

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I'm Bill Kristol, welcome back to *Conversations*. My guest today is someone we've had on several times, always a terrific interlocutor, to use a fancy word there. Eric Edelman, a long-time foreign service officer, ambassador to Finland and Turkey, worked in the White House for Vice President Cheney as his top national security advisor, and then number three official in the Pentagon. So, very distinguished career and a wide range of experience and a perfect person to discuss Donald Trump's trip last week to the Middle East with, and some of the implications of what he said there and what he did there, what he didn't do there and a couple of side tangents he went on.

So, I don't know, I think it was a more newsworthy... Obviously, it was a sort of colorful trip and people covered it in that way, the camels, the plane, the sheiks, the business leaders with him. But it was a pretty interesting trip from the point of view of trying to think about Donald Trump's foreign policy. What are we now four months into the second term? Do you think, Eric?

ERIC EDELMAN:

Well, I agree, Bill. First, it's great to be with you again and interlocutor is a great foreign service word, so thank you.

BILL KRISTOL:

I like to make Eric feel at home here. We'll use a lot of terms about the seventh floor of the State Department, and what are *démarches*, that's always one of my good ones, and *chargé d'affaires*, that's a nice one.

ERIC EDELMAN:

“Demarshmallows,” as some of my foreign service colleagues used to refer to them. Well, look, the pageantry was a big part of the entire kind of *mise en scene* that Trump orchestrated. As the coverage in the New York Times pointed out, if he'd gone almost anywhere else in the world, there would've been protests. If he'd gone to Europe, certainly if he'd gone to Canada or Mexico, which are the traditional opening trips for an American president, there certainly would've been protests. We've seen major protests break out at hockey games in Canada since the advent of the Trump administration.

But he knew that going to the Middle East, where he had gone on his first trip in his first term, he would be greeted with sword dances and with, as you say, camels and Arabian stallions and red Cybertrucks and fighter escort for Air Force One and all of the trappings of power that he enjoys and the kind of adulation he requires psychologically, I think, in order to operate at a high functional level. So it was, from that point of view, a great place to start his foreign travels as president. Technically, actually.... Technically though, I think we have to note his first trip was actually to the funeral of Pope Francis.

BILL KRISTOL:

Oh. You're right, good point. Yeah, I missed that. I didn't think of that. So he went to three countries. Frankly, for a lot of Americans, and I'll put myself in that category, they slightly blur together since they're all next to each other and they're all similar backgrounds, you might say, but still very different actually in terms of their foreign policies and what happened in each of those countries. And I guess the order was Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE—United Arab Emirates. But since the headline of the trip became the plane, maybe we should begin with the

famous, or infamous, Qatari 747. What do you make of that? Just, I don't know, meaningful? Colorful? Meaningful? Indicative of anything?

ERIC EDELMAN:

Well, it's a perfect surrogate for discussion of the trip, in the sense that the trip was not about, as presidential trips typically are, geopolitics, but really more about geoeconomics. But in this particular case, it's geoeconomics with Trumpian characteristics. And I think Susan Glasser of *The New Yorker* captured it very well in her Letter from Washington this week, in which she said that the trip demonstrated that Trump really has no particular foreign policy doctrine. He was very critical of the Gulf petrostate monarchies that he traveled to in 2016 when he was running for president. He criticized Hillary Clinton for taking money from some of these states, including Qatar.

And he obviously has no problem with it now, including this "gift." And I say gift in scare quotes because according to both the conversation you had recently with Tom Malinowski, former member of Congress, former colleague of mine in the State Department, but also reporting, very detailed reporting in *The New York Times* today, this didn't exactly start out as a gift. It started out more as a potential state-to-state transaction because of Trump's impatience to get a new aircraft as Air Force One. And the Qataris have been trying to unload a specially built 747 that they have for VIP travel for the emir, which is very expensive to operate. They've

They unloaded one actually, according to *The New York Times*, as a gift to Tayyip Erdoğan, the president of Turkey, because of Turkey's role standing by Qatar in its short-lived sort of embargo with Saudi Arabia and the UAE back in 2017. And they gave one away, they're trying to unload the other. And although initially they thought they would be leasing it or selling it to the United States government, somehow this morphed into it's going to be a gift to either Trump personally or actually to the government, but then it's going to go to Trump's library. It's all a little bit of a mystery how it morphed into this.

But as Susan Glasser wrote, it's the perfect symbol for the trip because he has no doctrine. He really believes in transactionalism as a way of life. And in that sense, this Qatari luxury aircraft is not just a symbol of Trumpism, it's really the substance of Trumpism.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that's very well said. And it is kind of amazing when you read, *Times* especially the article, it's not even clear there's like an official document. It's sort of, that's also, I suppose, the kind of transactionalism Trump likes, right? Pretty vague about exactly what's promised to whom, a lot of ability to rethink things later on. Maybe he will use the plane as a private citizen after he becomes president. He'll cross that bridge when he gets to it. The whole thing has that ring to it. I was amused also, I'll just say, by the fact that it seems to be something they've been trying to dump for four years. No one wanted to buy it. It's both expensive and extremely, I guess, expensive to operate. God know what the expense will be for us to transform it into an actual functioning Air Force One with all the security and other considerations that that involves.

But anyway, I think you're right. Yeah, that is the shakedown side. Well, say a word more about that though. Why would the Qatari, why would they be so eager to have Trump's backing or Trump's goodwill?

ERIC EDELMAN:

Well, there are a variety of reasons. First, the United States has been the protector of the Gulf States really since the 1960s, early 1970s really. When the Brits decided to remove their defense force from east of Suez in the late 1960s, the United States de facto became the kind of protector of the Gulf States. And that relationship has developed over time and includes, of course, the fact that the Qataris now host a major US Air Force base, Al Udeid, which is also CENTCOM forward. It's CENTCOM's major base in theater. And it's, as a result, played a pretty big role in operations both in Iraq and Afghanistan over the years, continues to play an important role for the US, provides Qatar with the potential protection against Iran— although

they themselves have been very interested in mending fences with Iran or maintaining good relations with Iran traditionally so they got all their bases covered.

And it also allows them to, because of the hold that they have on us through the base and relations with presidents like the one they want to have with President Trump, it allows them to also do things like host *Al Jazeera*, which stirs up lots of trouble in the region against other Arab states, moderate states. But also to allow them to host Hamas and be a major sponsor traditionally of the Muslim Brotherhood. So the Qataris are very interesting. They kind of keep all of their bases covered.

And the one difference I think between the relationship that they have with Donald Trump and with previous presidents, in previous presidencies it's always been clear that the relationship was a state-to-state relationship carried out through normal channels of government, embassies in capitals, etc. With Donald Trump, it's actually something that is more traditional in the region and they're more comfortable with, which is a very personal relationship, in this case between the Al Thani family and the Trump family. And I'm using the Trump family in the most expansive sense of the term because Steve Witkoff, his negotiator, for instance, has major business ties to the Qataris that precede his entry into the second Trump administration as a foreign policy player and Swiss army knife negotiator for all trades.

BILL KRISTOL:

It is amazing, people don't... I myself, until I thought about it for a minute, didn't quite think of this side of it. We have huge, big relations with Qatar. We have a massive base there, there's a ton of... They've reimbursed us in times we've asked for more money to help them, to help improve the base, they've paid, I think generally tend to pay that. We, in return, have tried to help in a way not press them as hard as we might have on their hosting of Hamas.

So this is a complicated state-to-state relationship and people can reasonably differ on exactly where, which equities are more important and who should be pushing harder on certain things. The conventional Republican position over the last few years has been that we've been too soft on Qatar actually. Biden didn't push hard enough on the fact that they were hosting Hamas and were friendly to Hamas right after October 7th and friendly to, they hosted the Hamas-Iran meeting right after October 7th, maybe, of the foreign ministers or something.

ERIC EDELMAN:

They hosted the Taliban for years as well.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Okay, that's all, I would say, legitimate debate. What's really striking about Trump is there's no evidence that any of that is being factored in, right? It's about the plane, as you say. He emphasizes and emphasized in one or two of the speeches in the region how much this is about him and his personal relationships to the sheikhs and the emirs. It's not state-to-state, it's really... People sometimes say, "Well, Trump's realpolitik compared to neocons like us, who care more about values, I suppose," and I suppose what we do about... And human rights. But this isn't Henry Kissinger doing complicated state realpolitik statecraft, right? Trump really... Anyway, I just was struck by that part of it in all three countries.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Yeah. As I said, the trip was largely kind of geoeconomic, but there were some geopolitical overtones that came up during the trip, which we can get into.

But before we do that, I think to take the geoeconomics on its own merits. To your point, if you look at the fact sheets that were put out by the White House about each of the stops. So in Riyadh, the Saudis promised \$600 billion in investment, the Qataris offered I think 1.2 billion, and then the Emiratis offered about 200 billion in AI deals, joint investments in artificial intelligence, which total up to roughly \$2 billion worth of trade and investment. I want to come back to those numbers in a second.

But Trump has said now a couple of times in different fora that he went and he got \$4 trillion, not 2 trillion, 4 trillion or \$5 trillion. So his hyperbole, his need to exaggerate and that he got this personally, when a lot of this was business deals that were already sort of underway, company-to-government or government-to-government entities, were already engaged in all of this. So one of the things that's very hard to parse when you look at the fact sheets is how much of this is going to be actually accomplished in Trump's term? How much of this is new? How much of it actually began before he arrived on the scene?

He seems to be aware of this slightly because he's also told the press that some of this is going to come to fruition after he's left office and other people are going to take credit for it. He said, "But you guys have to remember, I'm the one who did it. It was me personally." So it's very hard to really get after these numbers.

To give you one, for instance. In the Saudi portion of the trip, the fact sheet talks about \$142 billion in arms deals with Saudi Arabia. Now, when he went on his first trip to Saudi Arabia in 2017, they announced a 110-billion-dollar arms package, not all of which came to fruition. There have been questions that have already been raised about, well, exactly 142 billion's a lot of money for even the Saudis. Saudi defense budget is roughly 70 billion a year. So \$142 billion is two year's worth of their defense budget.

Byron Callan, who was a close observer of the defense industry and defense trade, has calculated that if you look out a decade and you factor in 3% annual real growth into the Saudi budget, 142 billion would be roughly 15% of what the Saudis spend over 10 years. Is that a reasonable wag at what the US might anticipate it would secure in arms sales? Yeah, probably. Maybe. And would that be a good thing? Yes, that would be a good thing because it'll tie the Saudis closer to us and allow us to have more influence. But will it actually eventuate? We don't know.

I think one thing you can say is Boeing and GE seem to have been pretty big winners in all this, contracts both for commercial and military aircraft. So that seems to be a part of this. But overall, if you had to grade it, I would say it's an incomplete because you can't really judge exactly how much of this is going to really happen.

BILL KRISTOL:

And let me ask you about two things that... well, and also the Trump organization and allies like Witkoff presumably got a lot of things, and that's slightly separate issue from what actual publicly owned US companies and the US government got. I do think also one point that didn't get noticed, maybe as much as it could have is there were things given in return. Obviously, no discussion, God forbid, of human rights, of Khashoggi and all that in any of these states. But in the UAE in particular, a pretty major concession, I think—and I would like you to explain it more than I can—of a... not relaxation, I think an end, to restrictions. A stopping of restrictions that had been put on on the transfer of certain AI technologies, artificial intelligence technologies to the UAE that had been done by the Biden administration, prodded by bipartisan majorities in Congress. I think some of the leaders of the prodding were Republicans who were worried about this sensitive technology going to the UAE, not a place that's known for not letting the technology escape elsewhere. And in particular, a place that has very close relations with China. And I gathered—I knew nothing about this, but you do learn, sure, sure, on these matters—that the UAE has a lot of facial recognition technology to keep everyone under control that's provided by China. So all this talk about, "very tough on China," and then it turns out to get the business deals for the Trump family and/or for the US, or other US entities, this rather sensitive and important AI technology is going over there to the UAE. I don't even know if there are nominal... I guess there are nominal controls on it, but was that not... Am I overstating that?

ERIC EDELMAN:

No, I think that's something that everyone's going to be keeping an eye on as time goes on. I mean, as part of managing strategic competition with China, the Biden administration had developed a series of export controls, a policy that it described as, "a small yard with a high

fence.” In other words, not try and cut off all chips for China, microchips that would be used, for instance, in large language model AI programming and computers, but the very highest end that would presumably give an advantage. So small yard, but very high fence. Those export controls are managed by the Department of Commerce, which is now headed by the Secretary of Commerce, Howard Lutnick.

There has been a lot of pressure from people like David Sacks, who's the AI czar supposedly of the Trump administration, to relax a lot of this because to compete with China in AI requires a lot of scale. Because China, of course, much larger data, can suck up a lot more data from its billion people than we can. So there is an argument for that at one level. But as you say, Congress, the Select Committee on Competition with China and the Congress formerly co-chaired by Raja Krishnamoorthi and Mike Gallagher, those folks have always been concerned about this and we'll have to see. I mean, as you say, UAE, Dubai is notoriously a leaky place for the transfer of technology to whoever, and that's something that's obviously going to have to be watched as time goes on so that it doesn't go to China.

BILL KRISTOL:

We'll see how much interest the administration has in watching it though. I was struck, you commented, and we've talked about it as the trip was happening, by the appearance Wednesday, and I guess this was in Qatar, if I've got the country's order correct, of the Syrian, the new head of Syria. What do you make of that and what was that about?

ERIC EDELMAN:

So it was actually... The meeting was in Riyadh on the day that he left Saudi Arabia. It was that morning when he went on to Doha and he met with Farouk al-Sharaa, the new president, interim president, of Syria who came to power in December. That was actually important, but it was preceded by a statement he made the day before that he was going to end all sanctions on Syria. We had put in place an enormous number of sanctions on individuals and entities in Syria as a result of the very destructive 15 year long Syrian Civil War, which cost hundreds of thousands of lives, created a massive outflow of refugees from Syria and internally displaced people in Syria.

And this was done, the president said quite openly, essentially at the behest of Mohammed bin Salman, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, and President Erdoğan of Turkey, both of whom have an understandable desire to see Syria stabilized after 15 years of violence that have wracked the country and disrupted the region. That's all understandable. And there is an argument that sanctions on Syria should be lifted, or at least some sanctions should be lifted. The question though is, first of all, this was done without any kind of deliberative policy process at all. In fact, the administration's counter-terrorism coordinator and Deputy National Security Advisor, Seb Gorka, just on the end of the day before the president left, was fulminating about, "We're not going to lift sanctions on this jihadi president of Syria."

And there is a question about al-Sharaa because he does have a past link to jihad. He was the head of the Nusra Front, which was an Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria for some time. They then broke with Al-Qaeda and broke with ISIS. But exactly what that means is still, I think, not clear a hundred percent. So, A, there's a policy question here, which is, if you're going to lift sanctions, you ought to have had some deliberative policy and some strategy for what it is you're trying to accomplish, which presumably would be to stabilize Syria.

Two, you would have wanted to consult not just with members of Congress but your allies in the region, notably including Israel, which has a very big interest in what happens in Syria. Neither of those things happened. It's not clear that the president on his own can actually lift all of these sanctions. Some of them are imposed by legislation. Others, like taking Syria off the Foreign Terrorist Organization list, the so-called FTO, requires him to submit a report to Congress, which they then have to approve. So to say the least, there were a lot of T's that were left uncrossed and I's that were left undotted in all of this.

Now, in the meeting with al-Sharaa, the president did ask, according to the readout from the White House, for some of the things we would want from a new Syria. One of which was, for

instance, normalization with Israel, have Syria join the Abraham Accords and become another neighbor of Israel that has made peace with it, it would be like Egypt and Jordan and the UAE, Bahrain, other states surrounding Israel in the region. That would be a good thing. He asked for al-Sharaa to expel some of the foreign jihadis who helped al-Sharaa come to power, but who have since been engaged in intercommunal violence in Syria that has troubled observers who would like to see a stable Syria.

He asked for their assistance in integrating the Kurdish militias with which we fought ISIS during the Obama and Trump and Biden administrations, to reintegrate them into the Syrian Armed Forces, and also to take over oversight of the camps that contain some 30,000 ISIS fighters and family members that potentially dangerous folks who, if left untended, could lead to a recurrence of ISIS terrorism in Syria. So he asked for all of those very important things, but not for some of the things that even Senator Thune talked about when he was asked about this, which include rule of law and minority rights and domestic reform in Syria. And therein lies, I think, a contradiction at the heart of, again, of Trumpism.

I mean, again, to the degree that there's a doctrinal side to this, Trump sort of announced it in his speech in Riyadh where he said, "We're not going to tell these countries how to organize themselves and how to live their lives the way my stupid predecessors did by insisting on human rights and rule of law. We're not going to do that. We're going to deal with the governments as they are," and et cetera. The problem is, in Syria, you don't want an inverse of what you had under Assad, which was an Alawite dictatorship over a Sunni Arab majority. You don't want now a Sunni Arab dictatorship over a country that is riven by cross-cutting cleavages of religion and ethnicity, lording it over Alawites or Christian communities or Druze communities or Kurdish communities. There has to be some pluralism, some rule of law. Otherwise, you're going to get more unrest and you're not going to get the kind of stable Syria that ought to be the objective of policy here.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. So even, as you say, people can think it wasn't crazy to have outreach to Syria, to meet with the Syrian president, but whether the government will follow up with any of this, how we even... As you say, what do allies think? Yeah, that is a problem with an ad hoc personalized foreign policy, especially when so much of it seems to depend on these individual relationships, or wished-for relationships, and God knows what business things are going on. Syria is probably not quite as attractive a place as UAE or Saudi for the American companies, but I suppose there are issues there too. Trump's always very sensitive to what minerals and oil countries have that we're supposed to be able to exploit.

But another country that came into the fray—it was kind of an interesting trip in that there were these outside countries that became quite central to it, at least in some of the conversations, Syria, as you've just said, explained very **well**—**but** also Iran, which suddenly Trump, in some, I guess offhand comments, you should explain, suddenly seems to have cast our Iran policy in a pretty... Not exactly a different light, but he was already going in that direction. But anyway, he made some news on Iran and what do you make of all that?

ERIC EDELMAN:

Yeah, so he suggested that the Iranians have agreed in principle to a US proposal for resolving the nuclear issues with Iran. To remind everybody, President Trump, in his first term, withdrew the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which was agreed to in 2015 by the Obama administration to put some limits, albeit limits that were set to expire in 10, 15 year's time, for the most part. In other words, a deal that kind of kicked the can down the road for dealing with the Iran nuclear problem, as President Obama himself admitted. Even at the time of the deal, he admitted that when a deal expired, Iran would be days away from having the capability to build a nuclear weapon.

For some of the critics, like me, of the deal, I testified actually against it in the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2015, that was a really fatal flaw because I felt at the time that, although 10 and 15 years when you're signing a deal sounds like a very long time, in policy terms, it's

like an eye blink. And here we are with a number of the various constraints on Iran expiring, like the ability to snap back sanctions on Iran, which will expire in October of this year. But also bans on transfer of ballistic missiles and other limits have already expired or will expire soon. So the Biden administration, their policy was allegedly to get back into a deal, but one that would be, as they put it in a Democratic platform in 2020, longer and stronger. They were unable to do that with the Iranians. They had about a year and a half of desultory negotiations. Never direct negotiations. Iranians refused to meet with the Americans directly. It was all carried out through intermediaries, but no real progress was made. Then October 7th came along and that all sort of went by the boards.

Trump has appointed, as I said, his all-purpose negotiator, Steve Witkoff, who is also a negotiating a ceasefire and hostage deal in Gaza, also negotiating peace between Ukraine and Russia, to deal with the Iran issue as well. They've had, I think, three sessions already. I think a fourth is to be scheduled. The president said in his comments that the Iranians had, as I said, agreed in principle and that we had provided them with a paper, a document, that outlined our desiderata for an agreement. The Iranians have at various points said they either haven't received it, or they have received it and are considering it but have not scheduled the next round of negotiations.

Some of the negotiators, notably including the Foreign Minister Araghchi, who was the Deputy Foreign Minister when the deal was negotiated a decade ago with the Obama folks, he has said that what Steve Witkoff says in public is different from what he says in private. And that in public, although he has hewed to the line that the president and others have said that Iran cannot have any enrichment capability, they've got to dismantle their enrichment capability, Araghchi has said in private, it's clear that Witkoff has suggested at a minimum some flexibility on that question and perhaps more. That would be consistent, by the way, with what Witkoff said in an interview with Tucker Carlson when he went on Tucker Carlson's show and what he had said publicly before. It's not inconsistent with what the president and Marco Rubio have said when they have said Iran should be allowed to have some civil nuclear capability.

So I think it's very murky right now. And most recently the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has said that he's very doubtful about these negotiations because the Americans keep insisting on no enrichment and that they should stop insisting on no enrichment if they want an agreement. We know that Trump is very flexible about these things. We know he doesn't care that much about details. I think there are a lot of Republicans in the Senate in particular, but also some in the House, who have been very hawkish on Iran, who are very nervous about what kind of agreement might come out of this, and whether there's some kind of, in Witkoff's phrase, elegant solution to this that involves either some suspension of enrichment during the Trump administration's term, but allows them to restart later, or whether they're allowed to have some low-level enrichment, but will have to export out the [Low Enrichment Uranium] to some other place.

There are a lot of different permutations and combinations of all this. But I think for those of us who worry about nuclear proliferation, the idea of allowing Iran to continue to have a robust industrial scale nuclear enrichment capability, uranium enrichment capability, is very worrisome from a proliferation point of view.

BILL KRISTOL:

And worrisome to Israel, I would guess. Another country in the region that came up tangentially during the trip. He didn't choose to go to Israel, and for whatever reason seems to be... I guess Vance, Vice President Vance, just seems to have canceled a, not officially announced but planned, trip to Israel out of unhappiness with what Israel is doing in Gaza. Maybe also general tensions with the Israeli government. I'm pretty struck that for a guy, for a ticket that campaigned a's very much in sync with pro-Israel hawks, and people like me, if I could say, who were traditionally pretty pro-Israel, getting beat up by all of our various friends or ex-friends and acquaintances about, "How could he possibly support Biden and Harris, and that Trump's so much better on Israel." He doesn't seem like...

I mean, these negotiations with Iran... I mean, that was one of the major beefs about the JCPOA back in Obama years and I think Israel was kind of cut out and it was just as if Israel had no interest here, they were worth... I mean, occasionally we talked to them of course, and then they made their views known, but they weren't part of it. And suddenly Trump and Witkoff seemed to be going along their merry way and Israel's reading about things online a few hours later. I don't know, tell me about what's your general take on the US/Israel relations? What's your take on the impact of the trip on US/Israel relations? What happens over the next few months?

ERIC EDELMAN:

So I think there are a lot of very nervous Israelis in the government and in the various attentive parts of the Israeli national security elite about all this. As you say, there has been a real pattern here of the administration doing things without any kind of coordination or consultation with Israel really. And when you add them all up, it's things that if Biden or Kamala Harris had done them, people's heads would be exploding all over Washington. They had direct talks with Hamas, which has never happened before. The President announced the contacts that the US had had with Iran and the opening of negotiations between the US and Iran without consulting with Bibi. This was a fait accompli that was announced to Bibi, he was informed of it, as I understand it, at Blair House shortly before he went across the street to meet in the Oval with the President.

Similarly, the hostage deal for Etan Alexander, we can all be glad that the last living American hostage was brought out, but it was done without regard to the fact that there are still a lot of Israeli hostages, not to mention some dead Americans who are still being held by Hamas. But again, no coordination really with Israel. You've also seen a ceasefire agreement with the Houthis in Yemen that was limited to their attacking US naval vessels in the Red Sea, even as the Houthis both immediately before and after this agreement, were targeting Ben Gurion airport with missiles and drones. So—

BILL KRISTOL:

Let's take 60 seconds on the Houthis, just a little bit of a sidebar from Israel. I mean, they also were launching occasional missiles at Israel, but one forgets, I wouldn't forget, but I mean the "Signal-gate" thing that ended up helping to cost the National Security Advisor Mike Waltz his job, was about this US military operation against the Houthis, that's what Pete Hegseth disclosed that he shouldn't have, presumably. This was much hoopla, certainly among Trump supporters, "He's tough, not like Biden. We're war fighters, we're bombing the hell out of them." What was that all about? How did that all work out?

ERIC EDELMAN:

Well, I mean, what's happened, look, there was an argument for a more robust policy than the Biden folks were willing to undertake against the Houthis who were in fact disrupting international shipping through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. What seems to have happened is that although the CENTCOM Commander General Kurilla, who is an extremely impressive military officer, I might add, anticipated that there might be a US very aggressive air campaign against the Houthis that would facilitate a joining together of the opposition groups in Yemen against the Houthis. So that would be a ground element as well that would perhaps take back the port and also the capital Sanaa from the Houthis.

In the event, that has not eventuated, in part, I think because the Emiratis and Saudis are really the main sponsors of the opposition to the Houthis. I think the Emiratis had some real reservations. The Saudis might've been more willing to go along, but it didn't happen. And as a result, although we have targeted the Houthi leadership allegedly and killed a number of them, it's a little bit hard to evaluate the claims because CENTCOM has not provided any briefings nor has the White House, so it's been very difficult to measure by any metric the success of the campaign. Although one can certainly measure the expenditure of munitions, which has gotten to about a billion dollars to the point that people in the Pentagon were getting very nervous about shortages of munitions that might be important and necessary in an Indo-Pacific contingency, for instance.

And so there clearly was a decision to call it quits, declare a victory. I think, and you and I are both old enough to remember Senator George Aiken who recommended that the United States do an, "Elegant bug out," I think was his term for Vietnam. This was, I think, an elegant bug out just declaring victory, but again, done without any consultation with Israel who's also being targeted.

The final piece of this US-Israel puzzle I think is that on the Syria side that we were talking about earlier, one of the things that Israel is extremely concerned about is overweening Turkish influence in Syria post-Assad. Because the Turks were the major patrons and suppliers and protectors of HTS Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which is the rebranded version of the Nusra Front that Farouk al-Sharaa heads and which liberated Syria from Assad. Turks have made no bones about the fact that they want to have some kind of, not just influence, but a defense agreement with Syria including potentially access to several air bases that have been vacated, which would be available. Some of those bases have been bombed by Israel during Israel's effort to completely denude Syria post-Assad of any military capability.

And that's all understandable, I don't begrudge the Israelis that, but it's also opened up for the US the prospect potentially of two allies and partners clashing with one another. And in a more normal administration, I mean, I think you would've had a senior envoy out there already trying to work out some deconfliction. Instead, we've got a circumstance in which the Israelis and Turks who don't want to come to blows over Syria are actually trying to work out this deconfliction themselves with sponsorship of the Emiratis. It's really an example of what happens when the US vacates the region and creates a vacuum. And it's I think not a terribly comfortable situation and one which if I were an Israeli, I'd be very worried about.

BILL KRISTOL:

This has been so interesting and so helpful to really think in a serious way about something that... Trump's speeches don't help, let's put it this way. Thinking about whatever people might be doing in the background and the press coverage, understandably, is sort of very episodic and focuses on wherever he happens to be in one day.

So two final things that I think are pretty big though. How worried, what about Israel and Iran? I mean there's certainly been talk for months that Israel sees a window of opportunity. This is the moment. Finally, Iran is weaker because Hezbollah has weakened, Iran itself weakened in those exchanges with Israel during the Biden administration where the Biden administration did quite a lot to help Israel, actually. And so this is the moment Netanyahu, he's been warning about Iran forever, and this is the moment he'll act. Is that possible in the next few months? How does that fit into the whole US/Israel relationship and so forth? That's number one. And then number two, we do just have this phone call, I guess yesterday we're speaking here on what Tuesday the 20th of May, between Putin—a two-hour phone call— Putin and Trump. So you've been involved in those kinds of phone calls in the White House and in the State Department, the Defense Department, what do you make of what we know about that? But so two big questions to Israel, Iran and Putin/Trump.

ERIC EDELMAN:

So I said earlier that there are some nervous Republicans in the Senate and the House about what kind of deal might emerge from these discussions between Araghchi and Witkoff. I think the Israelis are nervous as well because they are very reluctant to see anything that allows Iran to continue to be able to enrich uranium. And that was of course their big complaint about the Obama agreement in 2015, which is that it left Iran with this industrial scale enrichment capability. And not only that, it allowed them to experiment with more advanced centrifuges that could enrich uranium at a faster rate and at a larger scale that would enable it to, on very short notice, amass enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon.

And for Israel, this is a potentially existential threat. For us, it's an inconvenience and bad for proliferation, but for Israel it's existential. Late former Iranian president, Hashemi Rafsanjani famously said, "Israel is a one-bomb country," because it's so small and the population is so concentrated that it only takes a very small number of nuclear weapons. You don't need an

arsenal the size of the US or Soviet Union or Russia or China even to be able to accomplish Iranian aims.

So Bibi I think is facing a very difficult political calculus here. On the one hand, you have the sort of context that we've just been discussing, which is a little bit uncomfortable relationship because although folks anticipated that Trump would be more pro-Israel than Biden and Harris, I think what they did not properly anticipate is that Trump still harbors, I think, a lot of animus towards Bibi for Bibi's recognition of Biden's election in December of 2020. Second, Bibi seems to be trying Trump's patience in Gaza. You mentioned the cancellation of the Vance visit, some of that has to do with not wanting to give the appearance of having given the green light to Bibi for his announced reoccupation of Gaza and the military activity that is accompanying it. Apparently, the pressure has been so great from the administration on the Israeli government that Bibi has, for instance, allowed humanitarian assistance to go back in, although he won't allow that to be voted on by his cabinet because he knows it would divide the cabinet because the ultra-right ministers, Smotrich and Ben-Gvir would vote against it. So there's tension in the relationship. He also knows that Trump very much would like to have an agreement on Iran rather than military action. And Trump has made it clear he prefers an agreement to military action.

So Bibi at some level has to allow some of this diplomacy to play out, but it can't be very comfortable for him because as you say, he, and I think other Israelis rightly believe that they have a window, that because of what they did last October when they used their F-35s and other systems to essentially knock out Iran's integrated air and missile defense, they have a window for a potential military attack on the Iranian nuclear program. Now, in an ideal world, they would like to do this not only with a US blessing, but preferably with the US either participation or assistance for things like in-air refueling, certain kinds of munitions, which the US has that Israel does not...

Sometimes that translates into, you'll see stories in the *New York Times* and elsewhere because American officials will suggest that, "Oh, the Israelis can't really do it without us because we have all these enablers and this equipment." My experience with the Israelis is they will do what they feel they have to do if they believe their survival is at stake, and they will do things we would never dream of doing militarily. If you think about the Israeli raid on the Osirak nuclear power plant in Baghdad in 1981, the Israeli mission was flown using aircraft in ways we would never have done. I mean, they put their pilots at risk. They were flying with a tolerance for fuel levels that we would never allow because those pilots came back from that mission essentially flying their planes on fumes. We would never have done that. But one constant mistake I've seen in my experience in government is American intelligence analysts and government officials assuming that people will or won't do things because we would never do it that way. It's a good prescription for being surprised.

So, Bibi's got a time window. I don't know exactly when it expires before he feels he's going to have to act. And does he act in the face of Trump saying, "Don't do it," or while the negotiations are going on? I don't know. That's going to be a very difficult political calculus he's going to have to make. And a lot of it goes to his personal legacy. I think he knows that whenever the time comes for a reckoning over what happened on October 7th, which he has successfully postponed for going on two years now, he is going to bear a lot of the onus for what happened on October 7th, 2023. And I don't think he wants that to be his legacy. I think he wants his legacy to be, I'm the guy who destroyed Hamas. I destroyed Hezbollah and I destroyed the Iranian nuclear program. I think that's how he wants to go out. So we'll see how he calculates all that.

BILL KRISTOL:

But a pretty... I mean, this comes to a head probably during the summer, right? So a pretty important next few months in terms of US/Israel relations, war in the Middle East or military action in the Middle East and so forth.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Yeah, I'd say watch this space in July and August and particularly August. Because I mean, I don't like to be superstitious, but a lot of bad things have happened in my experience in August while much of Washington is on a well deserved leave of absence for a summer vacation.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. Let's close with... that's very helpful actually, something to really think about or worry about, but worry about whichever way, action could be worrisome, inaction could be worrisome, and a US/Israel rift.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

What about the Trump/Putin call? What struck you about that? That was just yesterday, so it's just being reported really last night and today, but what's your...

ERIC EDELMAN:

So I saw just before coming on with you a story, I think it was in Bloomberg, saying that Europeans are stunned by Trump's phone call in which he basically said, "Great phone call. The two sides are going to get together to talk about a ceasefire." Which people had called for already, and so now they're going to be... Instead of having a ceasefire and talking about a peace deal, now they're going to be talking about a ceasefire. The Russian readout of the call was a little different. It quoted Putin as saying, "Well, we're going to talk about all this and see if we can reach agreement, but we have to deal with the root causes of all this." And that's just code, in Putin speak, for an independent Ukraine oriented to the West with security guarantees, et cetera. Basically suggesting that he hasn't budged an inch from his minimalist demands. The Europeans are saying, after all the effort they've made in the last couple of weeks to tee up Trump to become irritated by Putin's unwillingness to actually come to the table despite Zelensky's frequently expressed offers to come to the table, that would then lead to some pressure or sanctions on Putin. Apparently in the phone call that the Europeans had with Trump after his phone call with Putin, they were stunned that he is unwilling to sanction Putin.

To me, this is Lucy with the football in *Peanuts*. I mean, they haven't been paying attention for the last decade because if there's anything we know about Donald Trump, it's that for whatever reason he does not want to put pressure on Putin or put sanctions on Putin. He agreed to the CAATSA sanctions when he was president only because it was a veto proof majority. He's always been slow to apply sanctions or unwilling to apply sanctions. There's been all this huffing and puffing from Vance and Rubio about we might get tired and ticked off, we might sanction Russia or we might just walk away from all this. Trump seems to have suggested it after his call with Putin that he's walking away. He's just going to let the Ukrainians and Russians deal with this and it's a European problem, not our problem.

That leaves open a very important question is if the US walks away from this, how does it walk away? If it walks away and it continues to allow the military assistance that's in the pipeline from the Biden packages of assistance that were still in train, contracts that are still playing out and being delivered. If it means continued willingness to allow the Ukrainians to purchase US military equipment financed perhaps by the Europeans, either using the interest on Russian held debt as the Fins are doing with artillery shells for Ukraine, and if it means the continuation of very important US intelligence sharing with Ukraine, that's one thing.

If it's what we saw briefly in the aftermath of the Oval meeting, the disastrous Oval meeting between Zelensky and Trump back in February of a cutoff of intelligence, a cutoff of assistance, and apparently also a cessation of offensive cyber operations against Russia that was ordered briefly by Secretary Hegseth, that's a completely different story, and that would truly be I think, a sellout of Ukraine and pretty catastrophic. I mean, the Ukrainians have shown really incredible valor under strain and willingness to fight with some limitations that I would rather

them not have, but seem to be politically required for the moment. But if they're cut off from the intelligence and other US assistance, that would make it very tough for them to continue.

BILL KRISTOL:

So the whole Russia-Ukraine situation maybe comes to a head this summer because I think some of those weapons, they'll either have to be renewed or permitted or not, and the intelligence cooperation continues or not. Maybe there would even be an attempt by the friends of Ukraine on the Hill to add aid for Ukraine to end of year appropriations package. That's a big, Iran-Israel... Obviously the US has all kinds of other issues simmering away, you might say, and in our foreign policy. It's interesting.

Well, maybe I'll just ask this question to close it. The whole point of America First... I don't like America First, I don't think you like America First, it didn't work in the '20s and '30s and it was really bad when they tried to rehabilitate it suddenly in 1940 to give American excuses to stay out of a war that which already had featured the Nazi conquest of France and an invasion of other countries, and obviously the bombing of Britain. That was the original America first. But whatever everyone thinks of America First, at least, I suppose, the promise of it would be kind of we stay out of these conflicts. We're not involved. It's a coherent, if not desirable in my view, intellectual construct. But that's not what—you made this point the other day, so just elaborate on it maybe to close—that doesn't seem to be Trump's attitude. He's not just keeping hands off of all these places, he loves being in the mix, it seems like. Plus he has all kinds of commercial interests and personal reasons for liking some countries better than others and some leaders better than others, which he likes to indulge. I don't know. It's striking to me.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Well, threatening to intervene in Mexico by bombing drug cartels and things like that. It's—

BILL KRISTOL:

Greenland.

ERIC EDELMAN:

It's not really totally coherent at all intellectually. I mean, just to kind of tie off the Ukraine piece of it before going to the broader question. On Ukraine, the problem is that Putin is playing for time. I mean, his losses have been extraordinary and the rate of advance has been really very slow. I mean, they've been advancing but at a snail's pace and mostly dismounted infantry assaults, very hard for them to make up their losses in equipment and much less in personnel. They have lost, according to British MOD intelligence numbers that were posted earlier this month, something like 967,000 people, of whom about 200,000 have died, been killed in action. They will probably hit the million-casualty mark sometime this month or early June. Those numbers are astronomical and they're not really sustainable.

If Putin has to calculate that he is pursuing this with continued US support, continued European support, maybe stepped-up European support, that's one thing. But if he's able to—

BILL KRISTOL:

For Ukraine.

ERIC EDELMAN:

For Ukraine, yeah. But if he's got to calculate that it's going to be US supports going away, European support is kind of iffy, then he's going to be stepping up his operations and think he can drive Ukraine ultimately to capitulate, which seems to be his objective. And that I think would be catastrophic not just for Ukraine, but for European security and for NATO and for US leadership in the world. And by the way, the Chinese will be watching.

But yes, to your point, I mean this is not a coherent kind of worldview and it's not sustained by any kind of deliberative process. I know people hate foreign policy process, who cares, only

foreign policy nerds like us. But John Bolton has a piece in the *Wall Street Journal* either yesterday or today in which he talked about the statements that are coming out of the Trump administration that now that Mike Waltz has been fired, that they're going to disassemble the National Security Council as we have known it.

And John makes an impassioned defense for the system that largely emerged when you were working in the White House under Brent Scowcroft and Bush, 41. That has persisted to this day of committees of principals and deputies working through issues, resolving those that could be resolved at a low level and elevating those that really require the attention of the principals and of the President of the United States because our system is very presidential centric. And we're going to do away with all that which allows, however imperfectly because it hasn't been perfect and there have been all sorts of problems with the system and the outcomes have not always been great, but at least it allows for a deliberate consideration of pros and cons of policy and what the potential advantages or disadvantages that we have vis-a-vis our adversaries and how we might coordinate and consult with our allies.

There's no guarantee that if you have a good process, you're going to have a good policy outcome because the world is a very complex, difficult place and you can never really predict how policy is going to play out. But I can tell you that if you have a bad policy process the odds of getting a bad outcome go up dramatically. So the notion that we're facing this incredibly complex world—we haven't even touched on some other things like tensions between India and Pakistan, two nuclear powers that could get to the point of having a nuclear exchange that would be catastrophic for the world. And we just seem to be very passive.

I mean, the President took a lot of credit for the stand-down that India and Pakistan reached, claiming that the phone calls that Vance and Rubio and others made were key to this, although the Indians have denied that. But it seems like others were actually more active than we were. And in the past, a US envoy senior person would have gone out—in Bush, 41, it was Bob Gates, the Deputy National Security Advisor—in other cases it's been the Deputy Secretary of State. But a lot of passivity on the part of this, in part because the Deputy Secretary of State was out at Dulles meeting South African, African refugees from the “genocide” in South Africa. So I mean, it seems like a very haphazard, incoherent policy in a very dangerous world.

BILL KRISTOL:

I guess we should close on that because it's such a terse statement of the problem, the challenges we face and that the country faces and the world faces, but really something we need to follow. And I mean in a funny way, not a funny way, but one has to follow a foreign policy more closely I find now than one used to, because it used to be you kind of got the basic thrust of foreign policy. You either liked it or you didn't. It played out in a slightly predictable way though in terms of what the point of what they were trying to accomplish, one could say, well, they're not going to accomplish it successfully or one could say they might. Here, one doesn't know.

And I do wonder when you just have so many countries that don't know where we're going, they don't know where each other are going, we're not there to reassure everyone at the end that, okay, we're going to prevent this from getting out of hand, as you were saying. That you've got an awful lot of billiard balls bouncing around without a regulator. That can get... It can be okay for a while, and then suddenly it's not okay. That's what it feels like to me and we need to keep a close eye on it.

So you will keep a close eye on it, right? And we'll get back together to discuss when the billiard balls are really breaking or really not breaking or something. I don't know what the metaphor is. Do you find that personally? I mean, you've been involved for decades in this. Is it as worrisome? I don't mean to put words in your mouth. You tell me. How worrisome is the current moment?

ERIC EDELMAN:

I co-chaired a commission on National Defense Strategy with former Representative Jane Harman of California, which reported last year and our report basically said, and it quoted

former Secretary of Defense Bob Gates to this effect, that the country's actually facing probably the most challenging international security environment, certainly since the end of the Cold War, but probably since the end of World War II, with this sort of tightening collaboration among adversaries, Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. It's not a time for improvisation, it's not a time for lack of coordination and foreign policy by whim. And unfortunately, I think that's what we have. So yes, I find the international environment very worrisome.

BILL KRISTOL:

We will be worried, but more importantly, we'll try to intelligently discuss it and do what we can, I suppose, to influence it. So Eric, thank you so much for sharing your genuine wisdom here with us today, and we'll have you back soon, obviously.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Look forward to it.

BILL KRISTOL:

And thank you all for joining us on *Conversations*.