

## **[Transcript] The Realignment / 412 | Yonah Jeremy Bob: Iran's Nuclear Program, the Abraham Accords, and the New Middle East**

Marshall here. Welcome back to The Re-alignment.

One of my favorite topics to focus on this year has been the place of the Middle East in America's 21st century conception and foreign policy. I've done a bunch of episodes on the topic this year especially. Earlier, back in April, we focused on how the US's record in the region doesn't particularly come out looking too great over the past 40 years.

And then of course, a little later on in the summer, we spoke with Michael R. Gordon of the Wall Street Journal focusing on how the war on terror, specifically the campaign against ISIS, ended. On today's episode, I speak with the author, Yonah Jeremy Bob, about another entire aspect of the Middle East, which is the effort Israeli and Gulf-slash-Saudi state focused to destroy or prevent Iran from attaining a nuclear weapon. Yonah and his co-author specifically

argue that this attempt to prevent a Iranian nuclear weapons program has actually realigned the Middle East entirely and we see that demonstrated by the Abraham Accords. We're going to get into all that in this conversation, definitely a new era to explore World 2 and I think a really useful one because this is one of those unlike the previous Middle Eastern focus episodes that is only go to gather an importance moving forward. Hope you all enjoy the conversation. Yonah Jeremy Bob, welcome to the Re-element. Glad to be here. Let me just start by asking the most important question that needs to frame the rest of the conversation. Why does Iran want a nuclear weapon?

Sure. Iran wants a nuclear weapon for the power. First of all, they might use it. That's what terrifies Israel and to a lesser extent also scares the United States and Europe. But once you have a nuclear weapon, if you're Iran and you want to let's say take over Yemen, which they sort of have done with proxies, or let's say take over Lebanon, which they sort of have done with proxies, or try to take over other countries or have more of a presence in Syria and Gaza and pick any country in the area that they've started to tear Iraq. So once you have a nuclear weapon, people can't threaten you as much. You can pretty much get away with anything you can get away with because people are afraid that if they escalate, you'll escalate and there's no end. So the same way that the Soviet Union during the Cold War could do certain things and the United States might want to stop it and sometimes try to stop it, but had to be careful about stopping it because we didn't want to go to nuclear war. That could be what they ran. And the difference between Iran and the Soviet Union is, and I don't want to say that they're completely irrational, but they are a fundamentalist messianic regime. They're not anywhere near as rational as the Soviet Union was and what they could do in the Middle East and across the planet if they had a nuclear weapon is way more extreme than what the Soviet Union was concerning. Even though, again, the Soviet Union was like a world power, Iran isn't a world power, but what they could be capable of doing is way more extreme and that's what scares people so much.

And the key thing here, you kind of jumped the next question because the next question is, is Iran a rational actor or not? Because something that especially folks who are not on the pro-Israel side are going to just point out as well, open secret. Israel has a nuclear weapons program, which they have another confirmed or denied, especially in the telling of your book. Key feature, though, I think that needs to frame that discussion is Israel is clearly, I think, proven by this point that if they do have nuclear weapons, Israel is a rational actor.

The United States is a rational actor with these weapons. They are not going to use them aggressively and they're not going to use them offensively. There's a proven track record here. So when you say that you're concerned that the fundamentalist nature of the Iranian regime is that there could be indications of irrationality, what's going to that part of it? Because I think that's the important thing to kind of understand here if we're going to distinguish the different actors here. Sure. I mean, if you just look at what Iran has done over the years, whether it's suicide bombings before that was invoked in the 1980s in Lebanon against the United States, against Jews and other Argentinians in the 1990s. I mean, you can make a list of literally dozens of terror operations they've done all over the planet in basically every continent, in almost every country in Europe, some countries multiple times, almost every country in the Middle

East, 2019 blowing up large amounts of the Saudis oil economy. So they're capable pretty much of anything. Now, the reason that I don't just, there are people who say that they're the only thing to think about them is they're religious fundamentalists and there's no rationality and don't even try to negotiate with them. That's not what we see in our book. Our book, we say you need both a viable military threat and diplomacy. And the reason is because the Iranians are strategic thinkers. And so if they think, for example, that their entire country would be annihilated by a nuclear war with Israel, me personally, I don't think they'd go for that. But it doesn't mean that they wouldn't do lots of other things. It doesn't mean that they wouldn't be more willing to send teenagers and 20-somethings all over the world to blow up a lot more things and to take a lot more risks, invade other countries, destabilize other regimes because they knew that nobody could really come back and get them. And again, at the end of the day, we don't know what they are capable of. It's possible that they would be willing to use a nuclear weapon. They could also try to do a dirty bomb and blame it on somebody else and say it was a proxy. And there's all kinds of scenarios. So I put them somewhere in the middle. I do think that they are strategic thinkers. The Khomeini regime and the IRGC that helps him run the country doesn't want to lose their power. And that makes them a little bit different maybe from al-Qaeda or an ISIS that might be so messianic that they don't even necessarily look at what's going to happen next year. The Iranians have been running a country now since 1979. So they care about

next year and five years from now in budget items. And they do have strategic thinking, but I don't think they're anywhere near when people try to say, well, they're a rational actor and will offer these kinds of incentives. And that'll bring them to a certain more moderate place. You can't think about them the same way that we would Europeans or even the Soviets. They are on a different plane of what strategic thinking means. And the thing that's interesting for me, turning on my empathy capabilities to the maximum, why wouldn't Iran want a nuclear weapon? So let's

just put aside your craziest Ahmadinejad statements in the 2000s. Let's put aside even the conversation about religious fundamentalism from a pure regime stability, from a pure security perspective. It just seems like the clear lesson, especially from North Korea's example, is that if you could get a nuclear weapon, you should really go for it. So how does the Iranian regime debate internally or even externally, whether it makes sense to actually sign the JCPOA and commit to 2030 not to pursue a nuclear program? Why don't you just go for

broke the way North Korea did? So first of all, there's absolutely no question that they do want a nuclear weapon. And if they could get it tomorrow without a cost that they wouldn't want to pay, and you see, I am talking about costs because I do think they're strategic thinkers, then they would get it tomorrow. The reason that Iran doesn't have a nuclear weapon yet, some of it's because of diplomacy, because they are hoping that some sort of JCPOA will give them economic benefits, get them some relief from sanctions. But some of it's because they really believe, and by the way, I believe too, that Israel would preemptively strike them in a very large and significant way if Israel believed that they were going to crest that line.

So what it seems they're trying to position themselves to do is right at the nuclear threshold without crossing over. Right now they're at 60 percent enrichment. What does that mean? Under the JCPOA, the 2015 nuclear deal with the West, they had to stay under 5 percent. Then there's like another midpoint called 20 percent, that's pretty significant. 60 percent is a huge jump, and it's basically the level right before the 90 percent weaponization level. So they already have between 60 and 20 percent. They have enough uranium enriched to a high level that if they made the

decision within days, maybe a week and a half, they could have 90 percent enriched uranium for several nuclear weapons, not one, several. Now that doesn't mean that they could fire a nuclear weapon at that point because they have to master, there's other skills you have to master, detonation,

you can't just light a match and it blows up like a nuclear explosion. You have to deliver it in a miniaturized fashion on a ballistic missile. But all of these things they're making progress on, so even those timelines are always getting shorter. They just had success with a satellite going up into space and anybody who follows these things knows that all of those satellite technologies can also be used for an intercontinental ballistic missile in the future.

So yeah, they definitely want a nuclear weapon. If there was no cost, they'd get one tomorrow, but there is a cost and they don't want Israel to strike and lose all the progress that they've made. They don't want to lose opportunities for sanctions relief. So they want to negotiate for the best deal they can while cheating as much as they can without, I want to say, pissing off the Israelis or the rest of the world too much so that they would actually get a high cost for it. And the last couple of years, they've done a very good job at it. I mean, they're really coming so close to the line without suffering major additional costs, certainly at least above the sanctions that were already on them going back to 2018. So I want to understand the different sides of the debate about how to approach this prospect of a nuclear run, because I think we could tell me this is an incorrect summation of the status quo, but I don't think anyone, whether you're a super pro JCPOA or you're on the more hawkish side, no one thinks a nuclear armed Iran would be a good thing. Therefore, the debate is clearly, can you do a version of the Israeli program that you describe in the book, which is attacking the program, the actual technical capabilities, the scientific aspects, the actual logistics of it, while also the clear deterrent of massive strikes should the program reach a certain point. That seems to be one version. And the other version is just the idea of using diplomacy to continue to avert reaching and crossing that threshold. I think it's pretty clear the position of the Israelis and more hawkish members of the US foreign policy side of things. What I'd like to understand is what the JCPOA side of the debate thinks. Is the theory of the case that essentially

you can just offer enough carrots and potential sticks to the diplomatic path will just win on for the long term? Is that a way of understanding the story that the diplomacy side is trying to tell here? I'm definitely enjoying this talk because a couple minutes ago, I got to explain the Iranian perspective. Now, I get to explain the pure diplomacy perspective. That's basically it at the end of the theory is that what do the Iranians want? They want respect. They were stepped on for a thousand years by the Sunnis, where you have the history of Islam. One way to tell it is the Sunnis are this big group that were always in charge that had more power, bigger numbers. They were always stomping on the Shiites. And from 1979, there started to be sort of a pushback. And so they're looking for payback, not for like 20 years, for like a thousand years or more. And they want to reassert themselves and they want Shiites in all of these countries to be empowered. And so if they can get that without having to fight, again, they're strategic thinkers, they're happy to take as much as they can, build the economy, build their ability to spread their ideology around the Middle East. And some from the perspective of people who want the JCPOA, they're saying, look, if we can give the Iranians respect, and if we can integrate them into the world economy, then they will see it is in their interest not to destabilize that. And they will see it is in their interest to keep that going. And if they start doing terrorism, we'll say, hey, we're going to start taking away some of the pieces that we gave you. Don't do that terrorism. You want to move closer to the nuclear weapon, we're going to take away some of the pieces. Your country has a lot of people in poverty who start to go up. And now you start to do a little bit more nuclear problems, more terror problems. Okay, we're going to push you back down again. But hey, if you keep going forward, we won't push you back then. You can really bring your country up to be a true star in the region of the Middle East, a global power in a sense, get respect, develop yourselves. And we won't try to do regime change on you. They're terrified after the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003 of people trying to invade in regime change. They're still terrified of that. Now, the problem with all of this, of course, is that it's been tried to some extent with Russia. It's been tried to some extent with China. And it was tried to some extent with 2015 JCPOA. And what we've seen is that it's not that you can't cool countries off that are bent on either regional or world domination. You can't cool them off. They can become more polite. They can become more civilized. But if deep inside, they really want that world domination or regional domination or to become, let's say China, I don't know if they want to dominate the world in the conventional sense, but if they want to be the world power and exceed the United States and be able to coerce countries to do things their way, even if those countries don't want. And if Iran wants to do the same thing within the Middle East, so that's the problem that we see is a country that's deep in this kind of ideology, just giving them respect, just developing their economies isn't enough. And that's something that sometimes we in the West, again, I grew up most of my life in the United States, don't always understand the way that other parts of the world don't always conceive of things the same way that we do. I mean, especially, I think once again, I don't think this is a podcast, so it's okay for us to kind of oversummarize things. But to a certain degree, you can also gain a lot of respect by getting a nuclear weapon, like within that framework too, which I know someone who's on the JCPO, man, JCPOA side of the conversation would acknowledge that they're not just saying it's as simple as just giving them respect. But I think that, I'd love for you to speak to the

Americans out of this, because this is really fascinating to me, because if you're looking at any Middle Eastern potential adventure or dynamic from an American perspective, especially someone who doesn't follow this issue, the first question you're asking yourself is, okay, well, so the first thing you should do is make clear we're not running the regime change game anymore. It's not 2003 anymore. It's not 2005 anymore. It's definitely not even 2013. Therefore, why is Iran concerned about these things in the first place? Like, what is our interest in this debate? And I think this comes clear, reading the book that the two of you wrote, a lot of this is also driven just by Israel and the Gulf States and by Saudi Arabia. In some respects, it does matter, obviously, what the United States has to say about these matters, but in other respects, maybe it doesn't matter as much. So I guess the question for you then is, to what degree is the United States in the driver's seat of this issue? And to what degree is it just not in a way that's probably uncomfortable in comparison to our previous history in the region? That is a great question. So I believe you're right that the United States is not solely in the driver's seat. On the other hand, it is still the global power and it still has an outsized influence on everyone. So how do we balance those two principles? One thing is to understand why is there a difference between how the United States views the Iranian threat, because it does view it as a threat, and the way Israel and the Saudis and other Sunni countries view it, which is very different. The United States, to my understanding from having, again, interviewed Mike Pompeo, former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, John Bolton, HR McMaster, both national security advisors, Rob Malley, who for most of the Biden administration ran Iran policy, Hedi Amar, who ran Abraham Accord's policy, various other officials, is that it's a general threat, meaning they understand that Iran, even if it developed nuclear weapons tomorrow, wouldn't be able to hit the United States because they don't have ICBMs, intercontinental ballistic missiles. On the other hand, since the 1990s, they've had ballistic missiles in Iran that could hit Israel, that could hit any Sunni country in the Middle East. And so for those countries, it's a very specific and maybe even an existential threat to existence. So that's why there's a difference in how everybody views it. I think you're right. I think it does not help to talk, and not everybody agrees on this, but I don't think it helps to talk about regime change. I don't think it's going to be easy to topple the Iranian regime. It's not just Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. There's a huge IRGC apparatus, which is deep in so many places. And it's not that the regime couldn't fall someday. It absolutely could. And it could happen suddenly the way it happened at the Soviet Union, but it could also last for another 20 years, 30 years. They've shown that no matter how strong protests get, that they have hundreds of thousands, millions of people, including militias, who are willing to step up and beat people up in a way that the Soviet Union's professional troops weren't willing to do. Maybe in some ways they learned from the Soviet Union that you can't use the army to put down your own people. So they developed this large, you know, besieged militia that's willing to beat up its own people. And so, you know, balancing those two things is very difficult between what the United States sees the threat as. And Israel and the Saudis see the threat. Israel and the Saudis, unless there is no nuclear weapons program, are going to feel threatened by Iran. And the United States, as long as Iran stays below a certain threshold, is not going to be all that excited about. It's going to be focused more on China and Russia and Ukraine and all kinds of other threats as much bigger. Iran makes it into

the national intelligence estimate, but it's pretty low, most of the time, in terms of threats. So, yeah, in summary, I'd say regime change, I think, is not helpful talk. I think it does make the Iranians more paranoid. It doesn't mean that behind the scenes, people can't go for it, you know, covertly. But to talk about it loudly, I think, is problematic. And finding that balance where the United States can exert its influence in a way that, you know, helps U.S. interests for stability in the Middle East and not having threats, but at the same time recognizing that Israel and the Saudis and the other Sunni countries really do feel more threatened and would be willing to take actions and take matters into their own hands. If the United States doesn't get Iran to a certain point that feels less threatening to those countries, that's something that's important for Americans to understand. Yeah, it's just, I just ask you that very complicated question that you gave a good answer to, just because I just understand the national reaction here. This is my day job, so I can say with all 100% certainty, there is zero appetite in the United States at a political or policy level for the sort of 2000s era regime change, political, military agenda. Though, obviously, if you are a North Korea, if you are a Iran, if you're any of these like hostile regimes, you obviously are not going to make any gambles on like Marshall or anyone else's political calculus. But that said, I think the point that comes through in this book is even if the United States could offer a 100% guarantee that there's just nothing we really have moved on, we're not focused there, this, this, and that, there are just so many other players in this story. And that's why I think it makes this so fascinating, so unique. You're having to just sort of treat that you're just forced to really engage with the region with a lot of the kind of convenient sort of short hands that kind of, you know, I think limits our ability to conceptualize foreign policy questions. So here's another quasi random question. Yeah, please. I just want to jump on one thing that you said, and it goes into the conversation we're just having about the United States and what might happen. We talk about in the book that there's a built-in crisis for October 2025, that whether the Biden administration succeeds in getting Iran to go back into some sort of formal or informal new version of the JCPOA, in October 2025, most of the restrictions on centrifuges, those are the machines that spin around in a rich uranium, come off. So even though the deal still exists until 2030, and technically the amount of uranium that Iran could enrich is supposed to be very low, the fact is if you get to a certain number of machines, centrifuges, and if they're advanced to a certain level, then if you could go from zero to multiple weapons enriched in a matter of days or weeks, then it almost doesn't matter that the deal is still in place. And that's going to be a crisis point for Israel. And if you want to talk about where the US's hand could be forced, look at October 2025 because Israel is going to see that as a crisis point. And if there isn't some more security, again, whether there's a deal or no deal, if there isn't some more security for Israel at that point, that could be a crisis point whether anybody else likes it or not because of the Israeli perspective. And I guess the big question that I'm sure listeners are wondering, because we're coming out of the summer of Oppenheimer, how difficult is it to build a nuclear weapon if you are a serious country to be super cool about this? Iran is a real country, it's obviously a serious regional power, it has economic resources, it has oil, wealth, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. How difficult, just starting from scratch, assume there's no Israeli deterrent, assume there's no Mossad program, assume there's no American deterrent. How difficult would it be for them

to just build a baseline nuclear program? For Iran or for anybody?

Yeah, let's say for a country at the level of Iran.

A country at the level of Iran that didn't need to worry about Israel attacking.

At this point in history, if you have the right connections,

you know, could potentially do it within a few years. Back in the day when the United States was working on it, when Israel was working on it, it could take a decade, it could take two decades, but there's been a lot more proliferation, there's a lot more advances.

The centrifuges that are around today are much better than what was around 20 years ago, let alone 50 or 70 years ago. So these days, if nobody gets in the way, you could do it within, if you have the money and you're like Iran does and you're big like Iran is, and you have a lot of people and educated people you could do within a few years. And in fact, Israeli intelligence concluded in the 1990s that if nobody stepped in and stopped Iran, that they would have a nuclear weapon within a few years. So maybe today in 2023, maybe you could even do it faster. It does take some time because again, there is a lot of different skill sets that you have to learn and get right. And there's a lot of screw ups along the way. It hasn't just been with Iran, Pakistan, and India. We're moving at certain speeds and a lot of things broke and mess up a lot until you figure out the right ways to do it. But it is absolutely doable. If nobody is stopping you in this day and age, we could easily, if the non-proliferation regime falls apart, we could go from right now, people say let's say nine countries have nuclear weapons, we could go to 20 in five years if somebody wasn't stopping that.

I want to go back to something earlier that may have gotten lost in the regime change conversation because I just want to make clear like my position, the position of this podcast is not one of aggressive regime change. But in the case of Iran, this gets interesting because let's say the Mullahs did fall. Let's say you did have a transition of government. This kind of plays out in the Chinese context in a sense of like, let's say the Chinese Communist Party fell, well, you could still have a democratic China that was incredibly nationalist and still wanted to let's say take Taiwan and that still had border disputes with the country's neighbors. So I kind of wonder, even if you did snap your fingers and have the end of the current Iranian regime, would a more democratic or a let's say still authoritarian but secular Iran, would it still have the regional rivalries that force a lot of the conflict we're discussing here because something you actually say in the book explicitly is that the antagonism between Iran and Israel is a post 1979 development. When Iran was under the control of the Shahs, you did not have that issue. So I'm not saying that Israel would inherently be cool with a secular democratic peaceful Iran having a nuclear weapon. That would just be a slightly different dynamic, but I kind of wonder, would you still have the same negative dynamic between Sunnis and Shiites in a democracy between Saudi Arabia and Iran if there was regime change?

Well, look, I think nobody knows for sure. And even though I said before that I don't think they should publicly talk about regime change, we do have a chapter called death by a thousand cuts in which then Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett was working on this issue in sort of a long-term sense, not over, not regime change tomorrow, but slowly gradually over years or decades to weaken the regime. And if you do that quietly and covertly, that could be an effective strategy over time. So let's say it happens at some point, not tomorrow, but let's say in 10 or 15 years, enough things finally go together, the regime finally collapses. There are moderates in

Iran, there are reformists in Iran, but they're not quite moderates to perform us again the way that we would understand it in the West. So my belief, and I don't think we know the answer to this, my belief is that they would have better relations with the United States than they do today, not necessarily great, but better. I think they would have much better relations with Europe. They might have completely positive relations with Europe. Why the difference between the United States and Europe? Because there's a specific history of the United States involvement in regime change in Iran going back many decades and there are Iranians who will hold that against the United States for a long time, even if it's not the regime. But I think relations could be better with the United States, significantly better for Europe. I think they probably would be better with the Sunnis. It's not like it would erase a thousand, more than a thousand years of Sunni and Shiite disagreements, but if you have a less fundamentalist regime, a more pragmatic regime, I think they would improve. Israel, I think, would be the last thing to improve. When you take surveys these days of Iranians, even among the reformists in the pragmatists, they do want the connection with the West. And they're not interested, per se, in fighting Israel, but it doesn't mean that they're okay with Israel because there is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And we do talk about the Abraham Accords of 2020 have been a game changer in the region.

Many more Sunnis today are ready to accept Israel than any time before now that there's six Sunni countries that have either peace deals or normalization agreements with Israel. And there could be a lot more if the Saudi deal, normalization deal goes through. But the fact is that your average Arab, your average Iranian Persian today still doesn't like Israel that much, still is angry about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and takes the Palestinian side. And so as long as that conflict continues, I don't think you're going to see them being friendly, per se, to Israel just on the basis of regime change. But each of those boxes could improve somewhat if there is a reformist pragmatist regime.

So I'd love for you to explain Abraham Accords. What were they? What were the specific circumstances that led to their development for folks?

Sure. So August 2020, the United States, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates, which is a small country but very influential and economically overcome in the Gulf, basically signed a three-way deal leading UAE to normalize with Israel. And that's the first Arab country to do that in decades. You have a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt in 1978. You have a peace deal between Israel and Jordan in the 1990s, sort of a deal with Israel and some of the Palestinians in the West Bank in the 1990s, but that doesn't ever finalize. And so basically you have almost 25 years without more deals. And suddenly you have this big deal with the UAE immediately after that Bahrain, which is an even smaller country, but also important. And the Gulf normalizes with Israel. Shortly after that, you have normalization between Israel and Morocco and Israel and Sudan. So all within four months, you've got four countries. It's boom, boom, boom. If you were living through the time and following it, it really did feel like people talk about the negative domino effect of communism from, you know, this was like the positive peace domino effect. It was just stunning, you know, deal after deal being signed. And we talk about in the book that this is not a blip. This is not a small trend. There are now billions and billions of dollars of trade going on between Israel and these countries, huge amounts of tourism between Israel and these countries. This is a deep long-term change, a deep long-term trend. And that's all of this

could only have happened if the Saudis were in favor. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, MBS, was absolutely in favor of this. Some of what we reveal in the book for the first time is what Mossad chief Yossi Cohen was doing between 2016 and 2021. With MBS, we can say at this point that he did meet with MBS. We don't give all of the dates. We give some of the dates. We give some more details about what some of his meanings were like with MBS, what some of his feel was with MBS that shows you that what's going on now in 2023 is not surprising. If you read our book and you see how invested MBS was in the Abraham Accords happening, so okay, he wasn't ready to be the first. He sort of wants to be the last. He wants to be the crowning achievement. He wants the biggest concessions in terms of his country's defense, in terms of, you know, impacting, being seen as impacting the Israeli-Palestinian issue. So he wants more than what the UAE got, but he wants all of these things to happen. He wants Israel to help his country be secure from the Iranian threat. He wants Israeli technology, whether it's offensive hacking or whether it's general technology to improve, you know, agriculture and education and the environment. And so he wants in on all of these trends. And in order to do that, he needs to get closer to Israel. The UAE is already benefiting from this. And despite there, you know, there have been several

small wars between Israel and the Palestinians in Gaza in the last couple years. None of the normalization deals fell apart. They've all continued to move forward. The one that's moved forward the least is the one with Sudan. And that has nothing to do with Israel. That has to do with the fact that it's hard to say whether Sudan is a country today with the civil war that's going on there. But in terms of from the Israeli side, even Sudan, I can tell you that a lot of the leaders, if and when they work out their own issues, they're jumping to move forward with more economic deals with Israel. This is where we could take our most

late 1990s, early 2000s, pre-911 conventional wisdom and kind of

see what happened moving forward. If you just read, you know, a lot of foreign policy experts and even, you know, Colin Powell, 2000, 2001, resolving the Israel-Palestinian conflict was very specifically articulated as the key, let's not say peace in the Middle East, but let's say stability to improving stable relations. Obviously, putting aside how the Israeli Palestinian conflict should be resolved, obviously, a resolution in either direction, two states, one state, no state, whatever, was not required to improve relations between Israel and these countries as you just articulated. So what happened to that thesis? What was incorrect about that 2000-2001 conception that if you do not resolve the conflict, you are not because this was then this and once again, I understand the position those folks were in, because if it's 2001, you're trying to find a way to articulate why this conflict matters at a broader level and a way that you got there is by simply arguing that, no, if you actually look at every single conflict happening in the region, it's actually deeply rooted in this conflict here. So that's the greater stakes there. But clearly, we've seen a decoupling of the Israeli

Palestinian conflict in any injustice therein from the broader stability conversation. So what was wrong about that kind of center-left-center-right conventional wisdom in 2000-2001?

So one interesting question that we'll never know the answer to is whether it was, it's wrong today, but was it completely wrong then? Is it possible that if the right incentives were offered to the Saudis then, would they have gone ahead with the same deals that they might do today? Would UAE have gone along with those deals today without resolving the Palestinian situation?

I'm not sure that they would have back then, but that was 20 years ago and a lot's happened. One of the big things that's happened is Iran is much more threatening to these countries today than it was back then. Another thing that's happened, and this is a bipartisan, one of the few bipartisan issues in the Middle East, is Obama, Trump, Biden have all been withdrawing from the Middle East. It's not a linear, it's not all at once, but all of the administrations for the last decade and a half have been saying, we're going to have less of a military footprint, and that is making the Saudis and the UAE and these other countries terrified and more terrified than they were back then. They back then, they assumed they'd have the U.S. big brother protecting them forever. And now they're seeing that's not true, and they say Israel might be able to protect us, and there's a regional air defense already. There's not just general intelligence sharing, there's already between the Saudis and the UAE and Israel and a number of other countries that haven't come out and admitted it. There's regional air defense, so when Iran has sent drones or its proxies have sent drones to attack a Sunni country, Israel has helped them out, where they've sent those drones to attack Israel. Some of the Sunni countries have helped them out with operational intelligence. So the picture is completely different today than it was back then. I can tell you that even before all of this happened, I interviewed Shabtai Shavit, who was the Mossad director in the 1990s. He just recently passed away, so I interviewed him, I think, five or six years ago before the Abraham Accords, and he said, what we need to do is make more deals with the other countries in the Middle East, and then they will lean on the Palestinian to make a reasonable deal with Israel. Now you'll need, some Israeli leaders will also have to make some concessions that haven't been made until now, but you can say that between Camp David II, with Ayut Barak in 2000, and Ayut Erumot made an even better offer to the Palestinians in 2007, 2008, there was a point where the Palestinians were offered 92, 94 percent of the West Bank, and they wanted another one and a half percent, and they were offered significant amounts of East Jerusalem, and they wanted all of East Jerusalem. They offered shared sovereignty of the Temple Mount, and they wanted not shared sovereignty, but they were offered an awful lot that they had taken at that time, and so I think eventually some of the Sunni countries said, the Palestinians are never going to be satisfied, or they might not be satisfied for 50 years, they might not be able to deal for 50 years. We need Israel now, we need Israeli protection from Iran, we need Israeli technology, we need to move forward, we can't wait for the Palestinians anymore, and I think that fundamentally is what changed whether that would have happened 20 years ago or not. It's absolutely true now, and the sooner the Palestinians get on board, again, there are some things that they concessions that they still need to probably get, but the sooner they get on board that they can't have everything that they wanted 20 years ago or 50 years ago, and then they need to cut a reasonable deal, the sooner everybody will be happier, and I think they'll actually also be happier, and the whole region will be a little bit more stable. And I like the way you frame the EOD, it's 20 years since then, so I guess the question that's coming to mind then is at a geopolitical, regional level, is Iran in a better position today than it was 20 years ago? So on the one hand, blood rival Iraq, Saddam Hussein's Iraq is now gone, and obviously the Iranians have significant influence in the country now. They got to bloody the United States to the tune of hundreds of thousands of American troop deaths during the

war in Iraq, lots of practice for the IRGC, they're involved in Syria, etc., etc., etc. There are all sorts of ways you could argue they've improved their position regionally, but on the other, and this is what you're describing in the book, you've now had their mortal enemy Israel form stronger relationships with their mortal enemies, so you've now had kind of an increasing coalition building against that, and obviously while the United States has withdrawn at a serious level from the Middle East, obviously the United States is on the side of that Israeli-Saudi Gulf States coalition. So how would you kind of assess the strengths and weaknesses of Iran's geopolitical position right now? I would say that the high point of Iran is 2017. 2017 is when Qasem Soleimani, who was the head of the IRGC Quds Force, if we can imagine somebody who had the power of all of the CIA and the FBI combined, that was Qasem Soleimani. He was

probably the second most powerful person in Iran until the United States killed him in January 3rd, 2020, and 2017 he goes all out on his trying to build this Islamic crescent land bridge connecting Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, other countries, and he's having significant amounts of success, and then two things start to go wrong. First of all, a bunch of people start to see that the Iranians are cruel and that they're fundamentalist and that their way, their style of Islam, even if there might be people who want to be religious Muslims, that it's too much, it's too extreme, and that sometimes what the Iranians care about isn't really what these people care about in Iraq and not necessarily think about what's in the best interest of Lebanon, but they're caring about what's in it for Iran. And a lot of these countries, even if Iran gets a tremendous foothold, there starts to be a pushback on that and they start to have less success and there's actually some fascinating cables that came out where the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence, which is a separate body from the IRGC, says the IRGC is screwing everything up in Iraq. We had all these great ties in Iraq, we were getting exactly what we wanted, and then you ideological political people came in, you're not professional intelligence officers, you started messing up decades of work, we had all this great stuff going, since the US came in in 2003. So basically, in some ways, and this is, look, again, I grew up in the United States, I lived in the United States for 30 years before I moved to Israel and I've been a journalist in Israel for a long time, and I'm a big believer in democracy. I think democracy proves itself over time as people actually like freedom and people actually don't like not having freedom if they have that opportunity to voice themselves. And so in a lot of these countries where Iran is going in and initially saying, oh, we're going to help you, but then people see that they have other motives and that they don't really care about their freedom, they don't really care about their interests, that blows up in their face. And then the other thing is Israel and the United States and the Sunnis start asserting themselves and they start saying Iran is so nefarious, Iran is trying so hard to take over, it wakes people up. And so if Israel was asleep at the wheel and let Iran smuggle in 150,000 rockets into Lebanon, so Hezbollah has this humongous rocket's ability to attack Israel if there was another big war between Lebanon and Israel, Israel's not letting that happen in Syria. There's something we call in Israel the Mabam, which means if you translate it from the Hebrew, the war between wars, and Israel and Iran are actually at a daily or at least weekly war in Syria, Iran sends weapons to get on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights to be able to put in position to go to war with Israel from the border, not just from Iran, but from close range, and Israel blows it up. And this is, you hear reports about this maybe once a

month,

but it's happening every single week. There have literally been thousands of Israeli attacks in Syria to stop Iran from building up forces there. And again, the rise of the Abraham Accords is also because Iran overplayed its hand. It threatened people too much, it was too aggressive. And so I would say today Iran is in a weaker position than it was in 2017. On the other hand, it's still in as a more dangerous, any stronger position than it was 10 or 15 or 20 years ago before it had all of these proxies, it used to have just as ball on Lebanon. And now it does have a lot of proxies in a lot of places. And so it is still quite dangerous. And just because I'd say that Iran has been pushed back by Israel and the Sunnis in the United States in its own overreach and lack of caring about individual countries that in 2017, it doesn't mean that it's not a threat and that it couldn't make things a lot worse very quickly.

And we're definitely burying the lead here, but I want to not just do a page by page for counting of the book, but can you actually just discuss what Israel has affirmatively done in Iran then to limit the nuclear program specifically? This is where the reporting comes in, obviously. Yeah, so I'm going to go over not everything, but some of the big operations we talked about sort of at a forest level. The first operation we talked about is the 2018 Mossad operation, where Mossad did a heist of Iran's own secret nuclear archives from Tehran, from the heart of Iran, in the Shirabah neighborhood. And this isn't just like a mission impossible when you put like a little disc or disgun key into a computer and you bring that, you're like, oh, we got the, they took the physical original files, you know, you have in your background, you know, bookshelves of books, they had bookshelves of files that they brought back. And that was astounding. And that changed not just the way the Trump administration was able to put pressure

on Iran, but it changed the way the international nuclear inspectors, the IAEA, is still putting pressure on Iran from the evidence that they were given by the Israeli Mossad. Five years later, one of the reasons there isn't yet an ideal between Biden and Iran is that Iranians are demanding that all of these probes about militarily what have they done for a military nuclear program,

all of that's got to go away. And the IAEA says, we're not making it go away. There's too much evidence. We can't ignore it. That's, you know, what we start with. And then we move on to 2020, when the IAEA first starts pressuring Iran and they issue their first resolution condemning Iran for non-cooperation. In June 2020, suddenly after that, you see Iranian nuclear facilities blowing up all over the place. You know, they talk about the Godfather, like a bolt of lightning, and it just comes in and, you know, something blows up. So we have to say, according to, you know, Iranian sources, between the foreign sources, technically under the Israeli sensor, but everybody pretty much attributes a lot of those operations to the Mossad, especially the July 2020 operation, which blew up the large Natanz nuclear facility, the April 2021 operation, which blew up another nuclear facility in Natanz, the June 2021 operation, which blew up the Karaj nuclear facility. And then there's a number of other operations that happened going in, even into 2022 and even January 2023. That's around, I think the last operation we're able to get into the book, because at some point you have to go to Princeton. Yeah, exactly. Yeah. And then there's, you know, some major assassinations. We talked about Qasem Soleimani that it was done by the United States, but I have to say, according to foreign sources, Israel gave the key intelligence six different

cell phone numbers of Qasem Soleimani so that the CIA could follow him, because it's not enough to just know where somebody is. You have to know where they are, you know, in five minutes or where

they're going to be at the end of the day in order to, you know, take them out, so to speak. Mosin Fakhrizadeh, Iran's nuclear chief, the father, you talked about Oppenheimer, sort of the Iranian Oppenheimer, their father, their bomb, you know, managing their nuclear program for decades, and he gets killed in November 2020, again, attributed to Israel and the Mossad. So that's just an assortment of operations. Each of those operations are credited with, you know, pushing back Iran's nuclear weapon, you know, program by, you know, nine months or a year, and you put them

together. They definitely pushed it back by several years. And part of what we say in the book is true that Iran isn't done with the nuclear program. And right at this moment, they're actually closer than they've ever been. But the fact is they might have gotten one a lot sooner. Again,

I go back. Israeli intelligence said in the 1990s that without intervention, Iran would have had nuclear weapons in two to three years, where 30 years later, they still don't have them. And I believe, you know, as long as Iran is, you know, moving quietly, but still trying to move forward, and if there's no deal with the United States, you'll see more Mossad operations. And if they ever overtly try to break out, then you, I've seen a classified briefing of a massive number of targets that the Israeli Air Force has, that it can hit an Iran to prevent them from crossing the line. I guess the real question here is, why has Iran tolerated? And I'm not gonna say tolerated, right? Because obviously, for example, you know, when Soleimani was targeted in the American strike,

you know, they launched, you know, rockets at American positions afterwards. But that just really in the grand scale of things feels like a slap on the wrist. So in the book, you're describing this massive program that the Israelis are undertaking, you're describing the the American strike. Why have the Iranians effectively just do they just have no choice? Do they have no means of seriously deterring the the program the Israelis have undertaken? Because that's

why I kept thinking, I'm like, wow, like, this is just this feels so

yeah, I get the comfort. For example, like you mentioned in the book, obviously, that, you know, we bombed the Germans when they added a nuclear, it wasn't going or we still bombed the Germans.

We bombed the nascent Japanese program. There was talk of, you know, bombing the Chinese program

that kind of didn't happen. But it's not always normal to go this aggressive, even in cases where obviously Cold War United States did not want China to have a nuclear weapons program. I'm sure the Soviets didn't want it either. So I'm just kind of like fascinated that things have gone this far in this direction, without the retaliation that would deter this aggressive action on the Israeli and American side. So what kind of explains that from your perspective?

So first, I just want to say one point that not everybody in the United States and certainly not in Europe understands about the Israeli mentality. The Israeli mentality is that when they heard Ahmadinejad, the former president of Iran say they want to wipe Israel off the map, that wasn't just rhetoric. And when you're talking about people who either lived through the Holocaust

or had parents who lived through the Holocaust or large amounts of their aunts and uncles were wiped out in the Holocaust, Israelis don't take it as, oh, that's just rhetoric. Israelis take that seriously. And if you think about a Holocaust hovering over your head, you act differently and you take a different set of risks. And that's governed certainly in Netanyahu and Yossi Cohen as Mossad director. We talk about how Tamir Bartó as Mossad director has a different view of things and not everybody in Israel views these things the same way. But that's sort of certainly what's governing things most of the time lately. In terms of the Iranian side, it's not that they haven't tried. They've tried a lot. And we talk about briefly in the book that after several attempts to kill Israelis in Cyprus and Greece and a number of places and finally in Turkey, and after the Turkey operation, Israel publicized it so much and made so many sort of embarrassing revelations about knowing exactly what the Iranians were doing that one of the top Iranian intelligence officials was fired like the next day. And he was actually considered a very successful official, but it was just so embarrassing that Israel was not only beating, the Mossad was not only beating Iranian intelligence at its game, but was sort of flaunting it in public and showing systematically how much better we are than you and how much we knew what you were doing and how we beat you every step of

the way. I don't know, by the way, if that's always the right move. But so it's not that Iran hasn't tried. Current Mossad director David Barnea recently said that Iran has tried in something like 20 or so instances across the world to go after Israelis. And then there's other things that they've tried. February 2022, they send some drones to try to track Israel. This regional air defense that I was talking about with the Sunni Arabs helps out. Israel takes out the drone. Not only does Israel take out the drones, but again, I have to say, according to foreign sources, blows up not two drones, but the entire drone facility of something like 125 drones as a response to these two drones which were launched that didn't hit Israel. So then suddenly, again, if you're ISIS, you just say, okay, we just throw more people, more people, we don't care how many people die, we don't care how much money we lose. But if you're Iran and you've been around since 1979 and you tried to attack with two drones and you lost 125, you say, that's not good for business. So we can't try that tactic or we can't try it right now. We have to try a different tactic. We try to kill Israelis in Turkey. We get embarrassed, all right? So Turkey's not a good place to try. We have to try to find some other country where the security's less.

So it's not that Iran hasn't tried. Iran has tried a lot. And there have been some instances that they've been successful. There are a couple of instances where terrorism has occurred in Israel from Islamic Shihad in Gaza, from Hezbollah in Lebanon, where Israelis have been killed.

But the vast majority of the time that they haven't succeeded is because the Mossad isn't actually that good and that pervasive and massive today.

Again, it was a good intelligence organization 30 or 40 years ago, but now it is a global power, not as powerful as the CIA, but it might be number two or certainly number three from Western countries after that. And that's not a level that Iran is going to win at most of the time. That's such a useful correction to my question in terms of basically just treating nuclear weapons capability as this interchangeable threat where the Soviets are going to think about it the same way as the Americans are going to think about it as the Israelis are going to think about it. Because also to your point, it's not merely just the specter of the Holocaust, like a nation of people experiencing the closest you could experience to an actual

apocalypse. But you also have the Yom Kippur War. You have 1973. You actually have examples within Israeli history, within living memory of not taking threats seriously, of stepping off the of stepping, you know, getting your eye off the ball from an intelligence perspective and, you know, once again, facing an existential threat. So I think it's I think a really important point to take away from your point from of the book, which is understanding that whether you agree or disagree with what the Israelis are doing in these cases, there's a very specific history that's driving that perspective. So this has been really great. Yona, could you just close us by just shouting out the name of the book? It's, you know, out now folks should definitely check it out. So here's the book Target Tehran. It looks like it might be going backwards, but you can sort of get a general general. It's it's mirror. It all makes sense. Yeah, exactly. And it's by myself and my co-author Elan of Yatar, how Israel is using sabotage, cyber warfare, assassination and secret diplomacy to stop a nuclear Iran and create a new Middle East. And again, it's on sale, I think everywhere, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, I think maybe, you know, Walgreens Target, you know, they're pushing it aggressively. The Wall Street Journal just reviewed it, you know, got in a number of other very good reviews. And what I'd say to people is we've been talking about serious policy. This has been fantastic for me. I'm going to do some additional preparation for next interviews after some of the really good questions you asked me. And but it's also just an exciting thriller. If you have somebody who doesn't care that much about policy, but they just want something exciting, a number of the reviews have said, it reads like fiction. It happens to be true, which is, you know, it makes it even cooler, but it reads like fiction. It's a spy book. It's exciting, you know, escapades. So I think anybody will like this book, even if they're not, you know, somebody who's like a policy wonk, if your policy wonk, I think you'll really like the book, because you'll also like the policy side. But even if you're not, you'll like the book because it has a certain pace, it moves fast. And so I hope everybody enjoys it. Thank you for joining me on The Realignment. Thank you. My pleasure. Hope you enjoyed this episode. If you learned something like this sort of mission or want to access our subscriber exclusive Q&A, bonus episodes and more, go to [realignment.supercast.com](https://realignment.supercast.com) and subscribe to our five dollar a month, \$50 a year or 500 for a lifetime membership rates. See you all next time.