

The Future of Democracy in Venezuela

A conversation with Ambassador Carlos Vecchio and Special Representative Elliott Abrams. Moderated by John Hannah

DERSHOWITZ: Good morning everybody. My name is Toby Dershowitz, and I'm FDD Senior Vice President for Government Relations and Strategy, and I warmly welcome everybody here today. Thank you so much for joining us for today's conversation, *The Future of Democracy in Venezuela*. We're so pleased to have with us Special Representative for Venezuela, Elliott Abrams, and Ambassador Carlos Vecchio joining us today for a most timely and important discussion.

Now today's program is one of many that we host throughout the year. For more information on our work and our events and our areas of focus, I welcome everybody to look at our website, FDD.org. We're delighted to be joined today by a distinguished audience from the Diplomatic Corps, representatives from Congress, from the Department of State, I see folks from Treasury as well, from the Pentagon, active duty military personnel, and many experts from the policy community and from the media. Many of our audience members already know that FDD is a non-partisan policy institute. We are a source of timely research analysis and policy options for Congress, the administration, the media, and the wider national security community. We take no foreign government or foreign corporate funding and never will. We invite all of you to join us in conversation, which we will be live-tweeting, at @FDD.

May I now ask that you silence your cell phones, and I'm pleased to turn the mic over to FDD Senior Counselor, John Hannah. Over to you.

HANNAH: Great. Thank you very much Toby, and welcome to everybody. It's a pretty good crowd. I was saying to Elliott that it's good nothing else is happening in Washington today. But I think we've really sorted out the hard-core foreign policy geeks from everybody else in Washington, everybody who's come today. Time's very limited. I'm going to jump right in. Toby did a bit of introduction. I'd encourage you to read the full biographies of our guests which are available outside. Just say Elliott Abrams is America's Special Representative to Venezuela based out of the State Department. He also was a very close and valued colleague of mine in the George W. Bush administration but lots of other very distinguished service for the American people, American government.

Ambassador Carlos Vecchio is Venezuela's Ambassador to the United States. He represents the government of the interim president and the head of the national assembly in Venezuela, Juan Guaido. It's great to have you both here.

Elliott, it's a timely session. We are basically exactly six months out now from that day in January where Juan Guaido declared himself the legitimate interim president of Venezuela. The United States almost immediately recognized that fact, and the illegitimacy of the Maduro regime. It's hard, sometimes, to believe that's only six months ago. It's a fairly short time. Sometimes it feels like six years. There was an interesting article that appeared in the *Miami Herald* I think yesterday, and it quoted extensively from a senior Trump administration official

about the situation in Venezuela. And the article kind of concluded with this official observing, and I'm quoting, "Just look at how radically different the situation is today in Venezuela versus January 31st. If anybody thinks that momentum has been lost, that a lot of ground hasn't been gained, that Maduro is not fatally wounded, then they're looking at a whole different world." I won't ask if that official is you.

ABRAMS: It's not. It's not.

HANNAH: It's not. Okay. We cleared that up. But I do want to get your view on that assessment, assuming that you agree with it. Can you just spend a couple of minutes, as briefly as you can, expanding on that assessment, bringing us up to date? Where are we with regard to this U.S. project of regime change in Venezuela and the restoration of democracy?

ABRAMS: Thanks, John. If you go back to last year, and previous years, what you had was an entrenched regime, a divided democratic opposition, a largely indifferent international community. That's completely different now. You've got 55 countries who will recognize Juan Guaido as the legitimate interim president of Venezuela. You have the regime being isolated internally, in that there's a totally united opposition now behind Juan Guaido. I remember when I came into this in January, people said, "Man, you got maybe three months. You will see the opposition divide." That has not happened, and it is not happening.

So the challenge that the regime faces is first of all, the bulk of democracies in the world are against them and supporting Guaido. Secondly, the unified democratic movement in Venezuela. Thirdly, U.S. sanctions. We are trying to cut off the funds flow to the regime, and I think we're having a fairly dramatic impact on the regime. The pressure will continue. We'll have more sanctions tomorrow. We keep rolling out additional sanctions to keep the pressure up. The level of interest as this person said in the U.S. government is very high. I mean, I've seen newspaper articles in the last month or two, "Oh, the enthusiasm is waning; the president's frustrated," and so forth.

Let me say, I'm sure the president's frustrated. I'm sure Carlos Vecchio's frustrated. Juan Guaido's frustrated. I'm frustrated! Of course, because the humanitarian situation in Venezuela is terrible. The human rights situation in Venezuela is terrible. Of course we want change, and we want it yesterday. But the level of interest at the top, the president, the vice president, the secretary of state, secretary of treasury, national security advisor, is extremely high, and we are not letting up. We're supporting the Venezuelan people in a struggle that is not only important for their country, it's important for neighboring countries, it is important for the whole democratic movement in the Western Hemisphere.

HANNAH: Great. Before I go to you, Ambassador, I neglected to mention, when you mentioned this issue of sanctions and more sanctions that are probably coming that FDD today just published, I think it's available outside, an important memo on Venezuela, "*Sanctioning and Rebuilding Venezuela*," that's got a lot of terrific recommendations in it going forward, both in terms of increasing the pressure on the regime in a way that limits the amount of harm done to the Venezuelan people, and then the aftermath. Assuming we actually get Maduro out of power,

how can we rapidly be prepared to rebuild Venezuela and address the humanitarian situation as quickly as possible? So I'd urge everybody to take a look at that.

Ambassador, I wonder, there's a process that's been launched in recent weeks by the EU. It seems to be led by the Norwegians. They've had a few rounds of this in Oslo and Barbados now. There had been talk, I know it's a controversial subject in some parts of the opposition, that these kinds of negotiations between the regime and the opposition always play to Maduro's advantage. It's just a way to delay time. I'm wondering, A, what can you tell us about those negotiations and whether or not any progress has been made? What's the plan there?

VECCHIO: Well good morning, everyone. Thank you very much, John, for this invitation and to FDD. This is a great opportunity to just explain what's going on in Venezuela right now.

Before going to that point, I agree with Elliott. We are in a much better position now than we were back in January. Nobody thought that I could be here, sitting here, talking with you as an Ambassador. We are controlling Citgo. We have now 56 countries supporting Juan Guaido. I think that I haven't seen a coalition like this, internationally speaking, after World War II, you know, supporting a political movement which is looking for a change. So, that's quite remarkable. And the most important thing, in my view: we have the majority of the people of Venezuela. The people of Venezuela is looking for a change. They won't be able to stop it, and this is the most important support that we have. We united the democratic society. Not the opposition, not the official government, the democratic society, under the leadership of Juan Guaido. Juan Guaido has become the most important person in Venezuela in the last 20 years, and Juan Guaido doesn't appear in national television. That's crazy!

And let me give you more. Juan Guaido has been in different states in Venezuela. He went – The last one was Trujillo. This is the state that it was more Chavista of all the states in Venezuela, and that was crazy. People you know supporting the change, looking for a change in Venezuela. So I'm fully confident that, at the end of the day, the Venezuelan people will prevail, because this is a Venezuela movement supported by an international coalition, which is quite important. And we need it. We cannot do this alone.

So I think we're in a better position now to produce that change, and we will keep that determination until we conquer freedom again. I know that it will be difficult because we are facing a criminal state and a criminal organization, and that's why we need that international coalition to increase the pressure, not only domestically, but also internationally.

And regarding Barbados or Oslo mechanism, President Juan Guaido has said so clear that he's looking any option to have a peaceful transition in Venezuela, because at the end of the day, we would like to stop the suffering of the Venezuelans. And we know that we are dealing with this type of regime that doesn't want to leave power, and we need to force them to leave power. So what we discuss, we need to increase also the pressure, national, international. We know that. And we have communicated that to the international community, and we have put on the table a clear agenda, because I mean the negotiation is not the objective. It's the mechanism. And we have presented a clear solution for the crisis, for the political crisis that we're facing, which is

putting an end of the usurpation of power of Nicolas Maduro, putting an end of the dictatorship, through a presidential election. That's what we put on the table.

Having, then a transitional government, and then call for a free and fair election in Venezuela. That's what we have been discussing in Barbados. We will have another round tomorrow, and I don't want to make more comments because I don't want to affect those conversations, but this is what we have put on the table. If they are not agree in a solution, in a presidential solution and a peaceful transition, it will be difficult to continue on those talks. But the international community should understand that the only way that that mechanism could work if the international community could also increase the pressure from abroad.

HANNAH: Is it a precondition of the success of this process in getting to an interim government, elections, that Maduro step down first?

VECCHIO: That's our position. To have free and fair election in Venezuela, it will be impossible to have it with Maduro in power. That's what we had last year, May 20th. So we cannot repeat the same thing that brought us to this conflict. So that's what we are presenting as a solution in Venezuela.

HANNAH: Is that the U.S. position as well?

ABRAMS: Yes. For the same reason: it's impossible for us to see how, with Maduro in power, you would get to a free election. If you just ask yourself, there he is. He commits himself to have free elections. Fine. He did that last year. He's got the intelligence agencies, the police, the National Guard, the Army, the Cubans, the colectivos, and you're going to have a free election? Not sensible.

HANNAH: U.S. is not participating in these talks.

ABRAMS: No, this is just between the regime and the democratic forces.

HANNAH: The EU, are they going to impose sanctions if these talks don't progress?

VECCHIO: Actually they released a statement saying that they will impose more sanctions on the regime if the regime doesn't allow a peaceful solution in Venezuela. And that's good. We need to increase that pressure from the European countries. In certain way they have been bypassing the sanctions from the U.S., you know, using Europe. And we need to close that door. If we do that, we'll increase the pressure to facilitate a transition –

HANNAH: Do you have any timeframe from the Europeans on when they would say, "Enough is enough; this isn't going anywhere, Maduro is –"

VECCHIO: It seems to me that they are waiting for Barbados, for the negotiations. That's what they said in the statement.

HANNAH: Okay. This next round in Barbados.

VECCHIO: Yes. I would say yes.

HANNAH: All right.

ABRAMS: I would just add the many of the Europeans are making a real mistake here, because many of them take the position, while these negotiations are ongoing, we shouldn't do sanctions. This is exactly wrong, because while they're ongoing, if you want them to succeed, you need to increase the pressure on the regime to compromise and European sanctions would have a big impact.

HANNAH: Yeah. Elliott, I want to go back to this question of January versus now, because I am one of those people, and I think I shared this, who was overly optimistic in January and February. It really felt to me like I could wake up any day, and I'd find out that Maduro was on a plane to Moscow or Havana or somewhere which clearly wasn't true. And instead, we've had these events that looked like they could have been inflection points for the opposition. The effort in February to forcibly get humanitarian assistance in to the Venezuelan people out of Colombia. Mostly that kind of fizzled and went nowhere. And then the events at the end of April, the supposed uprising, that also kind of ended up going nowhere.

So I just want to – What is it going to take, assuming that the critical factor here is to fracture this regime to get many more people to leave Maduro and go over to the opposition, what's been missing in those kinds of offers that need to be made to either Maduro himself or people around him that's just not being done? Or are they being made and they're not responding?

ABRAMS: Well you know the one word answer: more. Obviously the pressure has not yet been enough to force them to give way. I think the answer to it is to look at the other side of that balance, that is, Maduro's lost the support of the people of Venezuela. We have a million public opinion polls that show he's got 10% or something like that. But he's got Cuba, Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, in varying ways and to varying degrees. But it's very important.

My own view is that if the Cuban regime were not supporting him, he'd be gone already, because I think the Cubans are critically important. He's gotten a lot of Chinese and Russian financial help over the last 10 years, and more recently that's been very critical for the regime. When we imposed sanctions on the national oil company, PDVSA, what did they do? They turned to Russia.

So they're getting this support, and it is helping them. They've also increased the level of brutality. Given the lack of support in the country and the deteriorating situation, how do they stay in power? They arrest more people. They kill more people. They drive more people out. They make a real effort to destroy the National Assembly.

So by definition, the combination of pressures has not yet been enough. And you know I wish I had the exact quote, but it was about a month ago, Felipe Gonzales said, "This regime is finished. We do not know the hour and we do not know the day, but we know it is coming."

HANNAH: Okay. You didn't actually answer the question I was asking, which is what is the – You answered the punishment question, not sufficient punishment, too much outside support. And I want to talk about outside support, but this question of the incentives side of this, why would Maduro or the generals or any of the people around him keeping him in power decide to give up, defect, and leave? Some have done it, but what is that offer? Because in this same Miami Herald article I read to you from yesterday, the headline is, "*U.S. willing to offer Maduro guarantees he'll be left alone if he leaves Venezuela.*" What is the offer on the table for Maduro right now?

ABRAMS: If you look at every Latin American transition to democracy that I can think of in the last 30, 40 years, there is a negotiation, and there is a kind of transitional justice that isn't really justice. I mean if you think of Eastern Europe after Communism, if you think of what Nelson Mandela did in South Africa, there is always some kind of compromise in which there is no perfect justice, because country after country chooses peace, democracy, development over justice, frankly. It's a compromise. And I think that that will happen in Venezuela.

And we have said publicly, and we've passed some messages, certainly the United States is not in this for some kind of vengeance. We are attempting to help Venezuelans recover their democracy. This will essentially be their – not "will be", "is"; it's their negotiation. We're not at the table, and we will respect the agreement that they make, with one exception, I guess I'd say, which is trafficking drugs to the United States. If you're doing that, we're going to go after you.

HANNAH: Just on that point, there was this – I think you had then the head of military intelligence –

ABRAMS: Yes.

HANNAH: Who was in the National Assembly or one of the parliamentary bodies of Venezuela who defected, essentially renounced the regime and Maduro in February, went into hiding, ended up in Spain, and endorsed Guaido. Then next thing, you turned around, and Spain was, there was an extradition request from the United States to get this guy. He'd been indicted on drug trafficking charges to the Americas, and we were going to – How does that fit in? How complicated is this process?

ABRAMS: We knew that what would happen there. We knew that some people in Venezuela, some people in the military would say, "Oh, look what happened. Now if I leave the regime, go over to the democratic side, maybe they'll arrest me, too." The counterexample, though, is Cristopher Figuera, who'd been the head of the SEBIN who left the country and on whom we lifted sanctions. What's the difference in the two cases? Drug trafficking. You don't get a pass on drug trafficking.

HANNAH: Mm-hmm. Ambassador can you weigh in on this point? And I guess the basic question is, can you imagine if you can get to your goal, which is an interim government, free elections, and Maduro gone, that Nicolas Maduro spends the rest of his days sleeping peacefully, dying in his old age, not being hauled in front of an international criminal court, because we haven't talked about the UN High Commissioner's report, which detailed a lot of

crimes by this regime: extrajudicial killings in the hundreds, at a minimum, torture, all kinds of horrible things. Can you imagine that, or can the Venezuela people imagine that would be any kind of transitional justice they would be able to buy into?

VECCHIO: You know what I'd say is the following. We are open to leave a space for Maduro to exit if that facilitates the political process in Venezuela and to have a peaceful transition. We need to stop the suffering of the Venezuelan, and if that is the price that we need to pay, I think we are open to facilitate the exit of Maduro. And of course for that, we will need not only our opposition, also, the support of the international community to facilitate that process. And so we are so clear on that.

But let me tell you more about the other question that you mentioned about the events of April 30. We were pretty close. I mean, the domestic pressure, the pressure from our Congress and the international pressure were working. And they are still working, because for sure now we know that the inner circle of Maduro, civilians, and including military officers, are negotiating the exit of Maduro. They were negotiating with us the exit of Maduro. Some of them are still inside of that circle. So we don't have any doubt that they consider that Maduro is done. I mean, that Maduro is surviving in power. Maduro is not governing Venezuela. Maduro is not able to resolve any problem in Venezuela right now, and he won't be able to be in the same position that he had back in January.

So we know that. We were pretty close, you know, for that objective that we wanted to achieve. And so now, after that events, of course it's natural that you have – I don't know how to say that, like a –

HANNAH: A letdown.

VECCHIO: Yeah, a letdown. But now things are still moving, start moving, you know, in the right direction. So that's why I have been so clear, and we need to give that determination without hesitation, because we don't have any other alternative and any other action. So just keep what we are doing internally, and of course from the international community.

HANNAH: When you look back on April 30th in terms of the lesson learned, specifically about two people who were supposed to be part of that operation but ultimately weren't, the head of the Supreme Court and the Defense Minister, was that just on them that they were bad and unfaithful actors who didn't have what it would take to lead the regime, or were there things that you could have done that you didn't do, or that the United States didn't do?

VECCHIO: No, no, I would say that some of the people that needed to act, didn't act.

HANNAH: Some of the people in Venezuela –

VECCHIO: In Venezuela, inside of Venezuela.

HANNAH: Mm-hmm.

VECCHIO: We were so close.

HANNAH: And why do you think they didn't act?

VECCHIO: Courage, fear, in some cases.

HANNAH: But not that they didn't have sufficient assurances from the opposition or from the international community about their ultimate –

VECCHIO: Yes, I would say yes, yeah.

HANNAH: Not because of that.

VECCHIO: Not because of that.

HANNAH: Not because of that, good.

Elliott, I want to ask you about some of the outside actors that you mentioned. Just give me your listing. The countries that I generally hear about are Russia, Cuba, China, Iran, and Turkey. That's a lot of countries. Just give me your listing. Who is the most essential, critical player in keeping this regime afloat, and exactly what kind of assistance do they provide? And then down from there, through that list of five on what they're doing, and then what are we doing to stop them from doing it? Are we prepared to sanction any of that activity? Is our policy in Venezuela important enough for us to do that?

ABRAMS: Well, we have. Let's start with Cuba. Cuba is critical to the regime. Best example, I mean, symbolically, who are Maduro's body guards? Cubans. Not Venezuelans, Cubans surround him. They are in the civilian intelligence agency, the military intelligence agency, the Army, spying for Cuba, but spying for Maduro, trying to prevent coups, watching over everybody, trying to prevent lateral communication among members of the military and intelligence communities.

So this is critically important. Why is Venezuela so important for Cuba? Free oil. That's easy.

Russia has been very important. It's not that they have so many people there. I mean the Russian military presence is, I don't know, 150 people order of magnitude, mostly repairing the Russian military equipment that, since the Chavez days, Venezuela has been buying. I think the Russian role is partly, I'd say, psychological-political, supporting Maduro, so you block things in the UN Security council, you veto everything, and you give him the sense that there's a big country backing you. And there's Rosneft, the Russian oil company, which has been very important in buying Venezuelan oil, in selling refined products like gasoline, kerosene, and in helping with the finances of the regime, because we've done a lot of sanctions. So what banks will deal with this regime? Russian banks.

HANNAH: Russian banks.

ABRAMS: So they've been very useful. However, the Russian foreign ministry issued a statement yesterday noting that, "Oh, we're talking to everybody in Venezuela. We're not just talking to the regime; we're also talking to the opposition." And it's true, but they had been very leery about ever saying it in public. We knew it. There were meetings when I think the Russians said to members of the opposition, "Don't you dare tell the press about this meeting, or it's the last meeting you'll ever have." Now, they're voluntarily saying, "Hey, we're having these meetings," which I call hedging your bets.

HANNAH: By the way, can you just confirm what the secretary said about Maduro on April 30th was on his way to the airport, and there was a plane on the runway ready to take him to Moscow or something?

ABRAMS: I can't confirm that the plane was there that evening. We know that, very often, we have seen it: he has a plane fueled and ready whenever there's a tension in the air, and Cuba would be the obvious place to go.

HANNAH: Okay, so, China.

ABRAMS: Less important than Russia. What China and Russia are doing is very interesting. On the one hand, they're providing political support for the regime. On the other hand, they're wringing it dry. Venezuela's exporting roughly 750,000 barrels a day of oil. 500,000 goes to Russia and China, in exchange for nothing. Nothing. It's called payback oil. So that means it's to pay back previous loans. It means that what you're getting in exchange for the oil is you get a mark in a ledger book. Last year, last summer, a year ago, Rosneft, the oil company of Igor Sechin, Mr. Putin's friend, was owed \$8 billion by Venezuela. Now they're owed about a billion and a half dollars. There's six and a half billion dollars that should have been used to buy food and medicine for the people of Venezuela. No. That's just a little mark on a Russian ledger book. And the Chinese, too, are trying to reduce their – Nobody's giving new money. They're taking their money out, because they know this regime is doomed. But they're giving political support.

HANNAH: China doesn't have any critical infrastructure in Venezuela? No ports or any of those kind of things? No. None of that, no.

ABRAMS: No they give the regime help on espionage, but –

HANNAH: Mostly cyber kind of related? Shutting down the internet, things like that?

ABRAMS: Things like that, yeah. You know and they do shut down the internet intermittently to try to prevent Juan Guaido from communicating with the people of Venezuela. We have many examples of where he goes to a particular town, the internet's gone in that town.

HANNAH: Iran Hezbollah?

ABRAMS: Iran Hezbollah less important. Turkey less important. They have done some gold sales in both Iran and Turkey. We have sanctioned the whole gold sector. There is an

Iranian presence. There is a Hezbollah presence. It's not too big. After the sanctions began to bite, so I'd say February, they reached out to Iran for help. The Iranians can't give them much help. They're not going to give them any money. I think they have asked everybody: China, Russia, Iran, Cuba, to look at the electrical sector. I mean, they know that this not – Marco Rubio doesn't have an electromagnetic bolt.

And as far as we're aware, they've all come back with the same answer, which is basically, "You destroyed this electrical system by 20 years of lack of maintenance and lack of investment. There's nothing we can do. There's no magic here." So they're not able to help the regime much, neither the Turks nor the Iranians. And there has long been a Hezbollah presence, certainly for 20 years, mostly fundraising. It's not really terrorist activity.

HANNAH: But are they major figures in running drugs out of Venezuela to the United States?

ABRAMS: I would not say "major figures." I mean, the drugs come in from Colombia to Venezuela, and then they go north from Venezuela. There are a number of people of a number of nationalities, but I wouldn't say this is an Iranian industry.

HANNAH: Okay. And just Turkey, describe the specific help that we see Turkey giving?

ABRAMS: Gold. I mean, political support but –

HANNAH: They're taking Colombian gold.

ABRAMS: Venezuelan gold.

HANNAH: Venezuelan gold, I mean, yeah.

ABRAMS: Yes. I mean, the regime has a lot of trouble turning oil into money, partly, again, because of the Russians and Chinese, and partly because of our sanctions. A lot of people don't want to deal in Venezuelan oil.

So they've been selling a lot of gold, certainly more than a billion dollars' worth this year. And we sanctioned it. So, you've got to go places where people are willing to deal illegally, and Iran is and Turkey is.

HANNAH: And is this the subject of our conversations with the Turks?

ABRAMS: Oh yeah, sure. And I mean we've had conversations. There have been some other countries involved in this where, after the conversations, they've cut them off and they won't deal with it anymore. And my guess is that'll happen in Turkey, too.

HANNAH: Yeah, okay. Ambassador, I want to ask you just about another kind of outside group, the ELN, this Colombian group that's designated a terrorist organization here in the United States.

VECCHIO: Yes.

HANNAH: Can you just talk about that rising concern about the ELN and what role they're actually playing inside of Venezuela?

VECCHIO: Actually it's a concern, yeah, not only for Venezuela, but also for Colombians. They are in Venezuela, the ELN. They are protected by the regime. Actually, they are now in 12 states inside of Venezuela, and they have been involved in the drug trafficking in the gold transactions to send those gold out of Venezuela. And also in committing crimes inside of Venezuela and Colombia, terrorist activities. Actually, they put a bomb in the beginning of this year in Colombia.

So this is a concern for us from the security point of view. And it will impact not only Venezuela and Colombia, but also the entire region. And it will be one of the main challenges for us when we take full control of the government in how we can just protect our people, protect our territory, and how we can stop this illicit activities in our country and in the region. So yes, it's a main concern, and the world should know that this is an important element, and the world should know that we need the support of international community, and to do what we need to do in order to control them.

HANNAH: Within the last couple of days, I saw that Juan Guaido and the National Assembly have agreed, or they would like to, rejoin the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, which some people have read as, because there's been talk within the opposition, or at least reporting, the opposition's getting quite frustrated. They don't see any way to get Maduro out other than, now, through some kind of military action. It's very unclear anybody could do that but the United States. I'm sure there's a lot of hesitance about that in the United States. Can you just talk about that step of joining the treaty, but more broadly, about the issue of where the opposition now stand on outside military intervention to remove the Maduro regime?

VECCHIO: Interim president Juan Guaido has been very clear. I mean we are just moving forward and putting all the pressure to facilitate a peaceful transition in Venezuela. This is our first option. We would like to stop the suffering of the Venezuelans, but at the same time, we need to be ready for any scenario, to protect the lives of the Venezuelans, you know, according to the responsibility to protect principle and also using this legal framework in the future, so it's there. I mean, this treaty is part of the OAS. It's part of this continent, this hemisphere, we would like to be part of that. And the interim president has to send that to the OAS, and then we will be part of that. So in order to implement that mechanism, you have to follow all the procedures that that treaty has.

So it's not automatically, and we need to understand that we are facing, as I said, a criminal organization which is a threat again the region. And we would like to have the legal framework in any scenario.

HANNAH: There's a – First, have you had discussions at the Pentagon about possible military intervention?

VECCHIO: No.

HANNAH: No. People viewing from the outside, given the history of this region, alleged history of the United States problematically in the region and interventions in the past that this would be an awful idea. This would be a gift to the Maduro regime to have particularly the Americans leading an effort, however noble and humanitarian it may be, that it would backfire in a major way. Is that not your assessment of how this would go, the opposition's assessment?

VECCHIO: You mean, for what?

HANNAH: For U.S. military intervention into Venezuela.

VECCHIO: I mean, what I can say is the following: as I said, I mean we have a clear position to move forward for a peaceful transition. And we will like to be just ready for any scenario. And this is something that we need to build our main allies. Not only with the U.S., but also with the most important countries in Latin America and in Europe. And this is not a unilateral decision. It should be a multilateral decision on approach, and based on the circumstances that we will evaluate all together.

So I mean, it's there. Juan Guaido has been very clear that we are open to explore any option in order to protect the people of Venezuela.

HANNAH: Okay. Elliott can you just talk about the U.S. view of the general issue of military intervention and whether it still remains on the table as a general matter, setting aside the possibility that Americans are attacked by the colectivos or put into harm's way. But the issue of military intervention, and particularly taking into account the refugee out-flux and the impact that that could be having on number of neighboring states in the region in general and destabilizing parts of South America. How is the administration thinking about the question of military force?

ABRAMS: You know, look, we have a policy. The policy is to use all of the economic, financial, diplomatic, political pressure we can muster on the side of the Venezuelan people and the return to democracy in Venezuela. That's our policy. The phrase "all options are on the table" is never going to change, because it is true, and it is true for every president. And the example I always give is, if you had said to George H. W. Bush in 1988 when he was Vice President running for President, "You are going to invade Panama," he would have said, "You are crazy!"

So who knows, I can't predict the future. You've mentioned what about attacks on Americans? What happens when the outflow is not four million, it's five million, it's six million, it's seven million, and Latin American countries are pleading for responsibility to protect? I'm not going to predict the future. I'm just going to say our policy is to use economic, financial, political, diplomatic pressure on behalf of the democratic movement in Venezuela, Interim President Guaido, the National Assembly, and the people of Venezuela.

HANNAH: On this question, none of the neighboring countries have asked us to organize a military intervention, have they?

ABRAMS: No.

HANNAH: No. There are a lot of, and probably not enough, but a lot of Venezuelan soldiers who have left the country, are probably in Colombia and some of the neighboring states. It looks like this is presumably a trained force, committed to the opposition against the regime. Is anything being done with those soldiers to actually organize them, put them together into units, train them for any possible contingencies? Is that work being done?

ABRAMS: They're in Colombia for the most part. Would you say fifteen hundred? Twenty-five hundred?

VECCHIO: Yeah. Yeah.

ABRAMS: I'm not sure what the numbers are. And we are helping the Colombians. I think one of the ideas that the Colombians have had is to have them work as a kind of core of people to help the huge Venezuelan refugee community in Colombia, which is about a million and a half people, maybe more now.

But the Colombians, unsurprisingly, are not so keen on the idea of having this kind of military group heavily armed, inside Colombia. So no thought is being given to that idea. I mean I think the two major options are whether they simply go their own way and take up their own lives in different cities in Colombia with their families, or remain as an organized group which can be used in many ways to help Venezuelan refugees in Colombia.

VECCHIO: And the most important thing is that the message that we have sent to the military institution. We need the military officers inside of Venezuela in order to facilitate the transition of Venezuela. Okay? That's the main goal.

HANNAH: Yeah. We're going to go to Q&A, just is there anything going forward? We've got the UNGA coming up. Are there any big plans that you can share with us, events or things that you are looking to have happen, have the international community, have the Lima group, have other countries do in the next few months? What are next steps?

ABRAMS: Well we have a big meeting in Peru August 6th of dozens and dozens of countries to support elections and democracy in Venezuela. August 6th and then UN General Assembly.

VECCHIO: General Assembly, September.

ABRAMS: And, you know, you'll see tomorrow and more or less each week, sanctions.

VECCHIO: Probably sanctions from European Union, and also investigation. You know, taking to account the Bachelet report.

HANNAH: Yeah. Do you think something could happen at the international criminal court? Is that a possibility?

VECCHIO: That's another possibility, yes. But we need to move forward on that.

HANNAH: Further US law enforcement indictments of Venezuelan leaders and officials, you think, that we could see?

ABRAMS: I never try to speak for the Department of Justice on a question like that, so the answer is, "Yeah, I think so, but I –"

HANNAH: Is this a controversial issue? Because as you've said, the issue of indictments does lead to certain complications down the road if there are people you really want to –

ABRAMS: Not really, because we don't interfere in that process. It would be very foolish to try to interfere in that process. So they pursue the evidence. And at the point at which they, and the "they" in this case is probably individual U.S. attorneys in Miami and elsewhere in the country, have what they think is a solid case, they're going to indict.

HANNAH: Okay. We've got questions in the audience. Who's got the microphones? Just please state your name, your affiliation, and please keep your question short as you can, please. Where's mics? Right. Yes, please, whoever.

BARNES: Hi, Julian Barnes, *New York Times*. I want to know what are the options to try and pressure both Cuba and Russia to end their support here. Are sanctions on Russia under consideration? Are they a possibility? What are the pros and cons of taking a firmer stand with some of the great powers that are aiding the Maduro government?

ABRAMS: Well, you're seeing it with Cuba. You're seeing – I mean the one that got the most attention was cruise ships, but that was one of a list. Nor have we completed our action on the list. So pressures on Cuba have grown a lot since January. And they will continue to grow. And we've made it very clear that this is related to their actions in Venezuela.

On Russia, we're still thinking about what sanctions to apply, individual or sectoral sanctions to apply. It is striking that, from a financial point of view, one could say the Russians are helping. One could also say the Russians are squeezing Venezuela dry. They're not giving any more money to Venezuela. They're taking money out of Venezuela. Nevertheless, they are helping merchandise the oil to some extent. So that's something we're thinking about.

HANNAH: We got a question in the back here.

HANSLER: Hi, Jennifer Hansler with CNN. Thanks so much for doing this. To both of you, yesterday, House Republicans voted down a measure to fast-track TPS for Venezuelans. Do you have any reaction to that? And then Special Representative Abrams, what is the administration's stance on TPS for Venezuelans here in the U.S.?

VECCHIO: We will continue working with the Congress and with the Trump administration in order to facilitate the presence of Venezuelans here and to avoid any deportations to any Venezuelans. I mean this is an important issue for us.

ABRAMS: I think we issued a statement yesterday, or there were some interviews. The problem with TPS today in general is that the T is gone. You have court decisions that have said the administration could not lift some other past grants of TPS, treating it as a kind of right that you have and can never then be taken away. So if it's not temporary, no President, I think is ever going to use it again. There are other options, and I would say it's extremely difficult to deport Venezuelans, because we don't deal with the regime. There's no paperwork. There are no direct flights. So for our immigration system, which has so many other priorities, this is not one of them and in fact, I think this is probably not a 100% correct statement, but it's probably a 99% correct statement. We are not deporting non-criminal Venezuelans. If someone's been convicted of a crime in the United States, that's different. But that's really not what you're talking about, and generally, I'd say, we are not deporting Venezuelans.

HANNAH: Kim, did you have a question? Yeah, up here, front, wait for the mic.

DOZIER: Kim Dozier, contributor to the Time and the Daily Beast. You had a lot of people show up on April 30th. Demonstrations since then, after the vicious crackdowns, especially on that day, seem to have been smaller. How do you rebuild the momentum? And also a question for Mr. Abrams. What is the potential for a clash with Russian forces on the ground if any sort of action was considered?

VECCHIO: You know, we haven't called for a major demonstration in Caracas, but I have said so clear that Interim President Juan Guaido has been traveling across the country for different states. And if you see all the images on those demonstrations have been so huge, and particularly in those states were supporting before the regime. So I would say we have still the majority of the Venezuela is there. The people of Venezuela is still mobilized, and the leadership of Juan Guaido is so clear. So we have that, and that's quite important. And Juan Guaido will continue visiting different regions in Venezuela outside of Caracas. And I would say that the people is there. The people is there. And we will keep that momentum, and I think that is the option for an exit of Maduro, for a change is there. And we need to take advantage of it.

ABRAMS: Just before I come to your question, let me – I get some of these photos from President Guaido. He sends them to me. And it's very impressive. I mean he was in the Isla Margarita last weekend. A few weeks ago, Barinas, which is Hugo Chavez's birthplace, Trujillo, so huge crowds. No publicity, can't go on TV –

And I kind of blame the press, in part, because it looks to me like a lot of reporters are in Caracas and they don't follow him, and they don't put these photos out. But the crowds are terrific.

You know I think there are about, again order of magnitude, 150 Russians? Some of whom are really technicians, so you're talking about some dozens of actual armed people. If there ever were an American military intervention, they're going to get out of the way. They're not crazy. But that's not something, again, that is being contemplated right now. The policy is political pressure, economic pressure.

HANNAH: Just quickly, since April 30th, a lot of National Assembly members have been rounded up and arrested –

ABRAMS: Yes, 17.

HANNAH: – And done in. The fact that Guaido is able to run around the country, I'm sure he does it very carefully, but is interesting. And can you just say, is that a red line for the United States?

ABRAMS: It is a red line for everybody. Dozens of countries, I think, have made it clear to the regime that they will change their behavior with respect to this regime if they arrest or detain or harm President Guaido. Now the regime, of course, being a bunch of very brutal and despicable actors, have said, "Okay, fine, so why don't we just arrest and detain the people around him, his team?" Which is what they are trying to do. And they are trying to really undermine and ultimately destroy the National Assembly.

But on Guaido, yes. For us and lots of EU countries, lots of Latin countries, and I think the regime is afraid.

VECCHIO: And inside of Venezuela, as well –

HANNAH: It would be a big –

VECCHIO: I think the people of Venezuela will react against that, and that could speed the process.

HANNAH: Yeah. We're going to the back again, please.

WROUGHTON: Thank you. Leslie Wroughton from Reuters. Mr. Vecchio, do you notice in your negotiations that the government has in fact – that they are negotiating with sincerity this time? Any changes in their posture? Number two, Mr. Abrams, as we know, Foreign Minister Zarif was in Caracas. Do you maybe know what those talks were about? Anything regarding the sale of oil?

VECCHIO: As you know, I mean, we don't trust this regime. We trust the people of Venezuela, and we are just presenting a clear solution for the political crisis. And that's what we have put on the table. And if we don't see this time again that they are not willing to move forward on that, I mean Maduro is just putting an obstacle for peace in Venezuela. And the most important thing, in my view, would be that the international community, a lot of them will realize that Maduro is the obstacle for peace in Venezuela, and that Maduro is basically putting more conflict inside of Venezuela instead of looking for a solution.

So but we are doing what we could do internally in order to facilitate a transition in our country.

ABRAMS: I would think that the public reason for the visit is some kind of solidarity, which is fair. Two vicious dictatorships have a lot in common. In private, I would assume it's commiseration, because I remember in January and February people saying, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, this administration's policy is to try to get Venezuelan oil off the market and Iranian oil off the market? Wait till you see what happens to oil prices! Are you crazy?"

Well we've seen what happened to oil prices. So those warnings were really not borne out. And fortunately, the sanctions are having a significant impact on both of these dictatorships.

HANNAH: Yeah, in the back, I think.

GEHRKE: Hi, thanks for doing this. It's Joel Gehrke with the *Washington Examiner*. Two questions, one on this issue of prospective EU sanctions if the Barbados talks fails. The EU tends to move by consensus. Have you gotten a commitment from, for instance, Italy on what they would be willing to do? Was there some suite of options where they are willing to proceed on some but not other perhaps?

And then, more within Venezuela or within the region, there was a report last week that there's interest in selling F-16s to Colombia. How does the Maduro crisis enhance the need or the appeal of that kind of arms sale? And do you have a sense of what barometer is or the threshold is within Colombia, within Brazil, within others for where they would find it necessary to invoke responsibility to protect?

ABRAMS: Of the latter question, no. I can't say – I would say that despite the economic situation and the humanitarian situation in Venezuela, the regime just signed a contract for, if I remember right, \$249 million to buy eight Sukhoi combat jets and some military helicopters. So they're building up, or trying to. And the Colombians don't have any such advanced aircraft. So they want them as a matter of national defense. And they're good and close allies of the United States, and we want to help them.

On the Europeans, you know in some cases, I'd say Italy and Spain are the best examples. This is a domestic issue. It's a coalition issue. Some parties in the coalition are unwilling to be tough on the Maduro regime. You know these are things that the EU's going to have to sort out, but we've seen very strong statements from the European Parliament and from the council, the Consilium, last week. And the Bachelet report had a real impact in Western Europe. And I think because it made it clear this is not a left/right issue. This is a dictatorship and freedom issue.

So we are hoping the Europeans will move forward. Greece was an outlier here, and of course I think his second day in office, Prime Minister Mitsotakis recognized Juan Guaido. So we hope they will act. I think they will probably not do as – Well, they certainly won't do as much as we're doing. I hope they don't do symbolic sanctions. I hope they do a robust list of individuals involved in human rights violations. We'd also like to see, and I go back to what Ambassador Vecchio said, to do travel restrictions. Because a lot of the ill-gotten, stolen funds of the Venezuelan people are being spent living the high life in Europe. And they should stop that.

HANNAH: Elliott, just quick, you and I have done a lot of work on the Middle East. There's this situation in Syria. I can remember back in 2011, obviously, in August, Obama said he's finished. Fred Hoff said, "Assad is dead man walking," similarly the big refugee crisis, humanitarian crisis, sanctions on, and here we are, still. Assad looks like he's won some kind of Pyrrhic, partial victory. Is Syria completely – with lots of Russian support by the way. Is that a unfair parallel or a useless parallel?

ABRAMS: Yes, it's an unfair and useless parallel. Why do I say that? Because first, Syria is where it is in the world. Venezuela is an outlier in a hemisphere of freedom. In a Latin America that has, over the decades, moved to greater and greater solidarity of democratic countries. Secondly, Assad probably would have been out of there except for the fact that thousands, thousands of IRGC soldiers and Hezbollah soldiers went into Syria to fight, to die, to kill on behalf of Assad. If you think thousands of people are going to fight and die on behalf of Nicolas Madura, I'd say we don't think so. There aren't going to be any foreign troops coming in to defend Nicolas Maduro.

VECCHIO: Doubt it.

HANNAH: Got it. There was another one. Yes, sorry.

LAWLER: Hi there, Dave Lawler from *Axios*. Two related questions for both of you. Since we've been flashing back to January, there was a lot of muscular rhetoric at that time from the administration that Maduro needs to get out, and he needs to get out now or face the consequences. I'm wondering whether the fact that he is still in power has sort of – Is that part of what has led to this sense of let down? And is your position still the same now as it was then?

Related to that, back then we were all talking about an uprising within the military or within the regime as the most likely route out of this. Now we're talking a lot about a negotiated settlement. Do we still see the likelihood of an uprising leading to Maduro's downfall, or are we looking at this negotiated solution as the most likely outcome? Thanks.

HANNAH: Sorry, but we're running out of time. Quickly, as short as you can keep it.

ABRAMS: Okay, and let me you give the last word. So I'll just say people power in the streets, military coups, negotiated settlement, they interact, you know. The more people in the street, the more pressure there is on the military, the more they pressure the regime to negotiate something. I can't predict how the regime falls. I can't predict the date. It's a combination of all these pressures. But I think it's inevitable.

HANNAH: The odds that he's gone by the time American elections next November?

ABRAMS: Yes.

HANNAH: Yes? What? You think he's gone?

VECCHIO: You know that I'm fully confident that by this year, we will have a transition in our country. And I'm fully confident because as I said at the beginning, the majority of the Venezuelans are looking for that change.

HANNAH: Good.

VECCHIO: That's going to extend that agony, but they won't be able to stop the change in Venezuela, so we will achieve it.

HANNAH: Yeah. Share that confidence?

ABRAMS: Absolutely.

HANNAH: Okay. Any final, just one minute remarks, and then I know we need to let you leave. Any final remarks?

VECCHIO: I would say that we cannot do this alone. We need the support of international community, and working together domestically, internally, and with the international community, we will conquer freedom again. We are defending universal principles and values that we will need to bring back in this continent. And at the end of the day, the cost of freedom is taking place in Venezuela in this hemisphere and, in my view, will predict the future of this regime for the next 30 or 50 years.