

Episode 4 – Regional and global interests and influences

Peter Loewen: Hello, I'm Peter Loewen, Director of the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy. Welcome to Scholars and Dialogue, six conversations on the Modern Middle East.

These sessions were held in April and May, 2024 to provide in-depth insight on the political landscape in the Middle East, the war between Israel and Hamas, and the broader history of the region. This is a joint project between the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, IE University School of Politics, Economics and Global Affairs in Madrid, and Sciences Po Paris School of International Affairs. This is episode four, Regional and Global Interests and Influences.

Throughout history, the conflict between Israel and Palestine has been influenced by external players. This discussion analyzes the consequences of American and Middle Eastern foreign policies and interests in both regions. The session's moderator is Cristina Gallach, former UN Under-Secretary-General and former Spanish State Secretary for Foreign Affairs. She's joined by four panelists, Elham Fakhro, Hussein Ibish, Daniel Kurtzer, and Nimrod Novik.

Elham Fakhro is a research associate at the Chatham House Middle East North Africa program, and research fellow at Exeter University's Institute of Arab and Islamic studies. Hussein Ibish is a senior resident scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. Daniel Kurtzer is the S. Daniel Abraham, professor of Middle Eastern Policy Studies at Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs, and is the former United States Ambassador to Israel and Egypt. Dr. Nimrod Novik is the former senior policy advisor to the late Prime Minister Shimon Peres, and served as Special Ambassador of the State of Israel and as an advisor to the Israeli National Security Council.

Hope you enjoy their conversation and that you learn as much from it as I did.

Cristina Gallach: It is an honor for me and a privilege to be able to moderate an extremely distinguished panel in order to disentangle the regional and global influences and interests around the current conflict in Gaza and the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict, historically and today. And my first question is how and why do the interests of other often bigger states matter for what happens in Israeli and Gaza in this war? Ambassador Kurtzer, for you.

Daniel Kurtzer: Well, thank you very much to the Munk School at the University of Toronto, and Ambassador Gallach for hosting this event.

I think the interest of the United States globally are self-evident and they extend for many decades to the Middle East. The United States has had a consistent set of national interests in the Middle East, going back to the post-World War II period in which after the creation of the State of Israel, we have wanted to see a strong and vibrant independent democratic state. We have tried to advance the

Episode 4 – Regional and global interests and influences

Middle East peace process both between Israel and the Palestinians and Israel and Arab states. We have developed and maintained regional alignments and relationships with key Arab states. We have tried to push back against those who would seek to defeat the regional order, and we have had a particular interest in counterterrorism and counter-proliferation.

And so our interest in what's happening today in Gaza between Israel and Hamas is also self-evident. Hamas committed a horrible invasion of Israel on October 7th, killing and taking the hostages and raping and sexual aggression. And since that time, Israel has sought to both degrade Hamas and to prevent it from returning to governance goals which the United States shares. We are going to discuss a little bit later some of the issues in which the United States and Israel have diverged, but overall the strategic alignment between our two countries remains intact.

Cristina Gallach: Thanks very much, Ambassador Kurtzer. Let me give the floor to Professor Fakhro about the interest of other states on what happens in the current war.

Elham Fakhro: Sure. So the regional states have a vital role when it comes to this conflict. I think first we can talk about the role as mediators. So Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, and Egypt, all four of these countries have played significant important roles trying to mediate this conflict, bring about an end to the war in Gaza. So has Qatar with the added role that it plays in its outreach to Hamas, which few other states do. Saudi Arabia also historically has a role as the leader of the Arab Peace Initiative that it has brought forth to try to resolve the conflict.

So very generally, multiple states in the region have tried to play roles and do continue to play roles in a mediation capacity. Beyond that, the roles also matter when it comes to the conflict itself and whether the conflict can be contained within Gaza or whether this is going to spill into a broader configuration. And I think across the board, numerous states have also played a role in attempting to de-escalate, which has also been significant in this context. So very broadly, this is why the regional context is extremely significant to the conflict at the moment.

Cristina Gallach: Absolutely. Thanks. And let me turn to Ambassador Novik from the Israeli point of view, but as well as your knowledge of the Israeli relations with powers is so deep. What are the regional interests on the conflict?

Nimrod Novik: Well, we went through a very interesting period over the last few years when after the historical breakthrough of relationship between Israel and Egypt over 40 years ago and thereafter with Jordan over 25 years ago, a few years ago there was a breakthrough promoted by the Trump administration that brought us the so-called Abraham Accords, which was opening of diplomatic relations and full recognition and a wealth of relationships, business and otherwise, with Bahrain, with the United Arab Emirates, with Morocco, and to an extent with Sudan.

Episode 4 – Regional and global interests and influences

At that point, both Israel and those Arab countries sought to decouple the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the bilateral relations. And bilateral relations really flourished. More so with United Arab Emirates, it was very, very dynamic, but also with Bahrain as well as with Morocco. What happened since mid-2021 when we had a conflict, a 51-day conflict between Israel and Gaza, suddenly those countries realized that decoupling doesn't work. That what happens on the Israeli-Palestinian arena, especially violence, affects their interest, affects their neighbors, affect the attitude of friends and foe, and affect even the street at home with the broad public sentiment and affinity with the Palestinian cause.

From that moment on, we began to see those Arab countries sending clear signals to Israel: look, we're not going to tell you how to defend yourself, but factor us in if it goes on and if it is so brutal and if it create such tragedies on the Palestinian street, we might not be able to pursue normalization at the pace and the breadth that we intend to.

I must say that Israelis by and large didn't take it seriously. And indeed relations proceeded and we had periods of relative tranquility between us and the Palestinians. But as you all know, a bit over seven months ago, as Ambassador Kurtzer already referred to, we had the [inaudible 00:08:50] Hamas assault on our civilian population triggering an Israeli war into Gaza. And the continued tragedy on both sides has already affected the relations between some of these countries and Israel. Some of them have already suspended some business projects that were contemplated. Some have restricted communication, government to government, G2G communications, to the security establishment only. And expressions of displeasure, disapproval. A demand for ceasefire is coming from these countries on a daily basis.

Israelis don't take it lightly, but you asked me about the interests of neighboring and other countries. Maybe we'll have an opportunity to talk about how Israelis view the picture.

Cristina Gallach: Thank you very much for your comments to the panelists. I think we have all seen that [inaudible 00:09:59] are multiple, [inaudible 00:10:01], very important. Therefore, the regional aspect interest is something that cannot be taken aside from the conflict itself. And already with the comments that we heard, maybe I could turn to Professor Fakhro and with your expertise on normalization on the Abraham Accords, et cetera. And looking a little bit the most recent history and the context, could you reflect on the different motivations and these incentives for normalization from your point of view?

Elham Fakhro: Sure. So Nimrod gave you the very short version, which is the contemporary decoupling of the Palestinian issue from normalization. But I may give you the longer version of this. So effectively for years, the diplomatic formula for Arab-Israeli normalization was the exchange of land for peace. And this dates back to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war when Israel captured territories from several

Episode 4 – Regional and global interests and influences

Arab states, including Egypt, Syria, Jordan, effectively tripling if not more its land size in that conflict. And so in response, the Arab states adopted a collective position agreeing not to establish diplomatic ties with Israel until those territories were returned and until the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and in Gaza, which are the areas when we speak about a Palestinian state, it's along those 1967 lines.

In 1979 Egypt became the first Arab state to establish a diplomatic relations with Israel bilaterally. So it's the application of land for peace bilaterally. In exchange it got the return of Sinai, which had been captured in the war. In 1994, Jordan becomes the second country to do so. The peace agreement is also built on a version of land for peace. Borders between the two states are finalized. Agreements on water sharing are part of this peace agreement and so on. And the agreement between Jordan and Israel takes place in the context of this period of heightened optimism emerging out of the Madrid talks. They're taking place in the mid-90s, emerging out of the Oslo peace process amidst this environment of heightened optimism, at least in the Arab world, that the talks will yield results, a lasting diplomatic solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

So in this climate, there is very much this expectation that a Palestinian state will be created. And this is when you also had this first wave of Gulf normalization initiatives with Israel, which aren't really talked about very much, but at least two Gulf states, which are Oman and Qatar, began this tentative formal opening of diplomatic channels to Israel by this preliminary setup of trade offices at the time. Believing that should a Palestinian state be created, then this would move ahead into full normalization. And of course, with the collapse of Oslo, these initiatives also rolled back. The trade offices were shuttered and momentum for that collapsed. The next moment around normalization came with the Arab Peace Initiative of 2001 proposed by Saudi Arabia. Again, a summary of that would be the establishment of a Palestinian state in exchange for an normalization from every single Arab state. And that was not accepted. It did not progress.

Now I'm going through this to kind of get to the point later on. 2006, Hamas comes to power in Gaza. As a result, there's a blockade on the territory. 2009, Netanyahu comes to power again. And he's opposed to this concept of land for peace is really not what he wants. And so as part of this, the construction of settlements in the West Bank escalates. There are already settlements at the time preceding Netanyahu, but the pace under him really does skyrocket until today it reaches 700,000 settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, making it very difficult to even carve out the required land for two states.

And now if we jump ahead to 2020, the Abraham Accords is really the first time where you see this decoupling of land for peace or a two-state solution from normalization. It's completely unprecedented when the UAE goes ahead with

this. And it does set a new precedent in fact, which is peace for peace. Which is very much in line with what Netanyahu had hoped for in the preceding years, which is to have the Arab states set aside this idea of the Palestinians and land for the Palestinians and talk to Israel directly and have bilateral relations directly. In many ways it's the fulfillment of Netanyahu's vision.

And so I gave you this background because I think this can bring us to the motives and incentives behind normalization. So for the first time, we are seeing countries pursue what they see as their direct state-based interests around normalization. For the UAE and Bahrain, several issues came together to produce this relationship. On one sense it was very much a shared threat perception from Iran. The other, it was having another partner on board which understood their concerns and could more importantly bring these concerns to Washington and to the attention of a sitting US president, especially during Obama's time in office. Both Netanyahu and Gulf leaders were not very happy with his policies in the region, especially towards Iran. For the Gulf states, there were additional concerns on this US retrenchment or pivot to Asia, and at the same time, they benefited from technological exchanges with Israel. One of the earliest instances of cooperation for the UAE was acquiring satellite data on Iran's nuclear program from Israel. And at the same time, it's a new generation of Gulf leaders who prioritize these concerns.

So very generally, these are the motives for normalization for the Gulf leaders.

Cristina Gallach: Thank you for talking us through the historic process of normalization. So we have looked at the regional interests. We have looked at a little bit of the current question of normalization. Let me ask Ambassador Novik, if you could define for us some of the competing social and political pressures within Israel that have defined how it relates with its neighbors.

Nimrod Novik: Yes, the Israeli perspective. The way I would like to describe it is that for the past year and a half, two years, Israel internally is in uncharted territory. We have never experienced three phenomena that we did over the past year and a half. It started with the government seeking to overhaul the judicial system in a way that was perceived to most of the public as undermining the Israeli democracy. Their reaction was unprecedented wave of protest that lasted over 40 weeks consecutively with hundreds and thousands of Israelis in the streets. I'm not sure that per capita and over 40 years, it does not constitute the largest demonstration ever in defense of democracy. And it only ended when the trauma of October 7th occurred. Obviously, one does not protest to protect democracy and the government withdrew much of its suggestions. But we had the trauma of October 7th. And since that moment, Israelis are mobilized by very large numbers to the military.

And the third part of the trauma... The first was the assault on our democracy, the second was the brutal Hamas assault of October 7th. And the third one was

Episode 4 – Regional and global interests and influences

the prolonged war, as well as the fact that the government turned out to be missing in action and not functioning when much of the population along our border with Gaza and our border with Lebanon was affected and the government was not there. The result is that at the moment we have two primary phenomena that characterize the Israeli public as it relates to your question. One is an overwhelming majority consistently for months, something like 75%, who wish to see the government gone and the Prime Minister gone. The second phenomena, which is even more directly relevant, is that there is a total disconnect between how the world views the situation in Gaza and how Israelis do.

This is a result of two factors. One is that the Israeli media does not show us Israelis what's going on in Gaza. The images that the world sees of damage, devastation, casualties and so on, Israelis are not exposed to. Not because anybody imposes censorship, but because the media self-censors. Whether they do it out of patriotism, whether they do it out of consideration of ratings, I don't know, but Israelis are not exposed to it. On the other hand, Israelis are exposed not only on a daily basis but on an hourly basis to images and stories of the trauma of October 7th. Those who survived tell us about the relatives who were butchered and burned alive, children who were killed in front of their parents, parents who were killed in front of their children, those who were kidnapped, their relatives are fighting for them. Those who were kidnapped and came back are telling their story. We are saturated with images and stories of that day, and therefore the Israeli society is not in the seventh month after October 7th, but mentally we are in October 8.

Cristina Gallach: Well, that was extremely interesting what you mentioned and in particular role of media again in a conflict. Professor Ibish, good question for you on the reaction of the Arab neighbors to the Palestinians, which I think it's an important angle. Are you in a position to answer about how the Arab neighbors have responded to the plight of Palestinians?

Hussein Ibish: I think there are three countries where this has become really a big issue. I think in a lot of countries like the one I'm in now, which is Algeria, there's passionate feelings about the Palestinian issue but no real connection to it. And the issue does not threaten the governments in any country with one exception, which is Jordan. Jordan, which borders Israel, feels enormously threatened by the annexation agenda of the Netanyahu government. It also feels real popular pressure. I mean, there are angry protests in Jordan that are aimed directly at the monarchy. They're aimed at the regime itself. This is really not true in any other Arab state. So Jordan has reacted in a defensive crouch of considerable proportions.

And while I think the state appears to be able to weather the situation for now, if it goes much further, especially if we enter into a phase where we really see the stage set for practical annexation and expulsions in the West Bank, which is what

the Israeli irredentist and religious fanatics are focused on, not Gaza, for Gaza is a security problem, but the real sort of land hunger on religious or historical grounds is aimed at the West Bank. It's the official policy, let's not forget, of this government to annex large chunks of the West Bank.

So that for Jordan appears to be a death sentence. Because the arrangement, the understanding of the Jordanian government with the Palestinian plurality at least of citizens in Jordan, is that you are welcome to do anything in this country except pursue your national aims, your national expression as Palestinians must be in Palestine, in the West Bank, et cetera. It cannot be here in Jordan. And that's the result of Black September when PFLP and other Palestinian groups took over those small parts of Jordan and started really threatening the exclusivity of governance of the monarchy. And so this was not acceptable, and that is the social contract between the regime and Jordanian supporters and the Palestinian citizens of Israel. But everyone in Jordan is angered. So that's the first instance.

The second instance is Lebanon, which is threatened with a major war. And many Israeli leaders, including it would appear Yoav Gallant, the Defense Minister, and the National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi, are either trying to prepare for a major invasion of Lebanon or a major military action in Lebanon later this year, or they're doing a fantastic job of pretending to be getting ready to do it. And we won't know until it happens or doesn't happen. It could be this year, it could be next year. But there is a desire to rehabilitate the Israeli state, which is in a crisis of legitimacy because of the failures of October 7 and 8 and 9 when the people of Southern Israel were effectively stateless, or at least defenseless. And that is not supposed to be the case. And so while Israelis, exactly as my friend Nimrod said, still October 8th, at some point they'll get to November 8th and at that point they'll be asking, "No, what the hell?"

And I think that many Israeli leaders feel they need a win for the public to recuperate the state, to restore the amour-propre of the Israeli people and their sense of living in stability and security, which is badly damaged. And I think even the dullest Israeli leader must have realized that's just not available in Gaza. There is no win in Gaza, forget it. And I think some of them are looking north and saying, "Look, Hezbollah is a much more conventional enemy. We could go in, smash it up, deliver the Iranian Alliance a real blow because Gaza is not strategically meaningful to them, Hamas is an unreliable ally which comes and goes. And the axis of resistance, to hell with them. But Hezbollah is very important." So I think there's this sense that the recuperative victory lies in the North. I think this is a very dangerous folly, but this is an idea. I agree with Nimrod. No, no, no. But there are people who are thinking this way. That is for sure.

And then the third state that matters is Saudi Arabia, because when it comes to the Abraham Accords, and I really appreciate the brilliant Elham for her excellent

summary of the Arab-Israeli negotiations, they led us to the brink of the big enchilada, which is Saudi Arabia, right? And I think the United States was very keen on creating a triangular relationship, a triangular agreement in which Saudi Arabia would get a new defense treaty from the United States and support for its nuclear energy production, which is an economic program really. And at the same time, Saudi Arabia would normalize with Israel and the US would get this kind of an iron ring around the Arabian Peninsula and the crucial maritime choke points that are becoming more and more central to great power competition with China: the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, the Suez Canal and the Strait of Hormuz.

I would just illustrate that more than 40% of China's energy imports come through the Strait of Hormuz, and more than 40% of its manufactured goods aimed at Europe and North America go through Bab-el-Mandeb and the Red Sea. These are the arteries of the Chinese economy. So it's a very huge competitive advantage for the United States to have a ring of security partners, from Bahrain and the UAE all the way across to Israel, Jordan, and Egypt. And Saudi Arabia is the anchor because all of these choke points and all of these strategic areas are surrounding the Arabian Peninsula, which is basically Saudi Arabia.

Now, the thing is that the Gaza war does not change the prospect of normalization, even despite a passion about Palestinians. Because it remains in the interest of Saudi Arabia and the United States to create this. The Saudi-American bilateral stuff is almost entirely agreed. The treaty is basically agreed, and there is an understanding about American oversight of Saudi energy production, but not a 1, 2, 3 agreement, which would make the economic part of it make no sense, 'cause you would be sending uranium in and out and in and out, it's just bizarre. But you could have American oversight.

So that's all done. The problem is that there was always going to be what they were calling a significant Palestinian component. Enough of a benefit for the Palestinian Authority and Fatah, mainly in the form of money before October 7th. It was mainly in the form of money and some political strengthening of the PA and things like that. The Israelis were not really budging, the Netanyahu government was not so interested. Now finally, as I've been warning, and I'm sure Nimrod remembers and maybe even Dan Kurtzer, for 15 years I've been telling Israelis this is a commodity, Saudi Arabia. The price can go up and the price can come down, but the price can definitely go up. And you guys seem to think it'll never go up. Well, the price just shot way up. Because now the Saudis to defend themselves are asking for an Israeli recognition of the Palestinian right to a state, and that the Israelis get involved in a process designed supposedly to end up with a Palestinian state. And it's going to be very hard to get it out of them.

So at the moment, it's really about Israel's self definition, right? If Israel can conceive of itself as really just some adjusted version of the '67 borders with

Episode 4 – Regional and global interests and influences

some big settlement chunks annexed to it, then there's a deal ready both with the Palestinians and especially with the Saudis. No problem. If it must keep 30, 40% more of the West Bank that it hasn't annexed yet, then it's going to be very difficult for Saudi Arabia. Because Saudi Arabia, unlike the UAE in Bahrain, has leadership roles, an Arab leadership role, Islamic leadership role, and brittle and complex politics. So for them, the risk has gone up. So they're passing the price along to the consumer as if they were making a car and the price of steel just tripled, and the consumer is Israel and the price of the car has gone way up. So there you go.

Cristina Gallach: So let me now give the floor to Ambassador Kurtzer. From the US perspective, if we could have your point on the US posture towards Israel, how it has been evolving, and then we will enter into the current situation and the future. Ambassador Kurtzer?

Daniel Kurtzer: There has always been and continues to be a strong consensus of support publicly and within the two major parties to assure Israel's security, safety, and wellbeing. That has not changed even when there have been disagreements between us on specific policies, and there are always disagreements between us on specific policies, the underlying structure and architecture of the relationship has remained constant. We have seen this in times of crisis and we've seen it in times of growth.

President Biden has probably been the most supportive president that Israel has ever experienced. He has stuck with Israel over these past seven months, even though he has disagreed fundamentally with two key aspects of Israel's approach to the war in Gaza. Number one, the fact that Israel doesn't have a plan. They don't have a plan for what they're trying to accomplish and where they want to end up, and they don't have a plan for what's called the day after. And so when the prime minister of Israel gets up and says it won't be Hamas and it won't be the Palestinian Authority, that leaves only the option of Israel. And the defense minister has now said it won't be Israel, which means that there's a vacuum that will be created when this war winds down.

So the United States has tried to play the role of kind of Big Brother advisor to say to the Prime Minister and the war cabinet, "We support the objective. We want to see Hamas degraded so that it cannot attack Israel again. We don't want to see Hamas govern again, but you guys don't have a clue about what you're doing. And until you have an idea, we're going to have some differences of view," which became manifest this past week when the president decided to hold up the shipment of one single shipment of 2000 pound dumb bombs. That could grow over time if Israel remains unwilling to define both a goal for the war and a goal for the day after.

Cristina Gallach: Ambassador, if we enter now in the current situation, the current moment, do you see the support of the United States changing?

Episode 4 – Regional and global interests and influences

Daniel Kurtzer: Well, it has changed. Look, every democracy conducts policy within the context of politics, and our politics are in a period of flux. Right now, the Republican Party has tried to become the sole arbiter of what's good for the US-Israeli relationship. The Democratic Party is seeing an unprecedented split between what's called the progressive wing, which is no longer small. It's no longer insignificant. There are now maybe 20 or more senators who are willing to sign on to statements on legislation that will hold Israel accountable for what it's doing in Gaza. You can see what's going on on some of our college campuses. I think the way this is portrayed overseas is a bit exaggerated, but nonetheless, it's a factor in the politics back home. And we're in a presidential election year in which all of this is going to play out in the seven or eight battleground states where every single vote counts.

And so the administration is in a serious balancing act, as all democratic governments are. It wants to conduct a policy of supporting Israel within limits, but it understands that that policy may be costing it electoral support in the long term. And that's what we're going to see unveil over the next several months if Israel's actions in Gaza continue to be as unrestrained as they've been until now.

Cristina Gallach: And if I can bring Ambassador Novik now to the conversation, does it surprise to you the manner which Prime Minister Netanyahu is standing in front of the United States?

Nimrod Novik: It does surprise me primarily. Because of the spending of the United States, as such, and President Biden in particular among Israelis. President Biden has been a strong friend of Israel for all his political career. In the Senate, Vice President, and President. But Israelis never got a concrete articulation of his self-identification as a non-Jewish Zionist until October 7th. After October 7th, within a week of the tragedy and the war, he showed up in Israel and his body language and his language and his actions provided Israelis with the father figure that we did not have at home. He really embraced us and Israelis embraced him. That gave him a lot of leverage. And with months in which he was deterring Iran and Hezbollah, and months in which he was hundreds of sorties of US aircraft and Israeli aircraft with ammunition coming from the US, and two aircraft carrier battle groups coming to the Eastern Mediterranean in order to show support for Israel.

And then in this past April 14th when Iran fired 350 projectiles into Israel and the US Regional and Western Alliance, the structure that Central Command has built over the previous two years suddenly showed up and helped us intercept those missiles and drones. All that gives the United States even more leverage and credibility with Israeli public than even before. There is hardly anyone in the Israeli system that is not aware of the importance of the United States for Israel's security. It is a major component of our national security equation. And for the Prime Minister to stand up to Washington in such a in-your-face way, disrespectful repeatedly time and time again was most surprising.

The only minority in Israel that does not share the appreciation of the US and of this administration and of this president is the same annexationist minority that Hussein spoke about that is now dominant in the Israeli cabinet. They don't master more than 10, 11, 12% of the Israeli electorate, but Prime Minister Netanyahu brought them into power, provided them with a very powerful positions in his cabinet, and to a large extent, they call the shots. And they are the ones who force his hand to an extent for the reasons that Hussein explained earlier. They have a very ambitious agenda of annexing the West Bank and of establishing settlements in Gaza, which runs against the overwhelming majority of Israelis and certainly the international community led by Washington. So yes, I think that the Prime Minister is in playing with fire in bringing the relations between him and the administration to a point of crisis.

Cristina Gallach: Thanks very much for your points. I would like to turn to Professor Fakhro on how the different Arab states have been responding to the crisis. We already have some ideas and in particular in relation to normalization, but I would like to ask you also in relation to their populations, there seem to be that the leadership and the populations think quite differently in many of the countries that you are an expert.

Elham Fakhro: Right, so the responses from governments or states and the populations have been very different in this context. I would say this has definitely tested the limits of the Abraham Accords, the limits of those agreements. And the fact that they've held up is really a testament to how committed those normalizing states are to the relationship. I mean, to me, if the death toll of over 35,000 people in Gaza does not lead to some kind of straining of normalization, then it's very likely that nothing else would in this context. And so that's what we're seeing from the States. At the same time, I think they've also put clear efforts to deescalate, as I mentioned in the past. And I think the way that several states have done that is this kind of clear messaging to avoid antagonizing Iran and avoid appearing to side too closely with either United States or Israel in this conflict.

And I think they've done that in some clear ways. So for example, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE avoided openly participating in the Red Sea Coalition established by the United States and involving several other Western states to strike the Houthis in the Red Sea. They haven't wanted to have public involvement in that, and that's a message as well to, again, avoid antagonizing Iran. They've also publicly made statements informing the US that any strikes on Iran should not be carried out from within their borders, their territories, I think that's another attempt at de-escalation. And both have been involved in these diplomatic talks, as I said earlier, on ending the conflict. For Jordan as well, it's kind of sent these interesting signals. When Iran launched its counterattack on Israel, certain missiles were intercepted by Jordan, and I think they justified this very clearly the next day as self-defense saying that this isn't because these were coming from Iran. Any projectile over Jordanian territory, whether it's coming

from Israel to Iran or Iran to Israel, is something that we would intercept for our own national security. So we're not taking sides here.

These kinds of messaging from these three states have been pretty significant, I think, as forms of de-escalation. I think we've seen to some extent, I mean that's what it's been from the states,. From the populations, I think this is harder to understand or harder to see sometimes from the outside, but I think there have always also been efforts in a different direction. This time there's been so much populist outrage towards the death toll in Gaza. It has mobilized people in different countries in different ways. As Hussein correctly noted, Jordan is kind of the most visible example of this. But even in states where protests are not allowed, there have been other expressions of anti-Israel sentiments in the form of boycotts, for example, of US companies linked to Israel. There are widespread populist boycotts. There's this frustration that the US is not playing a positive role in this conflict and that there's a need to exert this kind of pressure as a bare minimum.

So in some states we've seen protests and others there are things like boycotts that citizens take part in. Polling data reflects this as well. So in Saudi Arabia, I think in the second month of the war, a poll from the Washington Institute found that 96% of Saudis did not want Israeli normalization to proceed or didn't believe that Arab states should have ties with Israel. This is a huge figure, and maybe more concerning than that is a fourfold support for Hamas among respondents in the same poll by the second month of the conflict.

Which brings me to a different point about how there should be worries, again, that this conflict can trigger broader radicalization. I mean, anti-Israel, anti-US sentiments I think are at a peak in the region. I mean, certainly not since 2003, the invasion of Iraq, has there been this kind of real deep-seated feeling of anger. And to roll that back is not easy, certainly not for another generation. So you're seeing really, I think a huge gap between what the governments are doing on one hand, which is kind of keeping the relationship. I mean, Egypt now has joined the ICJ case, but that's still not much. Governments are maintaining the relationship, but their citizens are really deeply frustrated with this. Again, and this is taking place in the context of non-democratic societies. In many states, protests aren't allowed and citizens are even afraid of expressing that. But again, the simmering frustration on the other hand.

Cristina Gallach:

Thanks very much. Before we turn to the audience, because we have already some questions, let me ask to you all about the destabilization and the comments. We are at the verge of a major geopolitical change in the region. Is the whole region further destabilized? What are the most concerning scenarios that you think might trigger the current war? I'll give the floor to Novik Ambassador and then to Kurtzer.

Episode 4 – Regional and global interests and influences

Nimrod Novik: Thank you very much. I would look at it from an Israeli perspective, and I would say that Israel faces a very stark choice as we speak. I think it was either Ambassador Kurtzer or Hussein that mentioned that there are three options for the morning after in Gaza once the guns finally fall silent. One is a unilateral Israeli occupation, which most Israelis reject. The other one is unilateral withdrawal that brings back Hamas and maybe other extreme elements, and therefore probably is ruled out. And the third option is third parties coming in, in order to rehabilitate reconstruction and saving the day in the Gaza Strip.

Several Arab countries have conveyed to Washington that they're willing to take that job, but on two very important conditions. One is that it is done under the auspices of the Palestinian Authority. That is to say they're not coming to Gaza as occupiers. They are coming temporarily to help the Palestinian Authority rejuvenated do that. So that's one condition. And the second condition, they are not willing to put funds into Gaza rehabilitation only for those projects to go up in flame in the next war, and therefore they want to see a credible irreversible path toward the two-state solution. Two conditions that the Israeli government refuses to take.

Israel at the moment is faced with the following choice, either historic opportunity of regional integration of a solution to Gaza that stabilizes the situation of an alternative for the Palestinians to the Hamas brutal ideology by the moderate, which requires Israel to say yes and change course in its relationship to the Palestinian Authority and to the Palestinian issue writ large. Or Israel can get stuck in Gaza in a prolonged bleeding occupation. And if that is the choice, this will affect stability on the West Bank, and this will force countries of peace with Israel near and far to distance themselves from us.

So the choice is very, very clear from contributing to regional stability and to Israel's security and to Palestinian dignity and independence, or to contribute to regional instability. Which way Israel will go we're going to find out in the coming few months.

Cristina Gallach: Ambassador Kurtzer and then Professor Ibish.

Daniel Kurtzer: There is never a single factor to assess the possibility of whether we're in an inflection point, but if I were to try to identify a single factor, it's leadership or the absence of leadership. There are enough potential changes underway in the region that if they can be brought to fruition, then there can be a different Middle East, not just with respect to Israeli-Arab relations, but more broadly. But you'd have no leadership in this region at all. You don't have it in Israel, you don't have it in Palestine, you don't have it in most Arab states, which are still mired in undemocratic, authoritarian, corrupt regimes, and you don't have a situation where someone will stand out and try to lead to a different outcome.

Episode 4 – Regional and global interests and influences

Now, if an Israeli election sometime after this war brings about a better leadership, if a reformed Palestinian Authority or reformed PLO brings about a different leadership, if Arab leaders can see beyond their own rather focused concentration on survival and think about what's best for their countries, then yes, we could be at a very significant inflection point. But I'm not confident of that. I don't want to sound totally negative, but I just don't see who's going to bring this about.

The United States has not pivoted from this region, but has too many interests elsewhere in Asia Pacific and in Europe, growing interest in Africa, and certainly in our own hemisphere to do the kind of over-focused policy that characterized the 1990s. And frankly, this region I think doesn't want the United States to play that role anymore, for a lot of different reasons. Russia is mired in Ukraine. China has tiptoed on the policy side, they certainly would like to see more economic activities in the region. And Europe is Europe. How do you bring 27 countries to have a unified foreign policy that would lead?

So the ingredients here or the ingredient of leadership is absent all over the place. And therefore, as we used to say in the State Department, long range planning is tomorrow and really long range planning is the day after. I just don't see how you bring about this vision that is possible, but only if you have people willing to make it happen.

Cristina Gallach: Thanks very much. Professor Ibish, over to you.

Hussein Ibish: Thank you. Here's how I see it. When Antony Blinken said in, I think it was in September, that the Middle East hadn't been this peaceful in quite a long time, I think it's years or decades or so, it wasn't noticed except after October 7th. He was widely mocked for having said that. But the thing is, when he said it it was true. The Middle East in general had exited about a decade, a little less, maybe eight or nine years, of conflict and confrontation along several lines. Along sectarian, along ideological, along spheres of influence, and various other lines, within states and between states kicked off by the Arab spring uprisings, which really reshaped a lot of realities. And that came to an end around 2018, 2019. The Abraham Accord was probably the first really dramatic, obvious example of the move away from conflict and confrontation and towards consolidation, retrenchment, maneuver, and therefore a rapprochement between former adversaries, de-escalation. You see the rehabilitation of Qatar in the GCC. You've got the restoration of relations between, as always, UAE goes first, but the UAE and then Saudi Arabia with Turkey, and then the UAE followed by Saudi Arabia with Iran. And just across the board there's sort of a [inaudible 00:50:57] turning inward.

Now, the thing is, none of the basic problems that caused the era of conflict and confrontation in the teens are resolved. The contradictions between states are not resolved. There's no stable order of spheres of influence. There's still a lot of

angry competition. And also the internal grievances that drove the Arab Spring, the lack of accountability, lack of rule of law, all of that is not resolved either. The only thing that's really changed is the collapse of the Muslim Brotherhood as a viable project in almost all of the Arab world. But that's a probably temporary phenomenon. I wouldn't count on that continuing.

So we had this very fragile moment over the past, I don't know, six, seven years, of de-escalation and rapprochement, and Blinken was right. Now the question is, does October 7 and this crisis we're in mean that's over. And I think the answer, the bet of the Biden administration is that if the war can be contained to Gaza, then the results are manageable for the United States. Really, the policy has been one of conflict containment more than anything else, in my view, from Washington. And I think they're not wrong. Because I basically agree that even though everything Nimrod said and everything Elham, and also Dan, everyone has said how destabilizing all of this is, they're right about that. But my bet is that if the war does not spread, especially not with an Israeli attack on Lebanon, or spread to the West Bank and above all occupied East Jerusalem, something like that, which would be very destabilizing, as long as this can be contained to Gaza, the powers that be are not done with their sort of retrenchment. They're turning inward, they're turning toward the economic, they're turning towards trying to rebuild the legitimacy of their regimes. All of that domestic stuff that they want to do is not over.

If the war does spread, especially through an Israeli attack on Lebanon, another major Lebanon war, all bets are off and we may be into a new era of conflict and confrontation. To me, the Israel-Lebanon border is a ticking bomb in the middle of the Middle Eastern room. Everyone's listening to it ticking, and we have no idea if it's going off or not. If it goes off, I think there'll be a lot of reverberations, much bigger than the war in Gaza. On the other hand, it is entirely possible that Israel is either not serious about this or will be restrained successfully by the Biden administration, which wants nothing less than it wants a Israeli war with Hezbollah at this point. And of course, Iran and Hezbollah agree, which is very helpful. They don't want a war either.

Cristina Gallach: Thank you. Can you, Ambassador Kurtzer, mention your views about Iran?

Daniel Kurtzer: Look, the United States has seen Iran as a major disruptor in the Middle East for many years. The one time that it appeared that there was an administration willing to engage seriously with Iran, it was during the Obama years. And that culminated, of course, in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015, which was part of a strategic idea from President Obama that that accord might lead to Iran's, in a sense, coming back into the region in a less aggressive, more open position. When President Trump pulled the United States out of the JCPOA in 2018, to the extent that there was a strategy that Obama had followed, that strategy then went down the drain. And Iran resumed its nuclear activities, the

Episode 4 – Regional and global interests and influences

United States resumed and intensified sanctions, and Iran continued with its very aggressive posture in the region with its proxies.

One of the things we're experiencing in 2023, 2024 are the results of Iranian proxy activities. Hussein is focused correctly on the challenge of Lebanon. Hezbollah doesn't take orders from Iran, but certainly coordinates very significantly. And the Iranian Revolutionary Guards are present. Iranian Revolutionary Guards are present in Syria, they have been for quite some time. And there's been a mini war between Israel and those factions in Syria for quite some time. And we've seen what's happened in Yemen with the Houthis impeding maritime shipping and the relationship they have with Iran.

So we are at a stage of intense conflict between not just the United States, but the United States and much of what used to be called the West, and Iran, and the outcome is uncertain. I share with Hussein the concern that we all should have about the situation in Lebanon escalating. I think until now it has remained on a relatively low burner because of Iran. Iran does not want to see a major conflict. That's also the reason I think that the April, what was the 12th, 13th Iranian attack on Israel and the Israeli response seems to not be repeating. But it's a very critical situation, and there's nothing on the horizon looks like it's going to change that assessment.

Hussein Ibish:

I think it's worth asking why Iran doesn't want to be dragged into a war and why it doesn't want Hezbollah to go far. And then Hezbollah has been very restrained without capitulating, without seeming weak. They have really tried to restrain their responses to Israeli escalations, which have been pretty significant in Lebanon. The reason is that the Iranian Right, if you read the IRGC-adjacent press, the Basij press, the Hardliner press in Iran, their analysis is consistent and has been for months: "We are winning." We meaning Iran and its network of armed gangs in the Arab world, the so-called Axis of Resistance. They think that they have lost nothing. Because Gaza is not of any strategic or cultural or religious importance to them, and they regard Hamas as unreliable allies, a marriage of convenience but nothing organic. And they feel they've lost virtually nothing.

And at the same time, they feel that Israel has been bloodied and it's stuck in Gaza. There's a quagmire and it's all very good for them. And they've worked very hard to restrain allies. Like, for example, when the Kata'ib Hezbollah in Iraq managed to kill several Americans in Tower 22 in Northern Jordan and injure a couple of dozen more, the Iranians dispatched a general the next day to Iraq and ordered them to stand down. And then they issued a statement the day after that saying they had suspended their military activities completely, but they restarted about a week and a half ago. But they included a bitter note in it. They said that their allies in the Axis of Resistance, especially Iran, do not understand the way we conduct our jihad. In other words. They were willing to obey the orders, but they were not happy about it, and they thought it was a terrible idea.

Episode 4 – Regional and global interests and influences

My point is that the Iranians want these allies, especially Hezbollah, as a deterrent for Israeli or American attack on Iran itself. It's not there to have a random war with Israel in behalf of Gaza or Hamas or these irrelevant things. It is there to protect Iran. And to waste it on unreliable allies and not unimportant places relatively is a very bad idea.

So I think it's pretty clear why Iran doesn't want a major war. They are convinced the only thing the Israelis can do to make this a strategic win for them and ruin Iran's advantage over this war is, and they keep saying it, is to start a regional war. They are very worried about an Israeli attack on Hezbollah because they think ultimately could lead to a war with the United States, or at least American attacks that Netanyahu has been trying to arrange for 20 years and has failed on American attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities. And I think there are people in the Biden administration who suspect Netanyahu of wanting such a thing. They don't know that, but they suspect it.

So it's a very weird situation where the United States is in agreement with Iran and not in agreement with some senior members of the Israeli War Cabinet. And that's a weird situation, but it's the case.

Daniel Kurtzer: Yes. Just to add a quick note, before Dr. Novik, we've looked at domestic politics in Israel and Palestine, United States look at domestic politics in Iran as well. It's not as vibrant and strong a society as they would like us to believe. They're facing very significant domestic unrest, economic challenges. They have a succession coming up with a supreme leader. So it's not so simple. And I think if you add that to what Hussein said, you have a quite different picture from the idea of a robust Iran trying to control events in the region.

Nimrod Novik: Yes, I agree with Dan and with Hussein that the situation between Israel and the Hezbollah is explosive. But I have a slightly different take, especially from Hussein's explanation as to why. And I think that being exposed to differing analysis can help your audience make a judgment on what is happening and what is likely to happen.

Israel is facing a very serious dilemma. As you all know. On October 7th, our civilian population in the south was invaded by Hamas, and the consequences are known. What is less known is that that strategy was a Hezbollah strategy developed over the previous decade with the idea of invading Israeli settlements in the north of the country, taking over, holding onto them for as long as they can, kill the population and withdraw. What are the implications for what's going on now? Israelis who live in the north look across the border into Lebanon and seeing the elite forces of Hezbollah across the border, and the one image they have in mind is we are going to be exposed to what happened in the south on October 7th, only on a bigger scale because Hezbollah is that much more powerful than Hamas.

Episode 4 – Regional and global interests and influences

As a result, about 100,000 Israelis have been evacuated from their homes in the north and will not come back until there is some arrangement whereby Hezbollah is not within a striking distance of Israel. When we ended the 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon, and Hezbollah really, it ended with a UN Security Council resolution 1701, that guaranteed Hezbollah does not come close to the Israeli border. That resolution was ignored. Hezbollah came very close, I mean within yards of the border. And now the Israeli government asks itself, our population cannot go back home as long as Hezbollah does not abide by the resolution that it accepted in 2006. How do we get Hezbollah to abide by it?

Now, there are two ways. One way is diplomacy and the other one is by force. We have a situation where France and the US in the person of Amos Hochstein, a special advisor to the president, are negotiating with the Lebanon state and Hezbollah, directly or indirectly, an effort for Hezbollah to undertake to withdraw from near the Israeli border to a distance where direct strike becomes less likely. What Israel is doing in the interim is indeed reinforcing diplomacy by force. The Israeli assumption is that Hezbollah will not yield unless it is threatened by force. Only then can diplomacy work. So what you see Israel is doing, and you see Hezbollah is doing, is exchanging limited escalatory violence, with the Israeli side hoping that that will allow diplomacy to produce results. But if it doesn't, Israel might have no option but to remove Hezbollah from its northern border by force.

Hussein Ibish: There is an option which is not to do that, especially when the other side doesn't want a war. That is an option, in fact.

Nimrod Novik: That's the option of diplomacy that I spoke about.

Hussein Ibish: Hold on. Let me just say the push to attack Iran came on October 11 and 12th before there were any evacuations in Northern Israel, and nothing strategically has changed on the border. It is a change in the Israeli psyche, and you described it beautifully, but there is no strategic change. So Israel has the option of going back to the reality that was there, but since 2006. They could do it. Why not? I mean, unless Israel's psyche change is enough to justify an unnecessary avoidable war, which in my view is not.

Cristina Gallach: Panelists, let me ask you a couple of questions on the future, although we know this is difficult business. And very specific ones. For example, both you Ambassador Novik and you Ambassador Kurtzer, you are all experts on sitting people and discussing, including dual track diplomacy. Is there something of this nature happening right now that could bring a sort of a diplomatic movement ahead that could signal that we think about the aftermath. And then when we talk about international presence in Gaza to restore some sort of leadership, security, order, et cetera, you'd like to know the feasibility of Arab states doing that as it has been mentioned, including by some of you.

Episode 4 – Regional and global interests and influences

- Daniel Kurtzer: Yeah, let me just jump in quickly. They're always a track to activities underway because there are quite a few people outside of government who want to make a contribution, have some experience and expertise. The successful track to activities however, have taken place when governments want them to take place. And so therefore the participants in Track Two can think out loud about issues that governments sometimes can't think out loud about. They keep the governments informed. The governments may plan some ideas, but who now among the key protagonists in this drama really want Track Two to succeed? Does Prime Minister Netanyahu? Does Yahya Sinwar or even Mahmoud Abbas? The answer is no. So yes, there are constantly, I think every day of the year there's a Track Two somewhere, usually in very comfortable locations and nice hotels. But without leaders willing to support those unofficially, they don't really lead too much.
- Cristina Gallach: Ambassador Novik?
- Nimrod Novik: Yeah, first I agree with Dan. I would add a caveat to what he said. On occasion Track Two starts with no government sanction or support and ends up creating a breakthrough. And Dan more than others has been witness to at least one such exercise, which is the Oslo process that started this Track Two. And eventually a government decided, the government of Rabin decided to embrace it, and it became policy. On other occasions, Track Two becomes a footnote to history if government don't want it.
- Cristina Gallach: Let me also bring into the discussion very briefly the international justice possibilities, the ICJ, ICC. Do you see that playing a role at some moment?
- Hussein Ibish: I would say the ICJ is unlikely to be a big factor because it's going to be very hard to prove intent, which is a key part of the genocide law, and the only real case would be I think, would have to do with the denial of food and humanitarian supplies there. South Africa might have a better case, but it's going to go on for a long time. It's unprecedented. I don't think it's a huge problem for the Israelis, except in terms of public opinion. I think the ICC could be a huge problem. If you get international criminal warrants for Netanyahu, for Yoav Gallant, for Tzachi Hanegbi, people like this, it's going to be a big problem. And it's going to be a huge fuss, Israelis are going to be very angry, going to get the Americans to complain, but that could be very serious. And there I think the cases are really quite strong.
- Nimrod Novik: I know I basically agree with Hussein's observation. The only, again, caveat that I would make, and it's not in contradiction to what you said but to reinforce it, is that even the ICJ is not expected to have a practical effect. And I think that their findings will prove that however devastating the war in Gaza, genocide it is not. But politically, it is already playing, not just internationally, but also on the Israeli domestic scene. When the Israeli public, especially the 75% that are hostile to

Episode 4 – Regional and global interests and influences

the current government, are getting reinforcement in their hostility by the fact that the government misconduct has brought us to this stage.

And basically the argument is as follows: since our war is not against Palestinians but against Hamas, how come you conduct the war in a way that is against Palestinians rather than just Hamas? Why is it this strategy of a stingy approach to humanitarian assistance? The Israeli government should have led the international effort of humanitarian assistance. If we are fighting Hamas and not Palestinians, then we should take care of non-combatants. So I think that those two cases that are running now in both courts are reinforcing the sentiment in the Israeli public that we have an irresponsible government.

Elham Fakhro: I think I'm conscious that we don't have too much time left. So I think I do want to kind of circle back to this point of Hamas at some point having been very useful to numerous Israeli figures and leaders because it simply discredited the possibility of a Palestinian state. I mean, I think Ben-Gvir many years ago made the comment that when it comes to delegitimizing Palestinian statehood, the Palestinian Authority, the burden, and Hamas is an asset. So this is an issue that is intertwined with that as well for many years. I mean, there's an almost symbiotic relationship, simply because Hamas was the biggest red flag that Israeli leaders could wave and say, "You know what? We're not going to pursue statehood because look at who we're dealing with." So I wanted to point that out.

But in terms of, again, the question that you asked me on the Arab states, yeah, they are playing a role in this regional diplomacy. But the day after, again, is a very difficult question because simply extracting Hamas, which I think even now these operations are... Most military analysts agree that you can have a very difficult time removing that organization from Gaza and implanting some kind of coalition or the PA or something like that is nearly impossible to do and is very, very unlikely to be met with success even if you look at other precedents, which have attempted to take out one government and just copy paste in one that's more favorable, these things don't work. So you're dealing with very serious, difficult, almost unsolvable questions in the long term for which there's no easy answer.

Hussein Ibish: And let me quickly add something. That de facto alliance between the Israeli Right and Hamas is still going on to this moment in the sense that the only two groups of people in the world, I think, who want this war to continue as it is, are Netanyahu and his coterie and Yahya Sinwar and his coterie. And the problem is, of course, they're the ones who would decide whether it continues or not. But my sense is both of those groups think they've benefited a lot from this war and want it just to continue indefinitely.

Cristina Gallach: Thank you very much. It's been an honor to moderate your great conversation.

Episode 4 – Regional and global interests and influences

Peter Loewen: Thank you for listening to Six Conversations on the Modern Middle East. You can find all episodes on our website munkschool.utoronto.ca, or wherever you get your podcasts. I'm Peter Loewen, Director of the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy. Thank you to our partner schools and especially to Arancha González, Dean of the Paris School of International Affairs at Sciences Po Paris, Manuel Muñiz, Dean and Provost of the IE University in Madrid.