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WEBINAR

ISRAEL AND IRAN AT WAR

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PANEL DISCUSSION:

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TOOSI: Hello, everyone. I am Nahal Toosi, senior foreign affairs correspondent at Politico, where I also write the Compass column. I'm truly honored to be here with these very distinguished panelists. The title of this discussion is Israel and Iran at War, although things are moving so quickly that maybe they're at ceasefire now. I don't know. And by the time we get out of this discussion, they might be at war again. And of course the U.S. is sort of involved, but not really. It's hard to tell. Our panelists today will try to get at this and many other questions.

A quick note on the format, I'm going to briefly introduce the panelists, then we'll jump straight into a set of questions I've prepared before ultimately turning to questions sent in by audience members. Today we have with us Jeff Feltman, a veteran U.S. diplomat who also served for nearly six years as the under secretary general for political affairs at the United Nations in New York. He's currently the John C. Whitehead visiting fellow in international diplomacy in the Foreign Policy program at Brookings. We also have Phil Gordon, another veteran U.S. official who recently served as national security advisor to Vice President Kamala Harris during the Biden administration. Phil is now with Brookings as the Sydney Stein Jr. scholar in the Foreign Policy program's Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology. And we have Suzanne Maloney, the vice president and director of the Foreign policy program at the Brookings Institution. She's a specialist on Iran and Persian Gulf energy, and she has advised both Democratic and Republican administrations on Iran policy, including as an external advisor to senior State Department officials during the Obama years. And of course, last but not least, we have Itamar Rabinovich, a former Israeli ambassador to Washington during the Itzhak Rabin years. Itamar is now a distinguished nonresident fellow in Brookings's Foreign Policy program focusing on Middle Eastern policy. So welcome everyone.

Let's start with Suzanne. Suzanne, we have seen some extraordinary events in the past two weeks. Israel attacking Iranian nuclear and military facilities while encouraging Iranians to rise up against their regime and the U.S. joining the fight by bombing key Iranian nuclear sites. Now, President Trump says a ceasefire is an effect between Israel and Iran, but it appears shaky at best. I'm gonna ask you to put on your soothsayer's hat. What will tomorrow and next week bring?

MALONEY: Haley, you've really started with the toughest of all questions. And that's exactly why we're so thrilled to have you here moderating this conversation among my very distinguished colleagues and myself. I think it would be dangerous to try to predict right now. Obviously, this has been a breathless couple of weeks in terms of the series of events that brought us from an imminent set of US-Iranian negotiations to unprecedented Israeli strikes on Iran's nuclear and military installations, and then the U.S. entry into the war over the weekend with the bombing of Fordo and several other very critical nuclear sites from U.S. territory. This has been just a remarkable period. The ceasefire announced yesterday and that appears to have held despite some last-minute challenges and some fairly fiery remarks from President Trump over his truth social account and via satellite television interviews, I think leave a lot of questions about how solid this ceasefire is going to be. We can look back to the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, and I think similar doubts existed over how stable that period would be. Both sides did engage in some incursions. I think it would not be entirely surprising if we do see some efforts by the Israelis to ensure that they got the job done, efforts by Iranians to flex their muscles. But really the key questions now are the battle damage assessment, the extent to which the Iranians can actually reconstitute some elements of their program. And what the United States and the Israelis might do if in fact they see that there are key elements of the program that have been left intact and that the Iranians could somehow now race to a nuclear weapons capability if they so chose.

TOOSI: But just to be clear, we're not, we don't have peace in our time just yet.

MALONEY: Well, President Trump clearly wants that. He's talking about, you know, sort of no hate and a whole new environment. I think that's entirely improbable. And I think both sides of anything

are going to be more determined to try to ensure their own dominance. The Iranians will have to come back from a fairly significant set of damage to key installations. And I, I think they look far weaker today than at any point in the post-revolutionary period.

TOOSI: We'll definitely get more into that. Phil, I'm curious about the decision-making process involved in all of this. Israel and the U.S. knew that because of the events since October 7th, 2023, Iran was unusually vulnerable. And so they acted, even if U.S. intelligence still said Iran had not decided to weaponize its nuclear program. But they acted with a speed and an audacity that you probably would never have seen in the Biden administration. Now, Trump supporters will tell you they're trying to solve the problem, not just manage it. Isn't there something to be said for their approach? You're on mute.

GORDON: Good to be, thanks, Haley. Good to do with you and my distinguished colleagues. Is there something to be said for that approach? Possibly, we'll see. There is a best-case scenario here. We won't know for a while if it takes place, but the best case is, indeed, Israel assertively took charge of the situation. The United States went along. Destroyed or degraded this nuclear program that has been a problem for the region for decades. Set back Iran's military capability, which had been used to interfere in Iran's neighbors, threaten Israel, the United States, support terrorism for decades as well. And if we're really doing best case scenario, the Iranian regime decides or realizes that this nuclear program that they had invested in for decades was a colossal waste of money and counterproductive because look where it is. And if you follow that through, and I think that's what the Israelis are gambling on, they realized you can't stand up to Israel and the United States. It's counterproductive to invest in a nuclear program. And going forward, they'll make peace with their neighbors and not threaten them with nuclear weapons or terrorists, and we will all do better. That's not crazy. It could evolve in that direction. But aiming for that best-case scenario is hugely risky. One, because we've all learned that in the Middle East, most best-case scenarios don't work out. There's so many things that can go wrong. And this one can still go wrong. So it seems like we've avoided the immediate escalation into conflict, the United States getting dragged into war. I mean, if the ceasefire holds, that risk maybe was overstated. But we have no idea what Iran's future decisions on the nuclear program will be. And that best-case scenario where they realize the error of their ways and stop doing this is unlikely because it's just as likely or more likely that they will conclude that they need a nuclear weapon. They still probably have highly enriched uranium. They know how to make centrifuges. Iran is a very big country. And just like after Israel bombed the Iraqi nuclear program in 1981, Saddam decided to move through a covert program, that's probably more likely. So sure, it could work out in the way Israel hopes, but as we've seen so often in the Middle East for decades, it could also go catastrophically wrong, which is why people like me thought the better bet was to indeed manage the program and get a diplomatic deal that guaranteed Iran wouldn't get a nuclear weapon in a different way without the risks of a war.

TOOSI: But isn't it possible that Iran might think twice, you know, just seeing this display of military power? I mean, you seem like you still think diplomacy might have been the best option. But again, isn't that just managing a problem instead of solving it?

GORDON: Well, I do think there's a strong lesson in the Middle East about managing it. I would love to solve the problems of the Middle East. But when leaders, including especially US leaders, have decided to solve it, it again has gone catastrophically wrong. The Iraq war is the best example of that. But there are plenty of others. So you can argue it's worth the risk. But we're not going to solve the problems of the Middle East. And like I said, I still think in this situation, so we've set back or the Israelis and the US have set back Iran's program for X amount of time. But a nuclear deal would have done the same thing in a more assured way without the risks of war and guaranteed -- even the JCPOA that Trump tore up in 2018, if that were still in place today, we'd

have another five and a half years where Iran wasn't enriching at Fordo, didn't have any 60% uranium, and right now it could have a couple hundred kilograms, we don't know where it is, a limited number of centrifuges, a very small amount of low enriched uranium, and inspectors running all over the country. So like whatever, 72 hours into this to decide, well, it worked, we dealt with the nuclear program and we didn't have a war, seems to me a little bit premature.

TOOSI: That's completely fair. Itamar, let's turn to you. Israel attacked Iran one day after a 60-day deadline that Trump gave Iran to make a deal. But two days before the US and Iran were due to meet again to continue negotiations. I don't know about you guys, but I've never taken Trump's deadlines too seriously. So I guess what I'm wondering, Itamar is- Why couldn't Israel have waited until after that meeting that was scheduled to happen in Oman? Why the rush to strike on the 61st day? You'll have to unmute.

RABINOVICH: Okay, sorry. I'm not sure that I would use the word rush. And I'm pretty sure that this was not a surprise to President Trump and his administration. The two countries were quite well coordinated. He must have reached the conclusion that the Iranians were not negotiating seriously. And he could have waited a few more days. Israel could have a few more days but there was the element of surprise to be taken into account in what turned out to be a very surprising and a very successful operation. Second, you know, we don't need to look at it only from this year's perspective. This is a long-grown conflict between Iran and the U.S. I mentioned James Bill's book, *The Eagle and the Lion*, 1988 book about that relationship. Israel and this regime has been very inimical, hostile and offensive to Israel since 1979. It has put together the group of proxies and the attack on October 7th was perpetrated by one of these proxies with full knowledge of Iran. And Hamas in fact was built up, equipped, trained by Iran. A second point I'd like to make, we keep talking about the nuclear dimension of this war. Let me bring in the conventional one. Iran went into this war with 3,000 ballistic missiles. At the rate it was producing them, we would have had in a few years 8,000 ballistic missiles, we've seen here, we witnessed firsthand what some of these missiles do when they land in populated areas. It's about more than just a nuclear program. Finally, I think the best to add to what Phil has just said, an agreement, an improved version of the JCPOA. I don't rule it out completely. The art of diplomacy, and I'm using the word art advisedly here, it would be to find a formula that would do the job without humiliating Iran to the point where it won't be able to do it or won't be willing to do.

TOOSI: Thank you. That's a very good point, especially bringing in the fact that it's not just the nuclear program. There's so much else that this attack, these strikes on Iran have managed to accomplish, especially taking out many of the missile launchers as Israel has. Jeff. So this is kind of a tricky question to phrase, so have some mercy on me. But it seems as if the United Nations, a place where you used to work, is sort of a bystander in all this. It seems like a lot of international institutions and international law itself just don't seem to be relevant. Do these international institutions have any meaning or any effect anymore when you see wars like this break out?

FELTMAN: It's a really tough question, Haley, and thanks for joining us today. We're certainly in a different spot than we were, say, during the Cuban Missile Crisis. During the Cuban missile crisis, U Thant, the secretary general of the United Nations, was the one who brokered the face-saving agreement about removing missiles from Cuba and, quietly, Turkey. That was the UN. That was the UN with Khrushchev and Kennedy that did it. We're not seeing anyone really appealing to the UN today, even though the Security Council has the responsibility for the advance of international peace and security. But what I would say are two things. First, if there is an agreement somehow between the U.S. and Iran on the nuclear program, or on other aspects, I would suspect that the Trump administration will take it to the Security Council. They won't ask the UN to negotiate it, but they will take the, they'll take it to the Security Council because the Security Council is the only body in the world that can make it universally legitimate. I would imagine that there would be

controversial elements to it and the Security Council blessing makes it international law. This is the same way the JCPOA was worked on in 2015. JCPOA was not negotiated via the UN, but it was endorsed by the UN. And there were key elements that were then monitored by the UN. The second point is the IAEA is a UN agency. It remains absolutely critical to our understanding of what the Iranian nuclear program consists of. And picking up on one of the things that Phil said, it would be concerning if Iran would now withdraw from the Nonproliferation Treaty of 1970 and kick out all the IAEA inspectors.

TOOSI: I think the points you're making are very important, especially with the IAEA, but it also seems like, you know, a UN endorsement, IAEA inspections, things like that, like that never seemed to satisfy concerns that Israel had, that Iran was violating the JCPOA, that something sneaky was going on, that the UN wasn't really taking Israel's concerns into consideration. And I know that the UN is, you, know, it's consists of its member organizations and it's like Madison Square Garden, not the teams, whatever. But what do you do as an international body like the UN when you have actors who simply just don't trust you because they don't trust other players?

FELTMAN: Well, I mean, the UN, I like the Madison Square Garden analogy, but it's a platform, it's a mechanism.

TOOSI: That's not an original one for me. That's an old one, but go ahead

FELTMAN: That's the true way, because the UN is a platform, it's a mechanism, it is a tool. If the member states don't want to use it, well then it's kind of irrelevant. But again, the Security Council is the only body in the world that has the power to make international law. Now on the JCPOA, the JCPOA did not deal with the proxy issues, but there were other parts of the UN, who were monitoring the proxy issues. The reports that were done on Lebanon, for example, will talk about the role of Hezbollah and try to bring some clarity to what Hezbollah was doing. This was before Israel degraded Hezbollah so severely. Now I was somewhat critical inside the UN. I thought we pulled our punches a bit too much on some of these issues. But it wasn't simply the JCPOA that triggered UN monitoring of Iran's malevolent influence in the region. It was other efforts as well. And, you know, the IAEA has been very clear that there is no civilian use for uranium to be as enriched to the level that the Iranians were enriching it to. There's no civilian. And, of course, the IAEA just a week or so ago released a report critical of Iran's nuclear program and played into, I think, probably the timing of the Israeli decision. It was a convenient timing for, in terms of Israel having that IAEA report. So I think that the UN has an important role. It's just simply not going to be the center of the negotiations the way that the way that the UN might've played in earlier periods.

TOOSI: So things have definitely really changed. Suzanne, I think I am giving you the hardest questions. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urged Iranians to rise up against the regime. But they didn't. Why not?

MALONEY: Thanks, Haley. I actually don't think this is one of the hardest questions. I think anyone who imagined that Iranians would see missile strikes and drone strikes across the country, at one point I think it was at least two-thirds of the provinces of Iran had experienced some Israeli military action, and that they would use that as opportunity to rise up against the regime, they haven't been paying close attention to Iranian history, either pre-revolutionary and certainly not post-revolutionary. I think that it was inevitable that there would be at least some effort by the regime to rally the population around the flag, and we of course saw the staged demonstrations. But I think generally speaking that Iranians under siege are unlikely to seize that moment to try to challenge their own authorities because they understand what the implications are likely to be. They understand that this regime is deeply entrenched, that we would not go down without a fight, that there is no real domestic political force that can oppose the regime. This is very much a direct

result of the repression that the Islamic Republic has institutionalized and deployed very effectively in prior moments of challenge that have occurred repeatedly throughout the past 46 years. And I think that there were really no external forces that were going to be capable of mobilizing the population. And there are many, many dissidents, many of whom have been forced to leave Iran over the years. There's also, of course, the former ruling family and Reza Pahlavi, who would have been the crown prince had the monarchy continued. Some of these individuals have significant popular bases outside of Iran and probably even inside of Iran. But they're not really in a position to direct activity or to galvanize some kind of opposition on the ground. And unfortunately from the demonstrations in 2009 after the contested re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or the economically driven protests that we've seen in the late 2017-18-19 period or even the Women Life Freedom Movement in late 2022 and early 2023, we've seen the regime managed to repress all of these individual movements very, very effectively. And we've not seen the types of defections that would lead us to a situation where there might be some kind of splintering of the regime itself.

TOOSI: You know, Suzanne, I mean, this is a very interesting point. Like you have seen this growing discontent among Iranians with the regime. You've seen the regime kind of oppress them, but you've also seen just a kind of a sense of that, a loss of hope that the regime can be reformed, right? So I guess what I'm wondering is if they haven't been able to do it on their own and they have the, I guess, the vibes I got from people that I talked to and, and people that I talk to who talk to people was that Iranians would not mind a helping hand. So I guess what I'm wondering is why didn't that translate this time? Like you have an opportunity and you don't seize it. What happened?

MALONEY: I don't think a war being waged on your homeland really creates an opportunity for political mobilization by a more liberal democratic force, unfortunately. I think this is a regime that I've described as being in a state of slow-motion metastasis. And this crisis, I think, demonstrated that even all the investments in both the nuclear program, its proxy network, and its military capabilities at home did very little to defend Iranians. So I'm sure that the disillusionment, frustration, and alienation of the average Iranian citizen from this system is even higher today than it was at any point in time in the past. But they also know that the regime just retains its repressive power, especially at home. And I think in the aftermath of this exchange of fire, we're likely to see, just as we did at the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the regime turn inward to go after internal critics, to clamp down in a way that makes the pathway to any kind of revolution or even gradual reform much harder today than even 10 days ago.

TOOSI: Yeah, I've definitely heard that elsewhere too. I mean, that the internal repression is definitely going to rise. And I think it says something bigger about just opposition movements in general. I've written about this, it's just they seem to not be able to have the effect that they once did. The human rights movements, these movements, they just, they seem, the dictatorships that they're going up against seem to have gotten a lot smarter and a lot tougher to try to overthrow. Phil, now what if the Islamist regime in Iran does not fall in the wake of all this, but it simply collapses, kind of becomes weakened and not what it was before? What happens then? Is that better or worse than what the world has now in Iran?

GORDON: Well, I think the base case is that the regime endures. Revolutions sometimes happen and regime sometimes fall, but rarely. And so we have to assume it will carry on. We know there's going to be some degree of transition because the supreme leader is 86 and he's not going to around forever. So even separate from any outside intervention or internal decisions, there's gonna be a major change in Iran in that sense. I think, and sort of picking up on where Suzanne left off, the alternative to this regime, I think unfortunately, is not the liberal protesters that we would like to see run Iran. One because they just don't have the physical capacity to take over. The regime is armed and willing to kill, and the opposition is unarmed and not willing to kill. So if there is an

evolution in the regime, unfortunately – and this is where I take issue with the regime change goal – of course, we'd like to see a different regime but be careful what you wish for. It's not going to be the liberal protesters that we are sympathetic to. If there's a regime evolution, it's arguably already underway because the revolutionary generation is getting on and it will be replaced by the next generation. I think more likely it evolves into a more traditional authoritarian regime with military hardliners in power. That could be good, in a sense, because there's no ideology or revolutionary fervor involved, and it's just a country looking after its national interests. But they also could be more hardline. For all of the problems with the supreme leader, he has had an element of caution. And when he is gone, it could be replaced by less cautious military leaders. I would say, though, in a more hopeful tone in terms regime evolution as opposed to revolution, to the extent we can tell, and there aren't great opinion polls in Iran, you can't really rely on elections, but whenever Iranians do get a chance to express themselves even only semi-freely at the ballot box, they seem to say they want a more moderate regime. Every time they get to vote in a presidential election, the regime sifts out candidates but usually allows one or two reformers to run and they usually win. And that happened again in 2024 with the current president Pezeshkian, who ran on a platform of a bit more social moderation and tolerance, fixing the economy, which is shorthand for getting a diplomatic deal with the West on the nuclear program. So I think we can believe and hope, there's a basis for believing that the Iranian public wants to move in that direction. And I don't totally exclude that the regime could evolve in that direction. It would certainly be in its interest to do so, because then it could get a diplomatic deal that would allow for sanctions relief and serve the Iranian people better.

TOOSI: So evolution, not revolution. It's an interesting idea, but believe me, if you'd say that to many people in the diaspora, they might really attack you. So be careful. Itamar, there's genuine confusion about whether the U.S. and Israel have been able to fully eliminate Iran's nuclear program, in part because there's apparently hundreds of kilograms of enriched uranium that have gone missing. What do you predict Israel will do about this? How far will Israel and the U.S. potentially go to ensure that all traces of Iran's program are eliminated?

RABINOVICH: Not immediately, I think the emphasis immediately, and I think President Trump made it very clear earlier today from our timetable, is try to stabilize what is a very fragile truce. And any actions of the kind that you alluded to would undermine the ceasefire, and this may come further down the road. You must assume that they will try in a number of ways to keep the program going, to go covert. They may even get out of the NPT with all the consequences that it could entail. But may I also say something about the earlier discussion about evolution or revolution?

TOOSI: Yes, please.

RABINOVICH: I think we also need to look, maybe not right now, but in the foreseeable future, about an internal collapse. I think the Iranian Revolution was a great revolution on the scale of the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution. And there were some resemblances between the three. In the other two, in the French case, there was a Thermidor fairly soon, the conservative backlash, and then Napoleon and other things. But the original revolution disappeared in a way fairly soon. In Russia, it took about 70 years. At some point I think we could see a collapse of the regime. And let me take a page from the Syrian book. No one, no one outside Syria and maybe inside Syria had realized how rotten and weak the regime was. And all it took was a push from a relatively small group to topple it. So, we don't really know what goes on inside the regime. I don't want to rule out the possibility that not right now, but at some point in the not-too-distant future, the alternative could be not evolution, not revolution, but collapse.

TOOSI: It's a very, very good point. Thank you. Jeff, what do you think Israel's surprise attack and Trump's decision to strike Iran two days after saying he'd decide, quote, within two weeks, end

quote, means for international diplomacy going forward. Can anyone be trusted if, if, you know, you're a country looking to make a deal with President Trump or anyone else? Do, do these promises mean anything anymore?

FELTMAN: I don't think anyone probably takes Trump's timeline seriously, something that you had earlier mentioned. But the Iranians lied about their nuclear program. They lied in 2009 when, well, before 2009, when Fordo was revealed. They lied about, more recently, as the IAEA noted. And then Trump, I suppose there's a softer word than lie, but Trump distracted people by talking about two weeks when, in fact, then he sent the bombers. I think that people are probably just going to take into account in diplomacy that it's the old Reagan thing, you know, you've got to verify, you got to verify whatever anyone is saying. But I don't know. I don't put too much stock in the deadline issue. Had Trump thought that there was serious progress being made in the five rounds of talks Steve Witkoff had via the Omanis with the Iranians, I think he would have found ways to extend his 60-day deadline, for example. He's very impatient. We've seen this. He's a very impulsive. He acts by instinct. But if he thought that these talks were going to be promising with the Iranians, and he wasn't being, as he says, played or tapped out, in his words, I think he would have found a way to go beyond the 60 days. That's clearly not what happened, and the Israelis decided to move based on that deadline, based on the IAEA report, based on the fact that they had a strategic opportunity.

GORDON: Can I jump in and say something on this, Haley and Jeff?

TOOSI: Sure.

GORDON: You're on mute. I was just going to say, I don't think it's necessarily accurate to describe this as Trump running out of 60 days and deciding to act. Israel decided to act regardless of Trump's 60 days. And then when Israel acted and Trump didn't stop it, Trump decided to get on board. It seemed to be going well and now talks about it as if he decided to enforce the 60-day deadline. But that doesn't match up with what actually happened.

TOOSI: I mean, there's a good point to be made there. It is unclear what exactly is in Trump's head. And one thing you learn, I think, covering Trump is multiple things can be true at the same time. He might've genuinely wanted diplomacy and to see if the meeting worked, you know, the meeting that was never held, but at the time, he might've been losing confidence that it would go anywhere. And he might've literally, people are like, did he give a green light or a red light or a yellow light to the Israelis? And I'm like, you know, the light was probably just broken. The Israelis did what they wanted to do. And then Trump was like, eh, you know, whatever, let's just go along with it and it might make me look good. It's also, we're hearing kind of the similar things about his decision in terms of the "within two weeks." You know, there's a lot of signs that he was, he'd already decided, he'd approved the plans to carry out the attack on Fordo, but he reserved the right to call off the order till the last second. So in reality, the decision wasn't made until it was made at the last second and the bombs fell. I don't know. I mean, is it fair to say that we need to kind of be comfortable with some of the gray areas, or, Jeff, maybe this is the question, like, you know. Should there be fewer gray areas?

RABINOVICH: May I say something in this regard?

TOOSI: Sure, Itamar. Go ahead.

RABINOVICH: We need to ask ourselves, what does it tell us about the coming weeks? Because hopefully there will be a renewal of negotiations. Probably they would be difficult. The Iranian may be dragging their feet and so forth and so on. And the question is, what about Trump? How long

would he be willing to wait? Or how soon would he lose his patience with the Iranians and choose a different or let Israel have a different track?

TOOSI: But it's also just, I mean, if I can just make the point, and anyone else jump in here, it's like what does Trump want? What are the end goals of a diplomatic deal? I don't know that anyone really entirely knows this yet, exactly. I mean, Suzanne, what do you think?

MALONEY: I think Trump wants to play peacemaker and he's had that opportunity in the past 48 hours and so he's going to seize it. I don't know that, he clearly does not want Iran to have a nuclear weapons capability but how he defines that and whether his standards are precisely the same as Israel's might be. I suspect there may be some daylight there and I think that one of the challenges that we have now is, it's still said that, you know, Iran has some capability to reconstitute its program. It knows how to make centrifuges. It probably has a number of centrifuges that were not impacted by this series of strikes. It certainly has some stockpile of highly enriched uranium. And one could imagine a situation in which the Iranians played the negotiating game as they have in many times during the past, while looking to try to reconstitute the program covertly. And I think that that is a risk that Israel is certainly aware of and is going to be holding a very hard line. I just want to make one other point, which is that a lot of the debate over the course of the past 12 or 13 days has suggested that the president was on the precipice of a breakthrough with Iran and the Israeli attack demolished that. I think we all know this and we all probably agree on this point, but I think it's really important to say that there was almost no prospect of a really good deal being concluded between the United States and Iran and the wider international community that would have set Iran's nuclear program back in a significant way. The Iranians did not take the Trump administration seriously. The Trump administration did not have negotiators who were well positioned to hold the Iranians' feet to the fire and develop an agreement that was as comprehensive and as detailed as the 157-page Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action that Phil and others in the Obama administration helped to negotiate. So let's be really clear, the military action that we've seen over the course of the past two weeks was not the cause of the failure of diplomacy. It may create a new pathway for diplomacy, even if real risks still exist.

TOOSI: And I mean, one quick thing before we go back to you, Suzanne, because it's going to be your turn. Jeff, did you want to say something?

FELTMAN: Yeah, if I could.

TOOSI: Go ahead.

FELTMAN: I'm picking up on it Itamar's point about the Trump call to the Israelis and the I think that we should look at Lebanon as an analogy, the Lebanon-Israel ceasefire. Because there's a ceasefire in place between Lebanon and Israel, put in place with help of outgoing and incoming administrations, but it hasn't prevented the Israelis from when they have intelligence from continuing to strike targets inside Lebanon that they see as threatening them, as being able to rebuild some of Hezbollah's deeply degraded capabilities. My guess is that with the type of intelligence penetration that we've seen that the Israelis have inside Iran, that if they have evidence of highly rich uranium being moved, of centrifuges being hooked up, things like that, despite whatever President Trump said this morning in his colorful language, they will act, consistent with how they have acted in Lebanon after the U.S.-brokered ceasefire.

TOOSI: I think that's a really good point. And it kind of dovetails with the question I'm going to ask, Suzanne, but just a couple of things. Israel also didn't trust that the negotiations with the U.S. and Iran were going to lead to anything substantial. But the point that I'm also trying to bring up is, you know, we know Trump doesn't want a nuclear Iran, but does he also want them to get rid of all their

ballistic missiles? Does he want them to eliminate the proxies? There's so much more that could go into this, and I still think he doesn't necessarily have the people or the clearly stated end goals of what he wants Iranians to agree to. I think maybe that's part of it. Maybe he just doesn't like being too clear about his end goal, because that holds him to a certain account. So Jeff, you made the point about what Israel is likely to continue to do inside Iran going forward. Suzanne, what will the Iranian government, which almost certainly knows that Israel is going to continue to do things, what is Iran going to do internally? You touched on this a little bit earlier about a clampdown. If you're an Iranian dissident or a member of Iran's Jewish community or anything else, I mean, what can you expect to see in the coming months and years?

MALONEY: Well, I think that we will see, as we've already seen, prosecution of anyone who can be tagged as having been complicit in the Israeli attack. What's really notable about the early days of the attack is how much penetration Israeli intelligence had and freedom of maneuver on the ground within Iran over many months. That certainly had to involve large numbers of people, and I would imagine that the regime is now looking to round those up or at least find scapegoats that it can imprison and execute much in the way that it did in the final years of the Iran-Iraq war to try to terrorize the population, to try and ensure that anyone who has any ideas about an opening will be very quickly silenced. And so I think that they will be doing that. I think they're also going to be trying to ensure that they can stabilize their relationship with some of their partners across the Gulf. The relationship with Saudi Arabia has proved to be one that the Iranians clearly value and it's been hard-fought in terms of reestablishing that diplomatic relationship. And the Saudis were, I think, a voice of reason around this entire crisis. And it is notable that the Iranian this time around did not target Saudi oil infrastructure as they did back in 2019. The attack on Al Udeid was largely performative, the relationship with Qatar is one in which Iran has a position of strength because of the shared oil and gas resource in the Gulf. And so I think this is just going to be a rebuilding period for Iran, they've lost a number of very senior people across the military industrial complex within the system and they're going to have a deep bench, there's no question that they can replace those individuals. But of course, as Phil said, this is all coming at a time when the succession question for the supreme leader is paramount. I don't believe that he's been heard from or seen directly since he's gone into his bunker. And when and how he comes back, I assume at a future Friday prayers, I think is going to be an important moment for the regime to try to broadcast that it's still very much in control.

TOOSI: You know, Itamar, I'm gonna jump to you because what Suzanne said directly speaks to a question I wanted to ask you, which is, what about the rest of the region? And, you know, Suzanne made the point that Iran's gonna probably try to solidify some relationships with Arab countries in the region. What should Israel do now in terms of its Arab neighbors?

RABINOVICH: You know, there's been talk and written text about, oh, now Israel became a hegemon in the region. That's not realistic. Israel cannot be the hegemonial power in the Middle East. It can at best be a partner to a large, moderate, pragmatic coalition in the region and be an important power in the region. You know, we have not mentioned Turkey at all. Turkey is the one that wants to benefit from the fall of or the decline of Iran and its quest for hegemony in the region, and it's trying to establish its own, particularly in Syria, but not just there. The Saudis are very influential, and there are a number of actors. So the Israeli government would be wise to talk and to make it clear publicly that it does not have far-reaching ambitions in the region. One only wants to be a respectable and important member of the club, not the president of the club.

TOOSI: That's, that's a very, very interesting perspective. Phil. Okay, so this is a tricky question, and I would word it carefully, but, you know, people resistant to the U.S. and Israel moves in Iran often point to the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein as an example of what not to do. And I know you've looked into this a little bit. I'm curious, though, like, what is Iraq like these

days more than two decades later? It went through absolute hell. For years. But more than 20 years later, is it a better place now than it was under Saddam? Is there a lesson to be learned there about regime change that maybe wasn't the lesson that so many people took away in the immediate years afterward?

GORDON: You're really trying to get me to be sympathetic to regime change, huh?

TOOSI: No, look, let me let me tell you why. Because if you're a young person in one of these countries, okay, and you're looking at your life ahead, and some historian tells you, well, you know, maybe decades from now, things will get better. That is really hard pill to swallow. So sometimes, you know, waiting on patient diplomacy and hoping for evolution, that doesn't really speak to a lot of the young people who have who want to, who get one life.

GORDON: Look, I totally get it. And you can make a very powerful case that a lot of regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere, a lot countries in the Middle East and elsewhere would be much better with a different regime. That's a separate question of whether the United States can and should expend resources to try to bring that about and what would happen if they did. So you're right that the Iraq invasion is like the poster child for regime change gone wrong. And sometimes, you know, I agree with you on this, despite like teasing you about that, the leading question. Saddam was terrible. Sometimes critiques of regime change like fall into the trap of implying that there was no reason for it. Of course there was a reason for. Saddam brutally mistreated his people. He invaded his neighbors. He invaded Kuwait. He might not have been pursuing an active nuclear program, but he wanted weapons of mass destruction. The world would have been a much better place without him. But the question is not, is that the case? It's again, what does it mean for our policy? So to go back to your direct question, like how is Iraq doing today? Like not bad in the grand scheme of things. Everything's relative, right? It is still a deeply troubled place with, you have armed Shia militia groups that are sponsored by Iran, deep ethnic divisions within the society, very high levels of corruption, a degree of political stability, but certainly not guaranteed. And that's way better, obviously, than under Saddam in the 80s, when it was at war with Iran, or under Saddam in the 90s, when there were sanctions and periodic conflicts. Certainly better than in the 2000s, after the U.S. invasion, you had a civil war killing lots of people, and then way better than what followed that: you know, ISIS taking over large parts of the country, this a brutal, violent, regressive terrorist movement. So did the U.S. invasion in 2003, ultimately 20 some years later, help lead to something that's better? Probably, but then you go back to like, was it worth thousands of American lives, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives, a decade and a half of conflict, the takeover of terrorist group? The United States spending \$300 million a day for 10 years to try to make the situation better, to get where we are today? People can make that judgment.

So the point is not, would these places better -- and I said this about Iran, Iranians would be much better off with a different regime, and so would their neighbors. The question is, if the United States or Israel decided to try and bring that about, like by arming opposition groups or deliberately fomenting an overthrow of the government, that's a different question. Because if that led to the pro-Western liberal moderates being in power like we would like, then the Iranian people would be better off and we would be better off, but my point was that is actually an unlikely outcome.

Last point on this, it's an important question and I can see you can argue both sides, but I don't wanna totally take away hope. When you, you know, you said a lot of people would be frustrated the idea of evolution. They're not going to evolve. It's been 45 years. And I totally get that frustration, even while cautioning about revolutions aren't always great for the people either. But I have in mind, Itamar brought up Syria's analogy. You know, a bit different because in Syria, you had an armed opposition group supported by Turkey that was able to overthrow the government. And we don't know how that's going to play out. I think sometimes the Soviet Union is a relevant

analogy for Iran. An ideological regime in power for decades, aging leadership, a failed foreign intervention in Afghanistan, so a lost military conflict, a failing economy, and then a president that wanted something different. You know, I made the analogy, I'm not saying Pezeshkian is Gorbachev, but that's a sort of evolution where ultimately from within someone decides, let's try to do this differently. Now, obviously Russia today is not a model for anybody, but my point is there are different paths to getting rid of a corrupt failing regime.

TOOSI: Yeah, you know, it's interesting because this leads right to my next question to Jeff, which is the final question that is coming from me. People have like the great man, the great-man theory of history or whatever and like I, I personally have like the really awful guy theory of history, but Jeff you are one of the probably very few Americans who have actually spent some time with Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. You did this when you were with the UN. What's he like in person? And what do you think he'll do next?

FELTMAN: Well, you know, this was almost 13 years ago, that it was the Non-Aligned Summit and I accompanied Ban Ki-moon into a small meeting with the supreme leader. It was two on two. I was with Ban Ki Moon. He had the first, Ahmadinejad's first vice president, Mohammed Reza Rahimi, who was later convicted, thrown in Evin prison for corruption. And it was basically a several-hour monologue from the supreme leader in a very sort of uncharismatic, quiet voice, of diatribe against United States. Animosity, hostility against United States, the U.S. leaders are mendacious, the U.S. leaders are, are exploiting their own people, U.S. leaders are promoting war in the middle, in the Middle East, can't be trusted, etc. And I would expect that even though that was 13 years ago, that his feelings, or his instincts have been reinforced, reinforced by walking away from the JCPOA, reinforced by some of the rhetoric we talked about earlier, about two days, 60 days, etc, etc., I mean, his, I don't think it was an act. I think that he is sincerely, his whole identity, the whole identity of the Islamic regime is built around being anti-American, anti-Israeli. It's not built around being pro-Iran, it's being anti-American, anti-Iranian. And it's an additional complication for how we get back to a diplomatic track, is how you overcome that anti-American animosity that's baked in to the entire identity of Khamenei and the Islamic Republic. And right now, I would imagine that his two main concerns in his bunker are, one, the succession that Suzanne and others have talked about, and two, what now do you do about rebuilding deterrence? Because the deterrence that Iran had built up on the nuclear program, the deterrence that Iran had built up with its proxy network, the deterrence they built up with their own air defenses is destroyed. And so I would image deterrence and succession are what's on his mind. And it's not going to be, the first thing on his mind is not going to be negotiations. On Pezeshkian, to Phil's point. I think that, I mean, Khamenei wants regime survival. His goal is regime survival, everything is about regime survival. I think Pezeshkian is very interested in the, in trying to provide benefits for the Iranian people, the economic benefits that would encourage him to want to go back to negotiations with the idea that you would find a way to lift sanctions. The problem is, all of the issues that so concern us, the nuclear program, the proxies, the IRGC, the human rights repression, aren't in Pezeshkian's hands. They're in the hardliners' camps. And so if Pezeshkian would have permission for his government to negotiate with us again on the nuclear program, what do we do about those other parts that are so problematic for us and that contribute to that 46 years of hostility between our two countries.

TOOSI: These are excellent questions to ponder. Now, I have a few questions from the audience. We don't have that much time, so we'll see how many we can get to. But Jeff, I'm going to stick with you on this. How do you think that China and Russia will view the U.S. delivery of a preemptive strike on an adversary? And this question comes from Sophie Antrobus of the United Kingdom.

FELTMAN: Great question, and I would think that the Iranians would be looking at their alliance with Russia and saying, huh, so what did we get out of that after all? You know, the Iranians provided drones and technology to the Russians for the Russian war on Ukraine, and I suspect that the Russians expected more than, I mean, that the Iranians expected more than rhetorical support from the Russians. You know, that they've invested in the relationship and the strategic relationship with Moscow, and Moscow gave them rhetorical support when they came under attack by the United States. China, China gets a large percentage of its oil from Iran, not the most, most comes from Russia, but enough that certainly China would have been concerned about what this means for their energy supplies. And I think that that probably played into the Iranian decision, not, at least so far, not to try to mine or close the Strait of Hormuz, with Iran needing to keep the revenue base open, needing to keep the relationship with China going. So I would suspect that there's a lot of thinking in Tehran about their external relations, because they really don't have any friends. So Moscow and China are about as close as they have to real friends.

TOOSI: That's a very good answer. Itamar, I want to ask you this question. It comes from Ibrahim Raballah of Birzeit University, which I believe is in the West Bank. What could the impacts and consequences of the Israel-Iran war be on the situation of the Palestinians, especially in Gaza?

RABINOVICH: It's more likely that Hamas would make a deal when we get to it because it's weaker now. It does not have the Iranian patron. So that could be a positive one. I would hope, I would hope. Look at the peace process of the 1990s, the height of the Arab-Israeli peace process that produced the Oslo Accords, peace with Jordan and so forth. It came in the aftermath of the first Gulf War when President Bush and Secretary Baker decided that they should take advantage of the circumstances created to try to solve the Israeli conflict. A diplomatic process begins now between the United States and Iran. And if the United States decides to expand the platform and try to resolve maybe not the whole Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but at least the Gaza issue, that would be a huge benefit.

TOOSI: Can you imagine having a grand bargain where we just put all the problems on the table and just -- ?

RABINOVICH: Not all, but a couple of them.

TOOSI: Okay, I just, I guess a girl can dream. Listen, I'm gonna ask you guys something. Like, I mean, just gonna throw this out there because I want all of you to get a chance to say something, but what is a question that each of you wishes that people were asking? But that no one is really asking or they're not asking enough. Suzanne, can we start with you?

MALONEY: I think you've asked a lot of great questions, and I think most of the discussions that I've seen have asked great questions. But I do think that there is a question in my mind about how negotiations proceed if the expected transaction of any negotiation with Iran is sanctions relief in return for some sort of compromise on its nuclear program. Its nuclear program has been heavily set back, and they're not getting any sanctions relief for that. So what does the, you know, sort of menu look like when we come back to the negotiating table? And is there a scenario, I think it is in fact maybe the more likely scenario, that Iran remains in this, you know very negative situation of its program, its proxies, its military capabilities significantly degraded, but no new economic opportunity is even on the offing. And so I think that the situation for Iran is probably a very, very negative one. And I think we have to probably think about a different concept for negotiations with Iran under the current circumstances. And I don't know what those look like. So that would be my question.

TOOSI: Good one. Jeff, what do you think? What's the question you wish people would ask? You don't have to answer it. I'm just wondering.

FELTMAN: Israel has seriously degraded Iran's proxy network, but they haven't eliminated the proxy network. Particularly a group like Hezbollah, which still has, as we saw in the local elections in Lebanon, still has strong political support inside Lebanon. So what happens with the remnants of this proxy network going forward? Does Hezbollah, looking at how weak Iran was next to Israel, and also with believing, seeing how far the Israeli intelligence penetration of Iran went. Does Hezbollah become more Lebanese and less of a strategic asset for Iran? Or does Iran double down and try, despite the loss of Syria, despite Israel's degrading of Hezbollah, to rebuild its proxy network? So there'll be a lot of people looking at the nuclear file. I think we also need to keep an eye on making sure that the proxy network does not resurrect itself.

TOOSI: We only have a couple of minutes left. Phil, what is the question that you wish people would ask?

GORDON: So first I agree with Suzanne that you have asked all the right questions and we're in the market for answers than questions, but I can tell you that the questions I had going into this, which remain on the U.S. participation in the strikes is one, like what damage could we do and did we do? I don't think we have the answer to that one yet. If the answer is like we totally obliterated it like the White House claims, that is important, but I don't think it is. And we just don't know how much of the tunnel network is intact. How much did they move the HEU around? What is their capacity to turn that 60% into 90%? That's an important question that is still out there that will help determine whether this was a success or not. I also had going into this and still do the question of is this more likely to lead to escalation and pulling us in or to putting Iran in a place where it knows not to escalate. That seems to be largely answered in the more positive sense so far that Iran, because its response options are so bad, did something mostly performative, but it's also not over yet. And Jeff's point earlier, which I think is a good one, that Israel is still going to act, especially so long as Iran's air defenses are down. We can be talking to them, but I think two things are true going forward to get back to another good question you raised. Iran is going to look to keep the nuclear option open. And Israel is going to act to present that. So we're not out of the escalation woods yet. And then finally, I know you want me to wrap up. The last big question, I think, is the hardest one of all to answer, which I started with, whatever, 50 minutes ago. Does this lead Iran to realize that its nuclear ambitions are counterproductive and stop, or does it do the opposite of make them more determined to get a nuclear weapon? That is the question at the heart of this whole operation.

TOOSI: Itamar, we only have a few seconds.

RABINOVICH: Two seconds. The question that is not asked of me, but that almost every Israeli asks every Israeli, how is this going to affect the Israeli domestic politics? We have an election in 2026. Netanyahu was trailing in the polls. What impact would his success in Iran have on Israeli domestic politics?

TOOSI: Wow, and my God, there's so much more that we could do, which I guess is great because it means we can hold more of these amazing sessions with amazing people like yourself. It has been truly an honor to moderate the session. I wish I could have asked even better questions and who knows what world we will be emerging into now that the session is ending. And I wanna thank the audience and the people who help put this together. Thank you so much. This has been great. And please join us next time as well. Thank you.

RABINOVICH: Thank you all.