

### **Ahmed Moor 22:05**

Thanks, Lara, Barbara, when it, when it comes to thinking through the US policy process, where do we go after the Trump administration is over? So we already know that US policy is no longer, no longer persists from one administration to the to the next. Trump is unusual in that it may not persist from one month to the next, but what's to prevent the unraveling of the of the policy taking shape in the next administration?

### **Barbara Slavin 22:36**

Yeah, I mean he can change his mind in one day or one one hour, so that's a really hard hypothetical to address. I mean, the question for me is whether we can get through the rest of the Trump administration without a new war and a worse war, whether this kind of no war, no peace situation can be extended, whether the MOU can be extended if there is not a real agreement between the United States and Iran, which is going to be very, very difficult to accomplish. So, you know, I think changes in the region that are going to have an impact. We're already seeing countries, Arab countries in the GCC, for example, diversifying relationships, distancing themselves in various ways from the United States, trying to find ways to co-opt Iran, bribe Iran into not attacking them again, and I'm very interested to see how those processes

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develop, whether there can be the beginnings of a regional security architecture, which has been talked about forever and has never really been created, that includes Iran instead of excluding Iran. If the region can begin to move forward, that may determine where the next US administration goes.

Because I agree with Trita, I mean Americans want out of the Middle East, they don't want to keep getting sucked back in after everything we've, we've been through, particularly since 911. They want fewer troops there, fewer aircraft carriers, and we've seen that our bases are extremely vulnerable to attack. Will we start scaling those back? Those would be important indications that that the aircraft carrier, which is US policy toward the Middle East, is finally beginning to shift direction. And I think that's something both parties could, could get around because of this war and how unpopular it is, but again we have to see how the negotiations go with Iran.

I did want to just make a brief comment, if I'm not talking too long, about some of the language that J.D. Vance used, I mean he's so young, maybe he doesn't even remember when President Obama gave his first inaugural, he said to the Iranians that we will stretch out our hand if you will unclench your fist, and JD Vance almost word for word talked about stretching out our hand to the Islamic Republic of Iran. I nearly fell off my chair when he said it. I mean, the Iranians are not naive, and they're not accepting any of this at face value, but it's the sort of language that is driving many in Israel in the foundation for defensive democracies, etc. driving them absolutely insane.

### **Ahmed Moor 25:37**

I appreciate that historic note. I want to go back to treat us mentioning interests. When we, when we think dispassionately about US interests, it's difficult to think about interest abstracted away from domestic politics. And we've got a presidential election coming up in 2028 and one looks at JD Vance and his description of the Israelis. He says they're a good partner, in the same way that the United Kingdom or France are good partners. Trita mentioned this, it's a way of de-exceptionalizing the relationship. What does that imply about US interests as compared to Israeli interests today? And, of course, again, politics are local, so what does that mean for who JD Vance is speaking to domestically? Trita, you want to tackle that one initially?

### **Trita Parsi 26:23**

As I mentioned earlier on, we have already seen a clear divergence of interest between the United States and Israel on this issue, and that's part of the reason why we're seeing the division that has already started to take place, but what you're also adding there is that the politics of this is very different now. It is not that challenging or costly, necessarily. In fact, I think this will play well, very well, in JD's own base, a base that probably is a little bit disappointed in him, because they had hopes that he would have prevented the war in the first place. I think part of the reason why he's taking on this very significant role is as a way of rebuilding his standing in that base, and say, okay, I may not have been able to prevent this war. At the end of the day,

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he's not the president, he's just the vice president. No one had any expectations whatsoever of Kamala Harris, but nevertheless, his base does have an expectation of him, and this is a way for him to redeem himself in that crowd, and I think, frankly, you know, compared to all the things he had to deal with, such as conquering Greenland or defending ICE in Minnesota, this is probably much, much better for him for his 2028 standing. So it's really fascinating that this is now a scenario in which you have the president really aggressively going against the Israelis, as so does JD, in a way that is very systematic and structured and strategic.

These are not just off-the-cuff comments in which he says that he's angry at them, they're going at very, very critical things. Let me give you an example, the president himself suddenly said that the Iranians are very rational. He said that they're pleasant to deal with, and that's going to be very, very hard for people to be convinced, thinking that he actually believes that. And he also said something along the lines that they are looking out for their country and their people, something along those lines. On the surface, this can sound, as you know, just another comment, and people probably don't take a lot of the president's comments too seriously, but I thought this was actually very, very strategic, because he was directly attacking the three main pillars of Israel's entire narrative about Iran that has been advancing the US for the last 25 or so years, which asserts that Iran is irrational, ideological, and suicidal. If you accept these three things, the first two ensures that you cannot pursue diplomacy or deterrence, because you cannot have deterrence against an irrational actor. It presumes a degree of rationality on the other side, and if you say on top of that, that they're suicidal, it means you can't do diplomacy, you can't do deterrence, and you have no choice but to go into preventive war, because they will attack you otherwise.

So, if you want to push the United States into a corner in which its only choice is to take preventive military action, then you need a narrative like this. I don't believe the Israelis themselves believe this, but they believe in the value that it has in pushing the US in this corner. And what did Trump do? He went after these pillars straightforward, they're rational, they're pleasant to deal with, and they're not suicidal because they're looking out for the interests of their country and their people. Now we can have disagreements as to whether this is true or what degree is true or not. I'm only making a comment that he is systematically trying to destroy much of the Israeli narrative that has held a significant position in the American debate on. What options are viable or not viable with Iran, and by doing so, he's giving himself significant maneuverability and dramatically reducing the maneuverability of the Israelis. Now, of course, making this statement once or twice is not enough. It took years to build it up. It's going to take much more effort to undo it, but you're seeing, I think, the beginnings of that effort, whether he concludes it or not, again a different story, but this was not an insignificant or off the cuff statement. This was very strategic and calculating, I suspect.

### **Ahmed Moor 30:32**

Well, so a follow-up question, there is, it is it correct to describe JD Vance's personal interest in playing to an America First audience as being commingled today with America's actual interest

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rendered through sound economics and security in the Middle East, are those things roughly in line with one another today?

### **Trita Parsi 30:52**

Well, at least in the limited sense of getting out of the Middle East, and then as a result, the necessity of taking on the pro-Israel lobby and the manner in which that plays well with his base. Yes, they are commingled at this point.

### **Ahmed Moor 31:07**

Lara, what do the Israelis believe their interests are? And I know you well enough to not say that this is against the Israeli interest. They should make peace with the Palestinians. What do they think the, what do they think is the best outcome for them through this through this war?

### **Lara Friedman 31:23**

Look, I mean, there's polling. Israelis overwhelmingly, over 90% consider, I mean, they supported the war. First of all, Israel is really overwhelmingly supported the war with Iran. They supported the first round, they supported the second round, and they now overwhelmingly view it as a loss, which, you know, from the perspective of, if you know, while Trump wants to paint this as a great victory, it's a victory, because I mean, it's going to reopen the Straits of Hormuz, which were closed before, not closed before, it's going to bring in nuclear inspectors, well, we had them before, but you ended the JCPOA, from the perspective of Israelis, the purpose of a war is to end the nuclear threat, to end the ballistic missile threat, and to have regime change. You got none of those, and they understand that, I think, correctly, as, as a loss.

And let's remember that from the Israeli narrative that has been sown now for decades, and been sown largely in the Jewish American consciousness as well, by APEC and friends. Iran's very existence is an existential threat, precisely because of what Trita just said. Right, this is essentially an irrational, suicidal, and genocidal regime. That regime change really is the only outcome that's acceptable, and talking about ending the nuclear threat and ballistic missile threats really on the way to regime change, that's understood that you can't have it in place.

The decapitation of the Iranian regime for Israelis was the beginning, supposed to be the beginning of the process of ending Iran. That's a failure. Where that puts us now, as Israel goes into elections the next couple months, it's not clear. I mean, anyone who counts Bibi out at any point, if you haven't learned to not count Bibi out, then you're not learning from history, but you know this is a really tough time. Bibi's allure in Israel, decades now in power, the longest, the longest standing prime minister in Israel's history is as King Bibi. He's the guy who can essentially, you know, get the US to support, stand with, defend anything Israel does anytime, and when you know you lose, like with the JCPOA, you don't pay any price for having literally driven a truck over back and forth over the present United States, and not only do you not pay a price, that president is even more obsequious to you after that than he was before, there's just

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no price that allure starts to fall apart a little bit as you go into elections. While Israel is not being consulted at all on this deal, they are not being consulted on Lebanon, and we haven't really talked about Lebanon. We haven't talked at all about the Palestinians.

I would just want to throw this in, you know, when you, when, when talking about Middle East, with, when you sort of, a lot of Middle East experts who are not focused on, on Palestine, and now Lebanon and Palestine seem very interlinked here. There's always the frustration of, like, don't, don't complicate our really high policy discussion with your little niche issue that you're obsessed with, and that's fine, except being obsessed with Lebanon right now makes sense. Israel is not done in Lebanon. There is no, with all of the tough talk we're hearing from the Trump administration, we're not seeing any tough action yet attached to that tough talk. Absent tough action which says to Israel you cannot do this, if you do this there will be consequences, and no one ever has consequences for Israel, so far.

So, I mean, you'd actually have to show, show that you can't just say it. Absent that, Israel will insist on they're not kidding, freedom of military action in Lebanon. They're not planning to leave, and they're not planning to stop. And talking about ceasefires doesn't have meaning from the perspective. Of Israel, the very existence of Hezbollah, just like the very existence of Hamas, either is viewed as a legitimate military offensive threat that must be dealt with, or it is a pretext to do what you wanted to do anyway, for your own reasons, like continuing permanent presence in Lebanon.

The question really then comes down to, do we count that out and just focus on negotiations with Iran, assuming that Iran, yeah, they say they're serious about Lebanon, whatever, but they won't be, or do you take seriously the fact that Israel will just meet, will continually maintain this ability to blow up what we're doing with their actions in Lebanon, counting on AIPAC and others to say, fine, we're not going to pick at the Iran deal, but we are going to absolutely insist that the US defend Israel's right, for example, for example, if Israeli soldiers are killed in Iran, sorry, in Lebanon while they are engaged in offensive military action while they're occupying land in another country, Israel says that that's terrorism and responds with a mass destruction in Lebanon, including against civilian targets, and the answer from everyone in the US who defends Israel is Trump has to defend that, that's not a, that's not a violation of a ceasefire

And then let's just again think about the Palestinians for a second, going back to JD Vance, and we can talk about the courageous, interesting things he's saying about Iran. What he said to Israel, among other things, was you can't kill your way out of every problem, or something along those lines, which, let's be clear, that suggests that it's okay to try to kill your way out of other problems. Gaza continues, the if we're talking about a new regional some idea of a stable regional security paradigm that will come out of this Iran deal. It is impossible to think about what that looks like as long as Israel is being given complete freedom of action against Palestinians in Gaza and also the West Bank and complete freedom of action in Lebanon. It's hard to see, it's hard to see what that looks like and how it will be stable in any way.

**Ahmed Moor 37:04**

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Thank you Lara. And thank you for bringing Lebanon to into the conversation. I want to take a moment to also encourage people to share their questions. We're going to reserve 20 minutes for for audience questions in just a few minutes. Barbara and Trita, and maybe Barbara first, How do you explain Iran's seeming commitment to restricting Israel's operations, invasion of occupation of Lebanon. What is it? Is Iran fundamentally emotionally committed, historically committed, strategically committed? What is it about Lebanon that requires the Iranian leadership to say that in fact our destiny, our future is linked to this small unfortunate country on the Mediterranean.

### **Barbara Slavin 37:50**

I would say it's all three. It's a long relationship, as we all know, and I think watching the Israelis kill Hassan Nasrallah, kill all of those Hezbollah officers with exploding pagers and so on was extremely humiliating for Iran, frankly, as well as for Hezbollah, and Iran feels that it has won one the war, and so it is in a position to make demands for what the peace will look like, it is its ability to weaponize the Strait of Hormuz brought the United States to the bargaining table and force Trump into a position where he wanted to sue for peace, for fear that he would turn out to be another Herbert Hoover. We've heard him say this over and over, so the Iranians feel they can make these demands now, and that they're entitled to make these demands. I think you know where we are. I just see everything is so ad hoc in a way, and we're seeing basically the Iranians are going to grab what they can get while they can get it with a very realistic appreciation for the fact that this can all break down any minute, so they have their \$6 billion already in unfrozen assets, which there's still an argument: do they have to spend, spend it in the United States, or can they spend it elsewhere on food and medicine? They have 60 days to export oil freely and get paid in US dollars.

I mean, I think every step is going to be what does Iran see it can get out of it that day, that week, and then if that works, they'll go on to the next, but if this, if this all falls apart in 60 days, the Iranians will still feel that they've gained a great deal, and they'll be able to point the finger at the Israelis for refusing to abide by by multiple ceasefires in Lebanon and defying the American president, but yeah, I mean, this is a, you know, I've, it's an important relationship that the IRGC. Help create Hezbollah in the 1980s after the Israelis invaded in 1982 Hassan Nasrallah was very important to Iran. I did a monograph about this back in 2008 for the late lamented US IP, where Iranians talked about Hassan Nasrallah as, as an equal, that he was the one who was helping to guide Iranian policy in the Arab world. Hezbollah was a trainer for Iran in Iraq, in, in Yemen, defended Assad in Syria. This, this was a very important partnership, and even though Hezbollah has been weakened, this partnership remains, and Iran is not going to sacrifice what is left of Hezbollah to Bibi Netanyahu.

### **Ahmed Moor 40:52**

Thank you, Barbara, Trita please, same question.

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**Trita Parsi 40:55**

I think Barbara is absolutely right. I would perhaps go a bit further and say what the Iranians are trying to do right now with Hezbollah is that they are rebuilding their forward defense. They had this strategy of having a deterrence and a defense in various places. Hezbollah was the most successful and important one, and it was successful for 20 years, because in 2006 when Hezbollah and Israel went to war. Israel lost that war, and that's the reason why there wasn't a war between Israel and Iran back in 2006 I spoke to the Deputy Defense Minister of Israel at the time, Ephraim Smith, who told me that Lebanon is just a prelude. This war is going to go to Iran once Hezbollah has been defeated, but it was never defeated, so the war never went there. That's why there wasn't a war in 2006 but there was a war in 2024 2025 and 2026 And now that the Iranians have reestablished their own deterrence, in their view, they are extending that deterrence to Lebanon.

It's going to be part of their forward defense, and here's why I think they are dead serious about this, and why the administration has become that serious about this, because the Iranians will sacrifice the MOU and a final deal with the US if Israel is not out of Lebanon, and the reason why is, are the Iranians going to trust a piece of paper signed by Trump, even if it's a fantastic piece of paper, or are they going to trust their forward defense? That's not a question for the Iranians, so what they're aiming for right now is to achieve both, to have their forward defense and have a deal with the US, but if the two of them come into conflict because Israel is still in Lebanon and the US is not putting that sufficient pressure, as Laura pointed out, then I think they will sacrifice the MOU and they will rely on the forward defense, because ultimately, in their view, that is far more reliable than any agreement with the United States, particularly with the Trump administration.

I think the Trump administration fully understands this. If you listen carefully to what JD is saying, and I think his statements are much more calculated, perhaps than much of what Trump says, or at least Trump has a variety of statements, some that he takes seriously, and some that he doesn't himself take seriously, but JD is talking about how the regional ceasefire is almost an American demand, or an American desire, because of the necessity of ending the war entirely in order to make sure that it doesn't flare up again. This used to be an Iranian demand, but is now presented as an American desire, and I think the US side fully understands the Iranians will walk out. It doesn't matter how far they get in the MOU if the Israelis are still there. The problems or challenges beyond the difficulty of pushing the Israelis are, although the US absolutely has the leverage to do this, is that there, you know, during this time period, it's not going to be overnight, it's going to be over the course of the next 60 days, during that period, there will be probably quite a few clashes between Israel and Hezbollah that would be highly problematic. The US side is at times very frustrated, believing that Iran doesn't assert enough of a control over Hezbollah, but also you have disputed territories, meaning there are certain territories that are claimed both by Lebanon and Israel, and I don't think that has been fully resolved, so that may be a conflict that continues to exist, but if the Israelis are not out of Lebanon, I don't think there will be a US Iran deal.

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### **Ahmed Moor 44:14**

Wow, so, so now I'd like to transition to some questions from from audience members, Barry Posen, and we'll stay with you, Trita. If that's all right, the US foreign policy establishment has been committed for years to the proposition that the US has important interests in the Persian Gulf. These can be summed up in two words: energy and money. If consensus on this proposition does not change, then how much untethering from the greater Middle East, and its disputes, can the US actually achieve?

### **Trita Parsi 44:49**

Yeah, right. So, an honor to have a question from Barry, who is one of the most important thinkers and establishers of restraint. So absolutely delighted that he is listening on this, and he's quite right that that is core interest that I think restrainers as well agreed to, of course. I think what we have seen, though, and this is an area that Barry has much more expertise than I do, but what we've seen with this very strong military presence in the region, it really has not lived up to what it was supposed to do. It was supposed to deter the Iranians from attacking, but the problem was that the Iranians weren't attacking. The US itself started the war, and then once the US started the war, within that war, these bases did not function as a deterrent against Iranian attacks, instead they became a magnet of it, and the perspective in the GCC countries right now is that they're not going to abandon their relationship with the United States, but it's not going to be structured and based on what it was before, and it's not going to be all their eggs in the American basket. I don't think a lot of these bases are going to be rebuilt or refinanced, they're going to, it is not going to be like a stark decision.

I suspect that they will just sail into the sunset, because I don't think the GCC states are that eager to pay for it, and I don't think the US will pay for it. I think they will continue to buy a lot of weapons from the United States, but what is really fascinating, and I think Barbara alluded to it before, the MOU has set up these different working groups that are addressing various issues, and one of them is dealing with regional security, but regional countries are involved in almost all of these, I think, in all of them, but different regional countries are involved in different working groups, so the regional buy-in for this deal is dramatic and far beyond what we saw in the JCPOA. The absence of the Europeans is also, of course, very clear, and the GCC states have completely replaced, and not just the GCC state, Turkey and Egypt as well.

So I think we are throughout all of this seeing the beginning steps of some sort of a security architecture that would allow the United States to leave without leaving chaos and without leaving influence, because it will still be able to have influence because of the arm sales to many of these countries, and because at the end of the day there are going to continue to be partners, but it's going to look very, very differently from what they did before, and frankly, from a US standpoint, and I would be eager to hear what Barry thinks. I think, frankly, much better for the US as well, because there will be an interest for all of these states to make sure that energy and security are continued to flow. None of them are going to be happy about it being able to be closed off and on, and what the US side wants, what the administration wants, is to make sure

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that when it comes to the strait, it is not under the control of Iran and Oman alone, but that they can regionalize it, so that the entire GCC is part of it. That would enable, first of all, far less of an Iranian influence over it, but also for the US side to say that the Iranians are not controlling it, but rather this is a regional thing, and that in and of itself could be a beginning step towards a bigger, more comprehensive regional architecture for the security architecture for the region.

### **Barbara Slavin 48:10**

Could I just add something to that? I mean, of course, one of the effects of this war has been to increase the motivation for countries to get off fossil fuels, hopefully soon, and also a number of countries are building alternate ways to get out energy that bypass the Strait of Hormuz, so the need for the US to be there to guarantee energy supplies, I think, is diminished. The other thing is the economic ties between Iran and the GCC. Now, I don't think this \$300 billion reconstruction fund will ever really materialize, but we're already seeing countries like Qatar, they have a plan to unify their electricity grid with Iran to help Iran get through electricity shortages during the summer months, in particular, and to give Iran a good reason not to attack Qatar again if there are new hostilities, and I think we're going to see these kinds of approaches by the GCC states, because they understand that this is perhaps the best insurance policy against being targeted again.

### **Ahmed Moor 49:22**

Lara, please go ahead.

### **Lara Friedman 49:24**

Sorry, just, just one more point, which is, you know, one of the arguably the signature achievement of the Trump administration in his first term in the Middle East was the Abraham Accords, which was meant to be a new regional political diplomatic security paradigm that would, that would get you know, gain steam, you know, against Iran, the rest of the region. What's interesting is what's coming out of this Iran war, in this Iran agreement, is potentially a much more viable regional security architecture, which renders the I would argue. Renders the Abraham Accords moot, or at least overtaken by events, which is is a really fascinating sidebar in terms of the Israel piece of this as well, because the Abraham Accords was first and foremost about normalizing Israel's role in the region through the structure, which makes it in Israel everyone's benefit to normalize Israel from a security perspective, and everything else this completely over to if this is successful, I would argue this has the potential to just erase the Abraham Accords from the the entire discussion for the region.

### **Ahmed Moor 50:32**

Well, let's stay with you, Lara, for a moment. We've got a question, forgive me for mispronouncing your name if I do, but Ash Khan Hashem, poor if Israel continues to take action

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to torpedo the talks, i.e. Lebanon. What type of punitive action could, would Trump reasonably take against Israel to prevent this?

### **Lara Friedman 50:53**

So, this is always a fun question. For years, when many of us have argued, you know, the US has to get tougher with Israel. The answer is, the only way to convince Israel of anything is to hug it tighter, you know. Pressure doesn't work, sanctions don't work, and the real answer is we've never really tried any meaningful sanctions or pressure. The reality is that the US-Israel relationship is so deep and so multifaceted that there are, I would argue, unlimited points of pressure, some of them public, some of them private. From the public side, there's a range of diplomatic options from the simply, you know, calling, you know, calling in a, an ambassador for a demarche, or refusing to take meetings, or public, there's all sorts of public, public things that Israel doesn't want to have happen to some very specific things that can be taken.

This is a president who is very happy to say I'm withholding benefits. I'm not going to implement this law. See if the administration sues me. He also has the possibility of doing nice things for the Palestinians, for example, like insisting on an end to Gaza, or not supporting Israel at the UN when it says that, you know, it's allowed to kill as many people as it wants in Lebanon, every day it's actually this. I don't mean to give it like a knot. There are those of us who, behind the scenes, for decades, have worked up tables of, well, if you wanted to get tough, here's an ever escalating list of things you can do. I mean, I was doing this 20 years ago under previous presidencies when we were asked, you know, well, what could we do? Here's a table of escalating things you could do in the cost benefits analysis. On each, I'm sure those tables are being done by other people today. There is, we have so much leverage over Israel. The fact that we, as the superpower, which is Israel's at this point only major ally, really in the world, act as if we are powerless to do anything except plead, that is a position we have chosen to take. It doesn't reflect reality in any, any dimension.

### **Ahmed Moor 52:51**

We have a question from Dinu Beslu, and maybe we can go, Barbara, and then Trita. In what ways might Iran overplay their hands in their eagerness, as mentioned, Iran is trying to extract benefits rather by the moment, rather than with a constant set of demands. Also, why would they not go for more minimalist demands rather than pushing for seemingly maximal maximalist package, which, which could backfire?

### **Barbara Slavin 53:17**

Yeah, I mean, I, unlike JD Vance, I'm not sure I have tremendous faith in this Iranian government or President Trump, you know. Instead of a new regime, we have largely IRGC retreads, people like Mohsen Rezai, who've been around forever and who have strong hostility toward Israel, the United States, and so on, and Iran's desire to, as Trita pointed out, rebuild its forward defenses could certainly annoy not just Israel but the United States. If, if there are

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incidents that that affect Americans, that kill Americans, obviously, that would be extremely dangerous, but, but you know, just this notion that Iran thinks it won. I mean, I was watching, you know, the soccer match. I don't know how many of you saw this amazing football match between Belgium and Iran, and Iran is really good at defending its turf. I mean, that goalie was incredible. He blocked every shot. It, he was like a hero out of, you know, the Shahnameh to me. I mean, he was amazing.

But Iran is not so good when it moves from defending its own turf and defending its own interests to spreading influence. It, it invariably antagonizes its Arab neighbors, other neighbors. Trita knows, I mean, there is a tendency to overplay the hand, to be too full of oneself, and I'm worried about that. I would like this Iranian government. It to be realistic in terms of what it can get from the Trump administration and how it can ensure a more peaceful environment going forward, so Iran should let the IAEA come back in and examine what is left of its nuclear program, for example, it should come clean about what it did in the past involving weaponization efforts, it could win so many brownie points from the international community, as well as from Iran skeptics in the United States, if it were to act responsibly and not overplay its hand, but I'm afraid that this desire to show we won, you lost, and to assert Iranian sovereignty will make the regime behave in an obnoxious manner that will undercut the ability going forward. Trita can talk about about Mohammed Bakr Kali Baugh. He's an interesting character, he's very pragmatic. It's possible that he can can pull this off with support from the new Supreme Leader from Pezeshkian and the President, and so on, but I'm worried about it.

### **Trita Parsi 56:10**

I think Barbara is right to be worried that they could do various things that would be highly, highly problematic and counter to their own interest. I am more worried about other things, though. So, just on the thing of them overplaying or being gloating, etc. Remember when the MOU was about to be signed earlier on, the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson tweeted a picture of Emperor Valerian as he was defeated by Shah Poo the Second, and said something along the line that the Romans thought that they could defeat the Sassanidians, and instead they had to sue for peace on Iran's term. He later on took down that picture, and they have actually not gone back to using language of that kind. I think they've been much more careful not to come across as gloating or anything like that, but I think it's, it's quite fair to be worried about overplaying of their hands by either side, frankly.

But there was something in the premise of the question that I don't agree with, because it seemed to assert that if it might be easier to get a small deal, and you know, they would overplay their hands by trying to get a bigger deal. I'm worried about the opposite. I am much worried, much more worried about the opposite, that they are not going to be willing to go for a big deal, a historic deal, a legacy deal, and that as a result, that will make it much more difficult for Trump to justify continuing on this path, given the cost that he will be paying with relations with Israel, etc. The only thing that makes it worthwhile, and frankly, the reason why I think Trump is even trying is because he's now trying to assert his legacy through a deal instead of getting rid of the regime. But then this needs to be big, it needs to be historic, all of the things

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that Trump loves, and if they go too small at this point, not only sure it could be easier to get it through, but it would be much more difficult to make it long lasting, and frankly, with Trump, I don't even think it would work, and we remember earlier on the Iranians were like we're willing to do x, y, and z, like do something else for more, six more months, in order for the snapback sanctions to be delayed six months or so. It's like this doesn't even register on Trump's mind. He couldn't care less about details of this kind.

If you want to grab his attention, you have to offer something historic, and the Iranians have something historic to offer. He wants to be able to say that he made peace with them if they're willing to go that far and actually have a level of reconciliation. I think that would make it much more attractive to Trump and much more likely that there would be a deal and much more likely that it would last, because for a deal like that he will lift primary sanctions, and if primary sanctions are lifted and American companies enter the Iranian the market, it's not a guarantee that the deal will last, but it will make it much more difficult to uproot it compared to what it was with the JCPOA. In addition to the regional buy-in that currently exists.

### **Lara Friedman 59:11**

And if I could just with a deal like that, it's a lot harder for Israel to get away with blowing it up, anything that's interim, anything that is, you know, an ongoing negotiation for years and years. The more fragile it is from the outset, the easier it is for Israel, I think, to find a way to blow it up, and the less political price they pay for trying to do so.

### **Ahmed Moor 59:34**

Right. So, let me.. I, we're out of time, but let me exercise my moderator's prerogative here, and ask you all in just a few words, what is what is the best alternative to a negotiated outcome here for the US and Iran, starting with Trita Lara, and then we'll give Barbara the last word.

### **Trita Parsi 59:53**

There is no good alternative to a deal. If there is no deal, we're going to go back to Psalm. Form of military confrontation, whether it will be a full war or a smaller war, it's unclear to me, but it will be very bad. The Iranians will close the straits again. It will create all kinds of economic pressures. It will create all kinds of pressure on Trump from the very same people like Lindsey Graham, who are now saying, okay, let's see if this works, while they're currently preparing their plan, not only to sabotage it, but to tell Trump afterwards, now you have no choice but to go all in militarily, which means ground troops and other things. So, I think there really isn't any alternative, and frankly, that is part of the reason why the likelihood of a deal is not that bad, because there is no alternative.

### **Lara Friedman 1:00:38**

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I completely agree with Trita. This is this is the only option right now. Failure of this is the return of essentially a full on neocon approach to we're going to change the whole region, clear everything off, which suits people in this country who have always felt that way, and it suits a lot of people in Israel. You know, it's not just war with Iran, it's regional reconstruction, it's regional complete regional realignment that is the goal here, but not realignment in the way that you get out of a peace deal. I don't think it's a better, I don't think there's any reasonable alternative to this. I think logically that is the only alternative.

### **Barbara Slavin 1:01:16**

Yeah, I'll add to the chorus, we've all been arguing for years that there is no military solution to the problems that we have with the Islamic Republic of Iran. There is no military solution, there are only diplomatic solutions. So, my hope is that after 60 days we are not back at war, and they simply extend negotiations. I agree with Laura, it may be fragile, but it's better to keep extending the nominal ceasefire than to go back to work.

### **Ahmed Moor 1:01:45**

I hope you're all right. I hope JD Vance and Donald Trump are listening, or somebody close to them. I want to thank Barbara Slave and Laura Friedman and Trita Parsi for their time, really authoritative voices. I've learned a lot. Thank you. Thanks to all of our participants, as well, the audience, please subscribe to the Quincy mailing list from Quincy institute.org that's quincyinst.org So you can receive invitations to all of the institution's events and follow the work that they do. Also, please subscribe to [fmep.org](http://fmep.org) and check out the Stimson Center. Thank you again for participating today, and for joining in our efforts to promote ideas that move US foreign policy away from endless war toward military restraint and diplomacy in the pursuit of international peace. Thank you.