Virtual Event | Reassessing America’s Middle East Policy

TRANSCRIPT

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- Participant, Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Yaakov Amidror, Anne and Greg Rosshandler Senior Fellow, Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, Distinguished Fellow, JINSA Gemunder Center for Defense & Strategy, Former National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of Israel
- Michael Doran, Senior Fellow and Director of Center for Peace and Security in the Middle East, Hudson Institute
- Jonathan Schachter, Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute
- Peter Rough, Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute

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A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/2089-virtual-event-reassessing-americas-middle-east-policy-32022

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Peter Rough:

Welcome to Hudson Institute. My name is Peter Rough, I'm a senior fellow here, and it's my pleasure to moderate today's discussion, our panel, entitled, Reassessing America's Middle East Policy. I'm delighted to be joined today by Yaakov Amidror, major general retired, who is the Anne and Greg Rosshandler Senior Fellow at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security.

He's also a distinguished fellow at JINSA, the Jewish Institute for National Security of America. And of course, he's known to the world as a former national security advisor and chairman of the National Security Council to the prime minister of Israel. General Amidror, as the title suggests, has a long-storied career in the Israeli Defense Forces, where he served in numerous capacities. He's also the author of most recently, Winning Counterinsurgency War: The Israeli Experience.

General Amidror will be joined today by two of my Hudson colleagues from our newly launched Center for Middle Eastern Peace and Security. That center is directed by Mike Doran, who's with us, and Mike is an alumnus of the Bush administration, where he served as deputy assistant secretary of defense at the Pentagon, and also as senior director for the Middle East at the National Security Council. Mike's a historian by training, and a former professor, and his most recent book is Ike's Gamble, which takes a look at the Eisenhower administration's policies in the Middle East.

And last, but certainly not least, we're also joined by Jonathan Schachter, who's a senior fellow at Hudson, and the member of the team in the Center for Middle East Peace and Security. Jonathan was an adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, where his portfolio included US-Israeli relations, the Iran Nuclear Deal, Israeli diaspora affairs, and of course, the unprecedented expansion of Israel's ties in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. He concluded his tenure by working on something that'll be familiar to all of our viewers, and that's serving on the team tasked with exposing materials for Iran's nuclear archive in 2018.

Previously, I would just add that Jonathan was also a deputy director for emergency management at the Chicago Office of Emergency Management and Communications. And I mentioned that because the first time I met Jonathan, I had a chance to talk to a gray beard of Israeli security affairs a few days before meeting him, and when I mentioned his name, the response was very endearingly, "I guess that's the boy from Chicago." So it's great to have Jonathan with us, and the newest member of the Hudson team.

I thought we'd start with an opening round of insights on the topic today, and it'd be best to start with General Amidror. And I would just tee you up, General, by saying, I myself am 39 years old, and for my entire adult lifetime, the United States and the American public have been riveted by the Middle East, until February 24, when Vladimir Putin went into Ukraine. And as if to say, not so fast, America, pay attention to the Middle East once more, last Sunday on March 13, the Iranians launched ballistic missiles into Erbil in northern Iraq. So I guess I would ask, General, with all of these events in the world, from the Russian intervention in the Ukraine, the negotiations in Vienna, where negotiators are trying to close JCPOA 2.0, and the Iranian kinetic action in the region, what's the view from Israel? I look forward to hearing your thoughts.

Yaakov Amidror:

Thank you very much for the opportunity. I think it's a very important subject to try to understand what kind of Middle East we want in this new world, which might emerge from the conflict between the
Russians and Ukraine, and the interference from outside of NATO and America, or America and NATO in this conflict, and what implications we might have in the Middle East. First of all, I want to say very clearly from the beginning, the interest of the state of Israel is having strong America. The stronger America is, the better it is for the state of Israel. And we don't have any illusion that there is any substitute to the special relations that we have with America. And these special relations will be much better for Israel, the more that America will be stronger. To be even more specific, we want strong America in the Middle East. The stronger America is in the Mid-East, is better for Israel, and we hope that will be kept by the Americans as a principle for the future, although we understand that America is facing other problems.

And when President Obama said, we have to pivot into the East, it was well understood it. We understand that America is facing other problems, the challenge of China, now the problems with Putin or Russia, domestic problems that America is facing inside, the pandemic, and other issues. And what we understand is that, from decision makers in the United States of America, for many of them, and it is not the first president, it's at least Obama and Trump and Biden, saying America main problems are not in the Middle East. And main challenges are not in the Middle East. And from the Israeli point of view, this is why we see America slowly is pulling out from the Middle East.

And the question is, what Middle East we want to have when it is clear that the American umbrella is not the same strong umbrella that was here in the past? In a way, Israel is a much better position than other countries in the Middle East to deal with the new situation. Because from the day one, we said, Israel want to be in situation to defend itself, by itself, and we never ask America to take part in our wars and battlefields. But no question that the fact that Americans are pulling out is a big question mark for Israel. Okay, what do we do with what we have? I think that the main change in the Middle East, if you take into account the situation now, is that the Abraham Accords made a big difference relating to what is going on here in the Middle East today.

It is another situation in which Israel has good relations with some Arab countries. It's not just anymore Egypt and Jordan, it is much broader than that. It's, for sure, Bahrain, Arab Emirates, Morocco, which have formal relations with Israel, but a friend of mine said that it is very busy under a table in the Middle East. And under the table, there are other countries. Just remember that the chief of staff of the state of Israel flew over Saudi Arabia to meet his counterpart in Bahrain, and it was known to the Saudis that this is the chief of staff of the state of Israel, and it is an Israeli military airplane. And nobody asked questions in both sides of the line when it was done two weeks ago. So this version of the Middle East now is a different one for what we had in mind a few years ago, thanks to Abraham Accords and other relations, which had been built under the table for years with Arab countries.

But the real challenge is, how we build a Middle East in which the United States of America is still a very important element, but not as strong as it was a few years ago. What great of connections and relations we build in the Middle East, taking into account that we have good relations with the United States of America, but the United States of America powers in the Middle East, military powers in the Middle East, is less than in the past. And now we are doing it with less interference of the Americans between ourselves. If you ask me, what is the biggest challenge of the Middle East today, is how to build the system which will be strong enough, which can deal with the challenges of the Middle East, mainly Iran threats, and less interference of the United States of America, but still, America is in the area. And we
are taking into account its capabilities and its relations, but we are doing much more and more by ourselves.

What I mean by ourselves, in plural, the Arab states, which are ready to cooperate with the state of Israel, on the table or under the table, how it will be something which will be a substitute to the American wish, to build into the East. From the Israeli point of view, it's clear it's enhancing the relations with those countries, and enhancing the new ... alliance is a strong word, the new group, which has special relations between the members, it's Cyprus, Greece, Egypt, and Israel, based on the interest that we have in the Mediterranean basin, relating to energy and other issues, and to build something which would be strong enough to be a bridge to Europe through the Middle East, in one side, and with the Arab countries, too, that we have relations with.

And now, we have to ask ourselves, what is the position of Turkey in this big picture, because of the decision which had been by Erdogan to change his policy and to have better relations with the state of Israel, how far we can go with it, how far he can be trusted. What does it mean because of his bad relations with Cyprus and Greece? Good question. But here, we have another opportunity that we have to explore and to see how all these three elements are going together, walking together. We are not the center of the Middle East, but we are probably one of the strongest countries in the Middle East, the only democratic one, stable.

And this is a very helpful situation for us, not being in the center of all this, but being strong element in this new grid in the Middle East. How far the Americans will move to this, how far they're ready to pull out from the Middle East, how far they can go without bringing other problems that they have to deal with. Question for the future, but it is a different Middle East because of the relations that Israel built through the last decade. It is another Middle East because America is slowly out of it, and it is another Middle East because more countries understand that we have to cooperate even more because America is out, and how we are dealing with the main threat to the stability of the Middle East. And this is Iran.

Peter Rough:

To follow up on that, General, since you're describing a world transitioning, or a Middle East transitioning from an American-dominated order towards one where the Americans are still involved, but there are new constellations on the horizon to strengthen the countries themselves against a revisionist Iran, for example. Does America still have a role in helping forge those relationships, like the Turkish/Israeli rapprochement? Is there a role there, or is that basically driven by the regional actors themselves?

Yaakov Amidror:

I think that in some cases, it was led by America. The Abraham Accords couldn't be done, couldn't be implemented, although we walk many years to build these bridges in the Middle East with the Emirates, or the Arabia, Bahrain, and Morocco. But it couldn't be implemented, at least not when it happened, without strong interference or cooperation in some situation, when America even pushed the sides into having better relations. I don't think that the decision of Erdogan is connected mainly to the United States of America, it is more about changing the position of Turkey after having from zero friction, to now even one neighbor with which Turkey does not have a friction.
And it’s Erdogan’s decision, as I can understand it, not connected to America, maybe thought that the Israelis can help him to deal with Washington, and to enhance the relations between Turkey and the United States of America. But that was not the center of his decision. America can help. In some occasions, as I said, America is a good example. America can make the difference. But for that, you need involvement of the United States of America, and I’m not sure how much the Americans are ready to be involved. From the Israeli point of view, the more involvement of the Americans, the better, but we cannot push America to be more involved than America wants to be. A good example of lack of involvement is Syria in which American decided not to be involved, but in the Eastern side fighting ISIS. And for example, when the Russians came in, American didn't say even one word about it. And Russia for Israel is like the weather, we have to take it in consideration, but we know that we cannot change it.

And we are taking it into consideration and we understand from our reaction to what's happening now in Ukraine, that we are very sensitive to the reaction of the Russians in Syria is in the very important interest of us. And we have to take into account the fact that Russia is very strong in Syria. But this is an example when the Americans are doing nothing, there is no vacuum, the Russians came in because America was out. And it is an American decision, we cannot push America, but we will be more than happy if American decision makers will take seriously the threats of Iran and which they're not taking into account and will help the countries in the region to deal with this space.

Peter Rough:

Thank you, general. And maybe I'll go to Mike next to talk about not just the transitions in the region, but also perhaps some of the interconnections between the region and the broader world. Mike, do you want to offer a few opening thoughts on what we've heard and your point of view?

Mike Doran:

Let me unmute. There we go. Thanks, Peter. And thanks, General Amidror, for those very stimulating thoughts. I agree with every word that General Amidror said, although I would depict the American policy slightly differently in that I think it's not just that the United States is pulling back and not being involved, but it's actually building up Iran as it does so. And that is the single most disturbing thing from my point of view about what the United States is doing. Because, I mean, there are basically two choices here. If we assume that the United States, that there's a strong historical imperative for the United States to pull back from the Middle East, you either pull back by putting together a coalition of your traditional allies, putting more responsibility on them to take care of the interest that you have traditionally identified as America's interest and interest of its allies, and through extended deterrents, you work to increase their deterrent capabilities. I think deterrence is one of the keywords here.

The other alternative is what I believe the Biden administration, it's the same team, basically the same guiding principle. The other idea is to have a kind of a concert system where the Russians and the Iranians are if not trusted partners, they're at least actors that you believe you can come to a strategic accommodation with in order to pull back and stabilize the region, and I believe that's a flawed concept and that's the concept they have. And when I watch what's going on in Ukraine, I think that our, America's allies should be very disturbed by what they see.

On the one hand, it looks these days like something of a success story from the point of view of the United States, because Putin is having so many troubles, the Russian military is having troubles that
nobody expected. But the general expectation was that Russia was going to roll right over the Ukrainians, and they're having enormous problems. From an American point of view, I don't think that's the bad thing at all, quite the opposite. But I'm struck by the fact that the United States never deterred Putin, this success that we're having, if we can call it that, or at least the difficulties that Russia is having are completely fortuitous, almost entirely fortuitous.

They're primarily miscalculations about the Russian military's capability rather than something that the United States did to the military. Now, American policy, Western policy by supplying Stingers and Javelins, and so on, definitely increased the pain that the Russians are feeling, but they were never deterred. And I'm not convinced that the big message that all the neighbors of Russia that are not in NATO, I'm not sure that the big message they're going to get is that Putin was deterred here. If you're Azerbaijan, if you're Kazakhstan, if you lose Pakistan or Turkmenistan then what you learned from this experience is that Putin gets a free hand if you're his neighbor and you're not in NATO.

And I think that some of those lessons also pertain to Middle Eastern countries as well. Not all are convinced that the troubles Putin is having in Ukraine are permanent. I can imagine this being just like the Chechen Wars that this is Ukraine War I, or we could already say, Ukraine War II, there'll be a lull. He will rebuild and then we will have Ukraine War III until he brings that country pretty much entirely under his thumb. Now it can go other ways as well.

But one other factor I want to mention here, so one is the United States is out of the game of deterrence. This is the lesson that I am learning from watching the United States in the Ukraine, but also in the Middle East. When the Iranians launched this strike in Erbil, the Americans messaged that it had nothing to do with them. I mean, they didn't say that openly, but they leaked information to the media, some of it possibly even false, but that absolved them of responsibility from having to respond in any way and they immediately ignored it, had no impact. We're hearing all into are, now with the hostages being released, that we're going to have an Iran nuclear deal any day now. This wasn't even a blip on the screen. And we of course also learn during the Ukraine war that the United States regards Putin as a partner in concluding the Iran deal.

So Ned Price, the spokesman of the State Department, stood in the podium and said, "Putin is a pariah, Russia is a pariah, but we're still working with Russia on the Iran nuclear deal." Well, what does that mean? That means their concept, the Biden administration's concept of order in the Middle East is a partnership, or at least an accommodation, with Russia and Iran. So the worst thing here from the Israeli point of view, from the Saudi point of view, it's not just that the United States is pulling back, but it's doing it in an accommodating mode with Iran. And I think the result of this is it's not going to help its partners deter Iran, because it's out of the deterrence business.

And number two, it's actually become a kind of guarantor of the Iranian nuclear weapons program. Because as the United States pulls back, the United States could say, we're pulling back, it's your problem guys, but we're not saying that. We're pulling back and saying we solved it guys. So if the Israelis go and try to carry out acts of sabotage, significant acts that could lead to friction, leading to a possible war with Iran, the United States is going to tilt against the Israelis on that. It's not going to help empower the Israelis to destroy the nuclear deal that it just concluded. So I think that we're shifting the balance of power against our allies, actively shifting the balance of power against our allies and in favor of our enemies.
Peter Rough:

Thanks, Mike. And I suppose we should just stay right there and go into Jonathan on the JCPOA and Iran negotiations. Mike just said that we could be on the cusp of a deal any day. Now it might be concluded and he has a pretty dire assessment of it. How do you see it, Jonathan? And anything else you’d like to react to? The floor is yours. I’m muted.

Jonathan Schachter:

Thank you, Peter. Of course I share Michael’s dire view of these things. It’s interesting touching on something that both Michael and General Amidror were talking about. For a while, I thought the only silver lining to the nuclear deal to the JCPOA was that it helped bring Israel and its neighbors closer together. So you had an empowered, enriched, and enriching, if you will, Iran on the one hand. And then you had the countries that are threatened by Iran on the other coming together, understanding that there’s a common threat. There are also lots of common opportunities and things to do. And the moment was right to take some of these relationships that were previously under the table and put them on the table, and that was a very good thing.

What I think is happening now is that it’s going into another phase, and that is as the United States intensifies its move away, and I’m careful about this too, because United States hasn’t packed up its bags and completely left the Middle East, but there’s clearly a desire to focus on other things. Something else has happened, and that is you can’t compartmentalize these things geographically. That is, what the United States says and does in other arenas impacts what happens to US relations and to US partners and to US rivals in the Middle East.

So Mike talked about the failure to deter Russia, and I agree with him on that point. That failure to deter Russia doesn’t just influence Russia’s immediate neighbors, it also influences the assessment of the United States in the Middle East. The withdrawal from Afghanistan and everything that went along with that, including very frankly, the incredibly difficult position that US partners and allies were left in in Afghanistan was undoubtedly noted by America’s partners, allies, and enemies in the Middle East.

So these things are not as compartmentalized as I think some would prefer or hope that they would be, I think these things all influence each other. And as this is happening, I see now we’re moving possibly into another phase, which is not just the phase of where the countries of the region have to come together and form new partnerships like the Abraham Accords. And as General Amidror intimated, relationships that are taking place but haven’t been discussed. But now what we’re also seeing is an increasing number of states hedging their bets.

And so in the last several months, you see outreach that we didn't see before between and among the Saudis and the Emiratis and the Turks and the Syrians and Iran. And you see all of this sort of people putting out feelers to try and figure out because people don't understand yet who's going to be left standing when the music stops. And I think that is actually a much more dangerous phase than we were in previously. And I think, with the nuclear deal on the table, we're in a different place now as well, the deal that was on the table in 2015.

In 2015, you had an argument between supporters and opponents of the deal, but it was all perspective. It was the two sides putting forth their best guess of what was going to happen. And now six years later, we don't have to guess anymore, it's not a prospective argument anymore. Now we know what the
JCPOA does and did. And unfortunately, the deal opponents, count myself among them, were right. And we see Iran's increased aggression, we see the capabilities that Iran has maintained and expanded that it never needed for a civilian nuclear energy program. And we see the sparking of a regional nuclear arms risk. And now going back into the deal under worse terms where there's even less time before it sunsets, less time before the snapback expires in 2025. And Iran will get access to all this money as oil prices spike is giving the Iranians more and getting less. It frankly doesn't make sense unless there's... I actually think that it's become more an article of faith now. And I think the pause in talks that we have right now, following Russia's attempt to sort of throw some sanctions relief for itself in there, gives an opportunity to reassess and say, what's going on here? What's the upside to this?

Peter Rough:
Thanks, Jonathan. And I suppose we might as well just make explicit what I think you were in part saying in connecting the regions that, not only will the Iran deal potentially unleash a nuclear cascade, but the lesson for a lot of these countries from the Budapest memorandum in Ukraine has to be that we needed [inaudible 00:31:20]. General Amidror, if I could go to point that Mike made and ask you to give your assessment of this, do you think that the war in Ukraine strengthens, weakens the Russian position in Syria? Or is it essentially irrelevant?

Yaakov Amidror:
Yes. I think it's relevant to the position of the Russians, but I don't know yet how the Russians will act based on the experience that they are facing in Ukraine. In one side, they have to be more cautious. They understand their limitations and they understand what could be achieved and what cannot be achieved. But at the same time, I think that the Syria is a different situation. The Russians here are not facing any real position. The other side that they're fighting against does not have the capacities that the forces of Ukraine's have. They don't use boots on the ground. It's only air force and missiles from afar. So I think it's probably... They will have to rethink what they want to achieve there and how they want to position themselves in the new situation, after the experience of Ukraine. But there are so many differences between these situations that there is no specific lesson that can be adopted by the Russians, based on their lessons in the experience in Ukraine. And it would be very interesting to see how it will imply and what difference it will make in this situation, because there's very few areas in which there are equivalent situations, forces, and challenges in Syria and in Ukraine.

Peter Rough:
Thanks. Mike, I noticed you were vigorously shaking your head when Jonathan brought out the issue of hedging behavior in the Middle East, and in at least recent months and recent years even it's rare to get into a conversation with you about the Middle East that's gone this long without the word China being uttered. So perhaps you could expand the interconnection to also talk about the role of China in the region and the impact that might have on hedging behavior.
Mike Doran:

Well, one of the bizarre aspects of the world view of the Biden administration is that on the one hand, the rhetoric around the Ukraine conflict sounds like Cold War rhetoric. And the demand for compliance, for example, from Israel on the sanctions against Putin, sounds like a demand for a Cold War unified position all across the globe. But as I mentioned before, at the same time, the United States is strengthening and the Russians and the Iranians are certainly doing nothing to counter them at all in the Middle East. When the Russian-Iranian alliance arose in Syria, the United States was quite happy with it. And the worst thing that Barack Obama said was that Vladimir Putin was in a quagmire at the time. So maybe it's exaggeration to say the United States put Russia on Israel's border, but we certainly did nothing to oppose it. We forced Israel, and we forced the Turks, to start working with Russia as we were working with them to try to stabilize the Middle East. But then suddenly we turn around almost on a whim and say, Israel, you must, you must now endanger your relationship with Russia in the Middle East at the same time that we are not doing anything to actually help them counter the Russians in the Middle East, on the contrary. And I think that those contradictions exist in the American policy all across the world, that there's an insistence on the part of the administration that every conflict we have with China, Russia is a discrete and separate issue with respect to anything else that's going on in the world.

So the conflict with Russia and Ukraine doesn't extend to our relations with Russia in the Middle East. The conflict with China over Taiwan doesn't extend to the question of the Ukraine, because we learn that the Biden administration was in Beijing showing intelligence to the Chinese of the Russian buildup and asking them for help in moderating Putin. So here's the United States, the greatest power on earth, still. The geostrategic rival of the Chinese and begging them for help to reign in Putin, which they could do on their own, but instead they go to the Chinese. So there's still an idea, even as these conflicts intensify, even as the cooperation between the Chinese and the Russians and the Chinese and the Russians and Iranians, even as that rises. I mean, from my point of view, there's now a global alignment, China, Russia, Iran against the United States, or designed to undermine the American order. Even as that comes into clearer view, the United States insists on treating the globe as if we can have this understanding among the great powers together with the Iranians.

And we can all stabilize things together. That simply doesn't work. And it especially doesn't work in the Middle East. So our allies, the Emirates, the Saudis. Look at the Emirates. The Emirates have had three ballistic missile attacks against them in the last month or two from the Houthis. How's the United States responded? Well on the one hand, it has defined it not as an Iranian policy, but as a Houthi policy, it has condemned it verbally. It has told the Emirates that it will help them defend their territory, but it has done nothing to deter the Iranians, which is what the Emirates need from the Americans. The Emirates don't have the power to actually carry out actions that will deter the Iranians. It needs America for that. That's America's job.

America is refusing to do it. So we have made our allies kind of defense orphans. They're betwixt and between. They're still being told by the Americans what to do in certain respects. And giving red lines, you can't get too close to China, for example, but we're not coming in to actually give them what they really need. So, as a result, what we are doing is driving them to China, and we see it. Every week there's a new, there's a new story. This week, we learned that the Saudis are considering paying for their oil, Chinese yuan. So moving it out of a dollar transaction, into a Chinese currency
transaction. Mohammed bin Salman has invited Xi Jinping to Saudi Arabia in spring. He’s coming. Mohammed bin Salman won’t take the calls of Joe Biden.

You would think that this would alarm the Americans, and they would think that maybe this Iran deal isn’t so good because we’re not getting a more moderate Iran. On the contrary, we’re getting an Iran that’s sending ballistic missiles against our allies, and we’re driving our allies to China. And yet, I don’t see the reassessment at all. And again, we’re not calling for the United States to take over the region with its military and do everything, but it has to read the security interests of its allies. It has to accept their understanding of their security as its understanding of its security. And it simply won’t.

Peter Rough:

Thanks, Mike. And I should have followed up with Jonathan on this earlier, but you made a nice segue, and that is you said that this JCPOA 2.0 is a known world to us. It’s a known quantity because we’ve experienced it before. It’s no longer perspective, but maybe for some of our viewers, could you go through what Iranian behavior was like post JCPOA? I mean, what was Iran doing in the region? What did the JCPOA allow it to do?

Jonathan Schachter:

Sure. So I’ll actually use what was predicted, because it turned out to be a useful roadmap to what Iran actually did. And what was predicted was that Iran would take the funds that it received, and it got access to, as a result of lifting of sanctions, and it would use it to be more aggressive in the region. And what we saw was with the conclusion of the deal, Iran became more aggressive in the region. In the three years after the conclusion of the deal, the Iranian defense budget, which is much more offensive than defensive, went up by more than 30 percent. The funds that it gave to Hizballah and Hamas also went up in those years. So an Obama official, who is now a Biden official, who at the time said that...

He was asked about this. And he said that the Iranians would spend the money on butter. But we now know that they didn’t spend it on butter. They spent it on guns or on a lot more guns than butter in any case. The second thing was that Iran was allowed to keep, as I said before, this massive nuclear infrastructure up, that's unnecessary for a civilian nuclear energy program. And it's one of the craziest things I heard, or I saw online a few weeks ago. A US senator said, you got to go back to the JCPOA because it's the gold standard of arms control. And the funny thing about that is there is a thing called the gold standard in arms control. And it's an agreement that doesn't allow for work on the fuel cycle, meaning not allowing the enriching of uranium.

And the really funny part was this senator, a Democratic senator, had written an article a few years earlier with John Bolton talking about the virtues of the gold standard in arms control. So this was a complete reversal.

Peter Rough:

It was a staffer who wrote that article.
Jonathan Schachter:

It might have been, it might have been, but the point is that you see in concluding the JCPOA, the US left decades of its own arms control policy about the fuel cycle. And it wasn't just that it allowed Iran to enrich uranium. It basically decriminalized an illegal uranium enrichment program because the Iranian enrichment program, it was built in secret, it was conducted in secret, it was done underground. It wasn't declared and it was decriminalized.

And the third thing was that it was going to spark a nuclear arms race in the region because the other countries in the region were not going to sit back while Iran was allowed to have these capabilities. And in fact, in the years immediately following the conclusion of the JCPOA, you see this increased interest not just in nuclear technology, but specifically in the fuel cycle and bringing things together with what Mike was talking about. There have been reports over the last couple of years about the Saudis cooperating with China, both on a Saudi ballistic missile program, and also on a uranium program in Saudi Arabia. So all of these things that were predicted, we're now actually seeing. Now, the other thing that was different from 2015 to now is something you can't blame anybody for not knowing because it didn't exist yet. And that is the capture of the Iranian Nuclear Archive in 2018. And before that, if you go back and you read the reports of the IAEA, the International Atomic Energy Agency, from before 2015, they're very careful and very legalistic in their approach. They don't say more than they can. They don't conclude more than they can. But you get this feeling from reading that they're putting together a puzzle, right? So you had a facility here or some activity there and they were trying to constantly deduce what was going on.

So they said, "Well, we see activities in this kind of facility, which is consistent with a military nuclear program." But they never came out and said, "This is an Iranian nuclear weapons program." They always stopped short of that because they were putting together these pieces.

So in 2018, Israel captures this Iranian nuclear archive. And I remember the first time that I looked at some of those materials and I was like, this was the solution to the puzzle. Because you weren't looking at pieces anymore. You were looking at the whole thing.

You were looking at the plans and the designs of an Iranian nuclear weapons program that was more comprehensive and more advanced than had been known previously. And so you know that the Iranian enrichment facilities and activity were designed from the start to be part of this nuclear weapons program.

So it makes it even harder today... In order for the JCPOA to make sense, you basically had to pretend that Iran had a civilian uranium enrichment program. But now it's impossible to honestly pretend that because we know what the program was designed for from the start. And that's where we are now going headlong into a renewed JCPOA, even though you know that it makes even less sense.

Peter Rough:

Well, if we're heading into headlong into a JCPOA 2.0, General Amidror, how should Israel react? I mean, what are Israel's policy options going forward?
Yaakov Amidror:

First of all, the expectations in Israel that the administration will take seriously its own promises to achieve a broader, stronger agreement. That even the administration agrees that the one which was signed in 2015 is not a good agreement and they promised. I think that the president did it by his own words to get a new one, which would be broader and stronger.

Israel's philosophy or policy is very clear. There is one difference between the Netanyahu administration and the previous one that [inaudible 00:47:50] was ready to fight the whole way to galvanize the opposition around him. But at the same time to lose some parts in the democratic party. He thought that fighting the bad agreement is more important than anything else then.

Now the decision of the government is a different one. They said, "We are against the agreement. It's not biting us. We will not change our attitude towards the Iranians and our efforts to prevent Iran from being nuclear. But we are not going to fight in public with the administration."

But I think that in principle their reaction to the agreement is the same. That Israel will do whatever is needed to prevent Iran from being nuclear. I can understand the difference in attitude towards the America. But I want to believe that the policy is the same. Israel will be ready whenever it will be needed to destroy the infrastructure of the nuclear military project.

Always the question is when the red line was crossed. When is the last time that you can do it? You don't want to do it earlier than either, but you don't want to be in a position that it is too late. And this is something that is a combination of assessment, intelligence, and technical understanding. But as far as I can judge, the main core of the philosophy and the policy of this government is the same as the previous one. Israel will not allow Iran being nuclear, whatever will be the price.

Jonathan Schachter:

Peter, I think that's right. And I think one of the differences between the two governments is that in 2015, when Prime Minister Netanyahu led that very vocal fight against the JCPOA, that was as the deal was coming together. That is, he was trying to influence the content of the deal itself before it was concluded.

The speech before Congress was in March 2015. The deal wasn't concluded until July. He was trying to influence what was there. I think that today we already know what's there. The deal is a fait accompli. That is, you already know what's there and they're talking about returning to it.

And so I think that part of the consideration of the current government in Israel is there's no sense having that kind of an argument over something that you can't influence, because the content has already been said. In some ways, the JCPOA is the upper bounds of what could be achieved, but it can't at this point and it won't. But there's no argument to be had there about what the JCPOA includes because it's finished, it's written.

Peter Rough:

Mike, since you have a painting...
Yaakov Amidror:

Today is about the conditions or the pre-conditions of signing the known agreement. It is a different situation. But I think it's very important to emphasize the core of the policies the same. Israel will not accept the agreement and it will do whatever is needed to destroy, if it'll be needed, the nuclear military project of the Iranians.

Peter Rough:

Mike, since you have a painting of David Ben-Gurion on holiday on your wall behind you, I'll make you an honorary Israeli for this next question and ask you how you see the Israeli position. And then maybe if you had any advice for the government, what would you advise?

Mike Doran:

It's difficult for me to tell the Israeli government what to do, especially because I think they're really in a pickle. And I think they are really on their own in a way that they haven't been on their own in a very long time. Because of what I originally said in my opening comments that the United States is tilting toward Iran.

It's not neutral here. It's not wishing the Israelis success in destroying the Iranian nuclear program. I don't take the longer and stronger rhetoric of the administration as anything but a statement of pious intentions. After this deal is completed, they will go and they'll send a few letters to Tehran saying, "We'd like to talk to you about a longer and stronger agreement."

And Tehran will say, "Get lost." And they'll go back to the Israelis and say, "We're trying. We intend. We really want." But they won't do anything. In the same way that when Iran attacks the Emiratis, America says, "We're there for you. We support you."

But what does the support actually mean in terms of action? Not a lot. But it's going to be even worse here for the Israelis because there's going to be a perception in the Biden... We have two and a half more years of this. There's going to be a perception in the Biden White House that Israel is dragging the United States into conflict with Iran.

It's a completely false belief, but their belief is going to be they solved the Iran nuclear problem. And Israel is trying to reopen the question here. So Israel has to actually at the same time that it wants to work through CENTCOM in increasing its military capabilities so that it will have the capacity to deter the Iranians and possibly destroy its nuclear program, if necessary.

They're going to want to work with the Americans to increase those capabilities. The Americans are going to want to deny them those capabilities. And if Israel takes military action against the Iranians, significant action against the Iranians, the Americans are going to oppose them or make it difficult for them in a lot of ways.

So they have to make politics against the White House while they're working with it, which reminds me of a Ben-Gurion problem when he had said, "I'm going to fight the white paper like there's no war and I'm going to fight the war like there's no white paper." This is the sort of dilemma they have.
But I don't know that this government has a kind of Ben-Gurion mindset. I'll just tell you what Ben-Gurion would say. I won't say that I will recommend this, because it's not for me to tell that Israeli government how to deal with it. Ben-Gurion had a similar problem in 1950-1956 when the Soviet Union delivered to the Egyptians a quantity and quality of weaponry that outstripped everybody else in the region.

The IDF looked at that and they said within a year, the Egyptians are going to assimilate all this weaponry and it's an existential threat to Israel. The United States was tilting toward the Egyptians, just like it's tilting toward the Iranians now. And so what Ben-Gurion did is he started carrying out very obstreperous reprisal operations against the [inaudible 00:56:09], who were organized by the Egyptians.

And as a result of that, as a result of showing the world that it had military capabilities and a will to use them and a will to defy the United States, the United States and the Soviet Union, the greatest powers on earth, as a result of that, people came toward them, and in particular, the French. The French came toward them because they were enemies with the Egyptians because of the French position in Algeria and the Egyptian role in Algeria.

And from that was born the strategic relationship with the French and the Israelis, which was tremendously beneficial to Israel. I think that this is what the Israelis need to be thinking about now. Who's in the role of the French today?

Who's the power out there that is going to be as discomforted or nearly discomforted as Israel is by the rise of Iran and America's tilt toward Iran and can help Israel develop the capabilities it needs in order to deter Iran, but also force the Americans to reconsider their position? No amount of arguing with these guys in the White House is going to change their perception. It's only action that is going to change their policy.

**Peter Rough:**

Well, if there aren't any closing thoughts, I think we've run out of time. So I just want to close by thanking Yaakov Amidror, Mike Doran, and Jonathan Schachter for this lively discussion. Please visit hudson.org for more of our events and all of the work done by our Center on Middle East Peace and Security, which you can find, as I said, at hudson.org. Thanks very much.

**Yaakov Amidror:**

Thank you.