

DUBOWITZ: Hi, thanks so much for joining us today. I'm Mark Dubowitz, the CEO of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. The historic Abraham Accords between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain were the first in a new wave of normalization agreements where Israel and Gulf countries have come together around common interests and aspirations. It also allows these countries to enhance their cooperation and coordination in addressing mutual concerns; chief amongst them: the threat from the Islamic Republic of Iran.

To better understand how these three countries are working to counter the threat from the regime in Iran and their assessments of the policies of the incoming Biden administration and how those policies will impact them, we are very grateful to have three of the leading diplomats who were responsible for this historic breakthrough.

As you know, FDD is a non-partisan national security and foreign policy-focused think tank. We don't take foreign government funding and we run a series of programs throughout the year that deal with important foreign policy and national security issues. We are very grateful for the support of the Shillman Foundation for making this event possible. If you are interested in learning more about our work and our areas of focus, please visit our website at FDD.org. And with that, I am pleased to introduce our guests today.

His Excellency Yousef Al Otaiba has served as the Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to the United States since 2008. In recognition for his service, he was promoted to Minister of State in 2017.

His Excellency Shaikh Abdulla Bin Rashid Al Khalifa has served as the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain to the United States since 2017.

And His Excellency Ron Dermer has served as Israel's Ambassador to the US since 2013. Previous to that, he served as senior advisor to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. We are very grateful to these three gentlemen for making the time to join us today.

Well gentlemen, it's great to have you. Thank you so much for joining us. And I want to talk about the threat from the Islamic Republic of Iran and the title of this event is *On the Same Page*. You represent three countries that are within Iranian missile range and the Biden administration is obviously going to be consulting closely with our European allies who, up to now are, not within Iranian missile range. And so, what I want to do is start with your perspective on this threat and ask all three of you straight out, do you oppose a return to the JCPOA? Do you want to start maybe with Ron?

DERMER: Well, it won't surprise you, Mark, that we do oppose a return to the same nuclear deal in 2015. As you recall, the Prime Minister forcefully opposed that and publicly opposed that at the time because it didn't solve the problem it was meant to solve, meaning it didn't close the nuclear file. What it did is – you know and I know FDD was involved in that effort to bring to the public's attention all the problems with the deal – but, the main problem was that all the restrictions that the nuclear deal put in place were automatically removed in a few years. We've already started to see the removal of some of those restrictions after five years, the arms embargo is removed and then in eight years it's missiles. In 10 years, it's centrifuges. In 15 years, it's stockpiles. So, all that had to happen was a change in the calendar in order for there to be change. Iran didn't have to change any of its behavior.

So, we had a situation from Israel's point of view, where a nuclear deal was on the table that didn't end the threat of a nuclear armed Iran, but it actually virtually guaranteed it. At best, it postponed a breakout for a few years, but that's it. And in addition to that, by removing all the sanctions, it also fueled Iran's quest for conquest and carnage throughout the region and my fellow ambassadors know about that well because their countries are affected by it as well. It's not just in Bahrain and the Emirates, it's Iraq, and it's Syria, and Lebanon, and Yemen throughout the region. So, we did not think that this was a good deal, we thought it was a very bad deal and one that should have been rejected at the time.

Now what we've learned since, over the last five years, is that deal did not do what its proponents hoped it would do, meaning alter Iran's behavior, move them into the community of nations. It actually led Iran just to be much more aggressive and much more dangerous in the region. That was before the Trump administration came in, that was before the Trump administration changed their policy. And we, in Israel, appreciated very much the decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal, to restore those sanctions, and really to create this maximum pressure campaign, which has made it much more difficult for Iran. Now, it didn't solve the nuclear problem with Iran, but neither did the deal. And I think right now, the United States has basically placed all of us in a position where Iran is facing enormous pressures. And it's important to keep that pressure on in order to ensure that the full dismantling of Iran's military nuclear capability, and also to reign in its aggression and terrorism in the region, which threatens all of us.

So, we are definitely opposed to going back to the same deal and we hope the new administration will sit down with Israel, will sit down with the Emirates, with Bahrain, with its other allies in the region, talk to us because we live in the region, we know a little something about our own security. And just as in the case with North Korea, when you're doing negotiations with them, you would listen to Japan, you would listen to South Korea and my guess is you'd listened to them even more than you'd listened to the British, French, and Germans. And I think the same case here. Israel and the Arab States are on the same page, as you say, when it comes to Iran. I think that means something and hopefully, we can engage in that dialogue with the new Biden administration and hopefully find that common ground moving forward.

DUBOWITZ: So, thanks Ron. Yousef, I want to go to you next. Do you oppose the return to the JCPOA? If so, why?

AL OTAIBA: I think it's important to understand and note that the region in 2021 is very different from the region in 2015 when JCPOA was negotiated. I think the attitudes are changing, the mindsets are changing. You talk to young people, they're very forward-looking and very optimistic about the future of our part of the world. And so, the Abraham Accords are a reflection of that. But because of that change in the region, because of maximum pressure, because of COVID, and because of low oil prices, I think there is a lot of leverage that the U.S. has over Iran right now. And I think one of the things we should seriously consider doing is look at a bigger and better JCPOA 2.0, one that addresses the shortcomings of JCPOA 1.0.

We thought it was a good start, we don't think it went nearly far enough. We don't think the voices of the region were represented at the negotiations. So, I think what we would advocate is one, let's look at how to strengthen it and not cede all the leverage that you have upfront. Let's strengthen the U.S. diplomatic team and bring in your regional partners who tend to be aligned on this.

I think we've been presented with a false choice, Mark. I think there's always been this dilemma that says, well, the U.S. has to strengthen its partnerships and its relationships with the Europeans, that usually happens at the expense of its Arab partners. Or, strengthen its relationship with its Arab partners at the expense of the Europeans. I think that is a false choice. There's absolutely no reason why the U.S. should not come in armed with its two partners from Europe and from the region, aligned on what a deal looks like or at least our objective and negotiate a deal that addresses missiles, that addresses proxies, that addresses interference. And I think we're well positioned to do that. We want a deal, we definitely want a deal. We benefit more than anyone else from a deal, but we want a deal that addresses all of Iran's challenges for the region.

DUBOWITZ: Thanks Yousef. Abdulla, I want to go to you next. Again, Kingdom of Bahrain obviously faces grave threat from Iran, both externally and internally, do you oppose a return to the JCPOA? And if so, why?

AL KHALIFA: Well Mark, here's the thing with the JCPOA: it addressed only the P5+1's global concerns at the expense of the GCCs and Israel's security and welfare in the face of Iranians asymmetric regional manipulations. When the JCPOA was signed, we were told that Iran was going to spend the proceeds on developing the country, building

infrastructure, schools, et cetera. Instead, we saw a huge increase in Iran's spending on its dangerous proxies in the region, its asymmetric warfare, its ballistic missile program, with almost nothing being invested in Iran itself. If I was to speak on a micro level, we saw real IED attacks in Bahrain significantly increase in 2015. We had police officers that were attacked. There were attacks that were going on right next to a girls' school in one instance. I mean, the list goes on and we've seen that continue for 2016 and 2017.

From the start, Bahrain has always stood with the U.S. government's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA and apply a different approach with the Iranian regime. It has always been part of the Iranian regime's plan as a scheme to distract the world from their domestic issues and what's going on internally. One thing that needs to be said is that, ever since the initiation of the U.S.'s campaign, the Iranian regime has consistently been testing the region's resolve by initiating a provocative act in the form of a direct or indirect attack in an effort to identify the red line. And it would then operate just below that red line and FDD knows that very well, we've seen it in some of what you have put out.

At the end of the day, we hope that an incoming administration will recognize that Iran's malign activities and ballistic missile capabilities are equally as troublesome to Iran's neighbors as its nuclear program is. Any return to the JCPOA should take into consideration the concerns of Iran's neighbors, including the Gulf and Israel, those that have been on the forefront of Iranian aggression for 40 years now. We have a lot of evidence that can prove what the Iranians have been doing. We've brought it to our allies and we hope that a different approach will be taken in order to push back on the Iranian aggression in the region.

DUBOWITZ: So, Ron let me ask you this: there's been an assumption in Washington, almost perception, that the regime in Iran is 10 feet tall, that any attempt to counter the regime will only lead to massive escalation and that fundamentally, it was a choice between the JCPOA and war. And yet over the past number of years, your military and your intelligence services have inflicted significant damage against the regime in Iran, both in the region, in Syria particularly, and inside Iran. And I wonder if you could comment on that. I mean, you're a small country, you've got a small military, a small intelligence service and yet, you've had some real successes against the regime in Iran. Could you talk a little bit about that?

DERMER: Well, first of all, it was always a false choice to say it was either doing this deal or war. That was never the case and the best proof of it is what happened when President Trump withdrew from the deal. I mean, you didn't have war, we had peace, we're having this conversation today. Part of the reason why we're having this conversation and an Israeli ambassador is sitting with a Bahraini ambassador and an Emirati ambassador is because of the strong and forceful posture of the outgoing administration regarding Iran. I think that was part of the reason that created the political space to allow for different things that were happening underneath the surface to surface.

So, it was never about this deal or war. It was a false choice, I think, in an environment after Afghanistan and after Iraq, to get people to rush in doing a deal, thinking with diplomacy we have to do it or else we're going to be facing another war. I've never really believed that at all. And I actually think that the right policy regarding Iran, and this is something the Prime Minister of Israel has spoken about for 20 years, is a policy that has crippling economic sanctions, that has a credible military threat of a breakout by Iran and that also reaches out to the Iranian people who are our partners. We don't have a problem with the people of Iran, we have a problem with the regime of Iran and my guess is that both of my counterparts agree with that because it's a radical regime that is trying to destabilize all the governments in the region and it vows and works to destroy Israel. So that was always a false choice.

You've also seen not only, I'm not going to comment on supposed allegations against Israel inside Iran, but you know that we have acted very forcefully in Syria in order to prevent Iran from entrenching itself there. You also saw, that in the wake of the decision by President Trump to take out, I think, one of the greatest dangers not just to the region of the world, Qasem Soleimani, you saw the response of Iran and they were deterred for the last year. They were deterred because of that action.

Before that, there was concerns that there was going to be an escalation, but the reason why there was escalation is there wasn't forceful American power. Once that power was brought to bear, and I think it was brought to bear in the case of Qasem Soleimani, then it's deterred. And I would encourage a new Biden administration to make sure that that deterrence remains. To make sure that the Iranian regime knows that either if they try to attack, not only the United States, but attack American allies in the region, American interests in the region, that there will be a heavy price to pay. That is the way that ultimately, you're going to deter Iran.

And I want to, just before you go on, just comment on what was said previously. I think Yousef has a very, very important insight about all the leverage. And somebody brought to my attention just yesterday sent me an article that was written, I think it was by Tom Friedman when the deal was signed, and he said, "This is the best deal you can get with an empty holster." Well, guess what? You got pretty big guns in the holster right now. And it makes absolutely no sense to take those guns out and to throw it away and then simply go into a deal. And what Yousef is talking about is going to 2.0, and I'm sure he agrees with me on this, the road to 2.0 does not go through 1.0.

So, the thing that you're hearing now is, we will start by going to 1.0 and then we will work for a longer, broader deal. I wish that were possible, but I do not – I think it's a physical certainty, or metaphysical certainty, that if you go to 1.0 and you get rid of those guns in your holster, you get rid of all the leverage, you will never get to 2.0. There's a separate question: can you go to 2.0? Can you sit down with Israel, with our Emirati, Bahraini, and other allies in the region, forge a common position that would be a 2.0? That's a different discussion but, for that discussion to have any chance of reaching that destination, you have to use the leverage that you have to push Iran in that direction.

To simply give up that leverage to go to 1.0 and then to say, "We're going to have talks," it simply makes no sense. There's no chance that that's going to happen. You will never get to a bigger and better deal, the likes of which Yousef is talking about.

DUBOWITZ: Well Yousef, let me ask you about that because I mean, that obviously has been a criticism of the JCPOA, which is that its fundamental architecture is fatally flawed, that this is not just a question of extending the sunsets or getting better inspection rights or including missiles in some way, that the fundamental architecture of the JCPOA is so fatally flawed. Now, because Iran ultimately has fissile material and the ability to produce fissile material on its soil, it can expand to an industrial size nuclear program. It can use advanced centrifuges, which are easier to hide and give Iran a much easier sneak out option. It's going to have near zero breakout as result of this industrial sized nuclear program. And I think as Ron said, I mean, the fundamental premise of the JCPOA is Iran agrees to temporary nuclear constraints in exchange for massive sanctions relief.

So, I mean, how do you respond to the argument that "JCPOA 1" can lead to "JCPOA 2"? Or do you agree with Ron that there's a fundamental problem with respect to the architecture of this deal, a deal that ultimately is going to funnel billions of dollars to the regime to fund its destructive activities?

AL OTAIBA: So, I think the problem with going from one to two is what would be the incentive to go back to two, or to continue to two, if the sanctions relief has already happened? If you've driven the car off the lot, and then you suddenly realize you want to go back and get a better deal or a bigger discount, what's the incentive to get a bigger discount if you've already paid for the car upfront? So, I think, I don't want to re-litigate the entire process, but what I think we did in JCPOA 1.0 was we used the strategy or playbook that we're going to put pressure and sanctions, ultimately that leads to a negotiation that brings us to some kind of view.

And I think what we're proposing here is exactly the same playbook. We have pressure and sanctions, we do want to reach a negotiation I think with a broader and more expanded team of partners that have a stake in the region's security that reach to a bigger and better deal. We want a deal that addresses everything that brings more stability to the region. We benefit from that.

And when we were negotiating our nuclear agreements with the United States, back in 2008, we came up with what has been coined the gold standard. What's the gold standard? Civilian nuclear power in a safe and secure way that doesn't have enrichment and doesn't have reprocessing. We came up with that, and we offered that as a model. We offered that as a model so one day when the U.S. does negotiate with Iran, there's a template to follow.

And I mean, it was incredibly widely and well received in Congress that we created this gold standard and everyone should follow the gold standard. The problem was your partners became sort of committed and assured to a gold standard that is safe and secure for nuclear power and your adversaries got a better deal, and so I think that's the part I'd like to sort of revisit is, how do we get a better deal that is safer? We have a model, we know what it would look like. Why isn't that the bar that we are applying?

So, I think we should have a high set of objectives, not just on the nuclear side, but also on missiles and on proxies and on interference because we have the leverage to back it up right now. And, if you come to the table with your Arab partners and your European partners, I think you're demonstrating a stronger negotiating team, which ultimately would lead you to a better outcome.

DUBOWITZ: And Abdulla, I assume you agree with that, and I'd certainly love to hear your further insights on this, and I also wanted to ask you to address Saudi Arabia. Obviously the Saudi ambassador is not on this call, we hope one day she will be. But you've got a very close relationship with Saudi Arabia. Could you comment a little bit on the way Riyadh sees the threat from Iran, and collectively Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, the ways in which you think you can work closely with the UAE, with Israel, with some of your other allies in the region to continue to put pressure on the regime in Iran and continue to work closely with the Biden administration so that your interests and your concerns are addressed?

AL KHALIFA: Well, let me first start with building on what has already been said. In terms of the nuclear aspect, not only are we concerned about Iran's use of its nuclear capabilities for military purposes, it's also concerning to see what the environmental hazards might arise just because of the proximity of the Bushehr nuclear plant to Bahrain, and UAE, and Saudi. I mean, that nuclear power plant is closer to us than it says geographically to Tehran, and so the last thing we need in the region is another Chernobyl.

So there has to be some sort of oversight to the process that's going on in Iran, but also, we're here to address the other issues that have touched our communities as well. Take, for example, Iranian money-laundering efforts in countries like Bahrain, where we have confiscated a lot of material related to a bank that they have set up, and they used it to funnel money from Iran, through Bahrain and into Europe. I mean, we're talking about a whole list of activities that either

take advantage of some of the policies in the region where we're opening up, moving forward, and it's becoming more and more concerning. Cyberattacks are on the rise, we have seen that, and I think it's about time that we really address all what the regime is attacking with and just continuing on a policy that has worked for the past three years.

With Saudi Arabia, I think that I can speak for Bahrain, but with Saudi, we've obviously seen this struggle with the attacks that have been going on from the Houthis. We've obviously seen that connection there. The U.S.'s recent designation speaks volumes, and at the end of the day, I think what we have seen in the region in every country that has a problem, it rallies back to Iran. Whether it is the use of proxies in the region, whether it's the use of groups that they are ideologically aligned with, or groups that they don't necessarily see eye to eye on, on a number of issues, but then they will work with them to get to their goals.

And here I can say, Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Qaeda, Houthis, they have all played a part in destabilizing governments in the region, and it becomes more and more challenging when they have a financier like the Islamic Republic pushing them to do more and more.

DUBOWITZ: So, gentlemen, we've talked about different instruments of power and obviously maximum pressure, at least from a U.S. perspective, the tip of the spear was economic leverage, and the concern, obviously, with the return back to the JCPOA is lifting that leverage and giving the regime in Iran tens of billions of dollars to fund its destructive activities. The Abraham Accords seem to be a real opportunity for your countries to create economic leverage on your own, and in fact fundamentally put companies to a choice between doing business with Iran, or doing business with you, and all three of your countries, the Saudis, others in the region, there's tremendous economic opportunities. Do you see the Abraham Accords as providing an opportunity for your countries to exert your own leverage?

Even if you have a, let's say a U.S. Treasury Department that is not going to be as aggressive enforcing sanctions against the Islamic Republic? I'll ask you, Ron. I mean, I think you've given some serious thought to Israeli economic power and the importance of power, of Israeli power, in not only securing your state, but in laying the foundation for the Abraham Accords.

DERMER: Well, let me just – To think about the issue of sanctions, remember Mark, because you were heavily involved, and FDD, was heavily involved in this debate five years ago. And I don't want to re-litigate the whole debate, but it's important to look at things that were said that were completely proved to be completely false. One of the central arguments at the time in 2015, and also when the decision was made to withdraw from the nuclear deal, was that the entire edifice of international sanctions would collapse because if the U.S. were to do sanctions alone, unilaterally, it would not have the bite and the power that this multilateral sanction regime.

And I remember conversations with the most senior U.S. officials across the board, and I'm sure that Yousef can remember because he was in Washington at the time, "Look, if we don't do this deal, the whole sanctions regime is going to collapse," and the argument that I made also publicly then was, "Look, if you force countries to choose between a \$21 trillion U.S. economy and a \$400 billion Iranian economy, they're going to do business with the United States." And that is exactly what happened.

I mean, the U.S. economic pressure has been awesome. Now it's not perfect, it's not hermetic, it takes time to get that in motion, but it's been truly awesome. And it really didn't matter over the last few years what foreign officials of the EU and other bodies in Europe, when they were saying, "We're going to stay in the deal, we're wedded to the deal," but guess what, British airlines and French oil companies and German banks decided they don't want to be part of the deal because they don't want to be connected to it.

And so that power is still there. It's unilateral. You can't be so much in love with multilateral diplomacy, which is always better than unilateral diplomacy, but don't kid yourself, it's American economic power when you're actually forcing people to choose, that works. Now, you have an interesting idea. How can we leverage the alliance that we have, the new friendship that we had? And I know that's an interesting idea that we need to think through exactly how to do it. What I can tell you is, I think the marriage between Israel and our partners, and the Emiratis in Bahrain, when you combine the entrepreneurship they have with the innovation that we have, I mean, the sky's the limit.

And I think the best way for all of us to deal with Iran is from a position of strength. And there's no question that the Abraham Accords, in my view, not only strengthens Israel, I think it strengthens the Emirates, and I think it strengthens Bahrain, and I think that's very important moving forward, and that's why Iran was so concerned about it because they don't want to see any of our countries get strong, and the stronger we are, the more deterrence will work, and the more we'll be able to grapple with the broad range of threats that Iran poses. I think if we were able to do that together, I think we're going to be much more effective than doing it separately.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, no listen, I agree wholeheartedly, obviously, but I think that my concern, Ron, is that some of the folks that made that argument back in 2015 are now acknowledging they were wrong, and are now flipping the argument and saying that because the United States has tremendous leverage, unilateral secondary sanctions leverage, they can afford to go back in the JCPOA, give all of this money, relieve the sanctions. And then if Iran doesn't conclude JCPOA 2.0, then they're going to snap back all of the sanctions and take all the money away.

And I guess the concern I've got is that the reason it worked in 2018 to 2020 is because you had an administration prepared to go unilaterally. And that in the face of nuclear escalation, nuclear blackmail and extortion by Iran, was willing to face them down. I worry that subsequent administrations may not be willing to do that. And in fact, if anything, in the face of Iranian nuclear escalation today, you've got an incoming administration saying, "Wait a second, we don't want to escalate with Iran. So, we're going to go back in the JCPOA and lift all of the sanctions pressure." And I think, to Yousef, I wanted to sort of –

DERMER: Can I just say before that, I don't want to monopolize the time, but just one thing, Mark, it's important to understand, and I'm sure that Yousef and Abdulla agree with me. We are not a thought experiment on a whiteboard in a building in Washington. We are real countries with real peoples, and what you said is very interesting for a *Foreign Affairs* article, but we have a responsibility to protect and defend our citizens.

And what I can tell you, without any shred of a doubt, is that Israel is much safer today than it was four years ago. And I believe the Emirates are safer today than it was four years ago, and Bahrain is safer today. So, it's very nice that there are people, and I'm the bluntest of the three ambassadors, that want to maybe roll the dice and have a thought experiments so they can prove they're right or wrong at some cocktail party in Washington, but we're real nations with real peoples, and we have a responsibility to protect our security.

The last thing you want to do is remove all those pressures because we already saw what happened when you did. We already saw what happened between 2015 and 2017. The problem got worse. Abdulla spoke about it, and it wasn't just in Bahrain. It was every single country. So, when your allies in the region are telling you, "We are safer today than we were four years ago," why would you want to roll that dice? What is the rush to go into the deal? And the only argument that I've heard, I don't go to all those cocktail parties, but the only argument that I heard was, guess what? They're rushing to a bomb. They're enriching at 20%. Well guess what? There's a way that you can deal with that. You make a statement, a credible military threat, and you say, "We are not going to let you break out to a bomb." And yes, we spoke about the red

line, the Prime Minister put up that red line in 2012 at the United Nations, with the Wile E. Coyote bomb that he drew that red line is clear as can be. And what was the red line? It was that Iran would not have a bomb's worth of medium enrich uranium at 20%. And guess what? Iran, they were going vertical, closer and closer. They went for a few more weeks just to say they weren't deterred by what the Prime Minister put out and then they started moving horizontally under that line.

I have no doubt that if the president of the United States makes it clear privately, publicly to the Iranian regime, he will not allow them to break out to a bomb, they will not do it. And then you can allow that pressure and the leverage that Yousef was talking about to do its trick, try to get a common position with all of us and see if we can work out what he says is a bigger and better deal that actually solves the problem. And doesn't just pave a highway of gold for Iran to get a nuclear arsenal.

DUBOWITZ: So, Abdulla and Yousef, I want to go to you to respond to what Ron has laid out.

AL OTAIBA: Well, I think the best way to prevent a country that you have security concerns from about reaching an enrichment level that is dangerous and getting up to weapons grade is to not have an enrichment cycle. Hey, where can we find one of those models? Oh, I have no idea.

DUBOWITZ: Well, you raised this earlier and I think it's a profound point. I mean, you have the gold standard the UAE agreed to, and you have the Iran standard that in 2015, the United States conceded to. And you're sending out a very interesting message. You're sending out a message that if you're an ally, we don't trust you with a nuclear fuel cycle, but if you're an enemy and the leading state sponsor of terrorism, we do? And that obviously has some serious consequences for the question of nuclear proliferation, none of them in the Middle East, but in Northeast Asia and around the world.

AL OTAIBA: But I'm trying to set it as an objective, as a negotiating tactic, or at least as a way to get to a place where it makes all of us safer. Here in the region with all our partners, there is really no logic why your partners can have a program that doesn't have enrichment and reprocessing, but your adversaries do. And I think that's the message I want people to understand. We did this, so there can be a template or a model. So, when you negotiate with the Iranians, you want safe, secure nuclear power? Well, there's the model. That's how it works. That's why it's called the gold standard. And I think we have an opportunity to present that because again, of all the leverage that you have today.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I mean, I find it fascinating and interesting that your three countries are on the same page with respect to the fact that Iran should not get enrichment and reprocessing and that Iran should not – this regime should not have the ability to produce fissile material on its soil, where there are countries like the UAE and by the way, dozens of others who have peaceful civilian nuclear programs who buy their nuclear fuel from abroad and are not producing it on their soil. But somehow there should be this exception for the leading state sponsor of terrorism to have that fissile material.

AL OTAIBA: Yeah. I don't want to be speaking for both of my colleagues, but I think we're on the same page in that we want a deal. We want a bigger and better deal. We want a deal that is more durable and sustainable. We want a deal that ultimately allows us to live in peace. That allows us to live in stability. That allows us to benefit from the Abraham Accords and increase trade and investment and bilateral and technology and research. I mean, that's ultimately the spirit of the Abraham Accords. We want to benefit from it, but we want a deal that allows us to do that safely and without risks.

DUBOWITZ: Abdulla, let me ask you, because we certainly from this advance ,from discussions in Washington, from communications from your leaders, your three countries are clearly on the same page with respect to the threat from Iran. Let's talk about some of the other countries in the Gulf. So, recent moves towards some kind of reconciliation

with Qatar. Where do you see that evolving? Do you see Qatar becoming more on the same page or less on the same page with respect to the threat from Iran going forward?

AL KHALIFA: As a GCC and as a unit, we always wanted to work closer with one another. The whole idea behind building the GCC was to become stronger together, unify. Yes, countries will have their foreign policies that are a little bit different than others. I mean, the Omani's, for example, they have relations, they still do, with the Iranians, but that didn't mean that they would not be an active member of the GCC. But the issue with the Qataris in the past was a way that they work in parallel. And let's say, one where they are supportive of coalitions from within the GCC and at the same time, they would work with those on the other side. Now, today we're in a unique situation where right after the meeting in Al-Ula, statements were put out and we are very hopeful that the Qatari government will move towards a faster reconciliation with its neighbors and play a productive role in strengthening stability and security in the region.

That's what we have been doing time and time again. When you look at, for example, the International Maritime Security construct, a lot of people thought that it was put together to deter a certain country in the region. Whereas it was basically to make sure that the waterways are open for commerce, open for those to come in and out of the region. And so, I think what we are looking for in the region today, and specifically today in Bahrain we are celebrating the "day of diplomacy." And the slogan that we have chosen is peace because we would like to see peace in the region as a whole. All these initiatives have brought us to a point where we have shown that peace is achievable if you're on the right side. And going back to your question with the Qataris, I think that it's important for them to reassess their relationships and to play a more productive role in strengthening the security and stability of the region as a whole.

DUBOWITZ: And Yousef, I'd love you to weigh in as well on this question of Qatar and Iran and also Turkey. I mean, it seems like in recent weeks that Erdogan has been making some overtures to Israel and to Saudi Arabia in particular; he seems to have some serious concerns about the new administration and the bipartisan opposition to Erdogan's behavior in Congress. Do you see the possibility of a new posture from Doha and Ankara with respect to Iran, or is it going to be sort of same old, same old?

AL OTAIBA: So, I think the truth is it's too early to tell. I think we just signed the reconciliation, the GCC reconciliation deal on January 5th. So, just about 10 days ago. I think it's a good first step. It's a promising first step. It addresses some of the operational issues like travel and visas and things like that and shipping, but we still haven't addressed the fundamental issues that caused the rift, support for the Muslim brotherhood and other groups, relationships with Iran and Turkey. That is the next step, resolving what caused the problem in the first place is ultimately what we want to reach to. Right now, it's like a couple who just decided to get back together for the sake of the kids, but we really haven't worked out the issues yet. We hope to work them out, but the final decision ultimately comes down to Qatar and it's very simple.

Is Qatar's relationship with the GCC partners, with the UAE and Saudi and Bahrain and Egypt and others, is that more important? Is that the priority? Or is its relationship with Turkey and Iran the priority? And I can't answer that question. They have to answer it, but that's ultimately what really led to the rift. We're trying to reconcile, we're trying to fix our problems like Sheikh Abdulla said. We're all about peace and de-escalation, but the countries have a decision to make and they need to decide, which is more important for them. Is it us? Is it our team or is it the other team?

DUBOWITZ: So Ron, both Abdulla and Yousef have talked about peace, their vision for peace in the region. We're all old enough to have lived through and remember the Arab-Israeli conflict. It seems from my vantage point that the Arab-Israeli conflict is winding down. And in fact, there may not be an Arab-Israeli conflict, God willing, in a few years. Is that your perception from Jerusalem? And if so, what are the consequences for that, with respect to this coalition against Iran?

DERMER: Well, I said soon after the breakthrough, the first breakthrough with the Emirates, and then it was followed subsequently about a month later with a breakthrough with Bahrain that we could look back at 2020 as the beginning of the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict. And since then you had Sudan and of course, Morocco, and others. And I have no doubt, by the way, that if the incoming administration pursues similar policies, obviously there's going to be a change between this administration and that administration. But, if the basic policy, which I think is confront Iran, embrace your allies in the region and leave a door open to peace with the Palestinians, but don't give them a veto over this entire region. If they pursue that policy, you will have others. And we could look back at this moment in time as being the beginning of the end. And that is certainly our hope.

What also gives me hope is to see the response to the breakthrough, which was very different than response to the breakthrough that happened 40 years ago was Sadat because when Sadat made his gesture, which is an act of remarkable courage, physical courage, political courage with breakthrough and going to Jerusalem and ultimately signing the peace agreement with us in 1979, that was rejected by every Arab state in the region, by Arab peoples throughout the region, Egypt was thrown out of the Arab league, and Sadat ultimately paid for that peace with his life. Even though he received pretty big concessions from Israel at the time in the Sinai, which is about three times the size of Israel. Now, fast forward 40 years when Sheikh Mohammed takes a courageous decision and breaks through towards peace, making peace with Israel. How did Arab governments in the region respond to it?

Several of them openly supported it. Others were silent about it and you know how to read the tea leaves in the Middle East or the coffee grinds. I don't know what's the right analogy. But, the silence also speaks volumes as well. And there were very few players who were opposed to it. In fact, Yousef and Abdulla were talking about that. It was the Palestinians were opposed to it, simply because they wanted to continue to veto. Not because this wasn't a concern of either the Emirates or Bahrain to ensure that the Palestinians we could move forward in peace with them. They just want it to have that veto power. Iran was totally opposed to it because the last thing they want is for us to be together and all our countries to be stronger. The Qataris were opposed to it. And the Turks were opposed to it.

And if memory serves, it's not that long ago, it's about five months ago, the Turks were threatening to remove their ambassador from the Emirates. Now here's a news flash to people on this call. Turkey and Israel, we have embassies in each other's countries for decades. They were actually the first Muslim country to have diplomatic relations with us. So that idea was, it was almost wild when I saw it at the time. And my hope is that the response, I think, tells you a lot about what is happening in the Middle East. The response, not of the governments, but also the peoples. And we could see that this peace that is emerging is not simply a peace between the top down of Sheikh Mohammed and King Hamad. It is also from the bottom up, you see it percolating among the people.

I mean, we might have a situation Mark, that there may be more Jewish weddings in Dubai and Abu Dhabi than they're going to be, I don't know if it's in Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York. I mean, you can see that there is a genuine warmth and a willingness to embrace this peace. And we had high hopes, I can tell you I had high hopes, but it's even exceeded my high expectations. And we have a little side bet, Yousef and I about the number of Israelis who are going to go post COVID, we're setting the over-under, we're in super bowl season now, but the over-under is a million. If anyone on the call wants to take bets. I think it's going to go over a million and it's going to be hard to find an Israeli in two, three, four years that had not visited the Emirates or Bahrain.

Be hard to find them. You're really going to have to look in the recesses of distant towns to find somebody who didn't make that trip. And I think that bodes very well, the embrace of this peace, not just from the top down, but from the bottom up. And I also hope that it will lead to a change in the peace that we have, the current peace we have with

Egypt in Jordan, which has been, unfortunately, a cold peace, which is certainly better than a hot war, but we would like to see a warming of that peace. And there have been forces in those countries, political, economic, and cultural who have militated against peace. I don't see those forces in either the Emirates or Bahrain. I see forces trying to encourage peace. And if we can prove, and this is really, I mean, we started this process, let's say and our leaders gave us the backing in order to achieve these breakthroughs because, without their confidence in us, none of this would've happened.

But now that we have that breakthrough, we have to ensure that it's a success. We have to ensure that everybody in the region knows that this peace is a huge success, that it actually strengthens all of our countries. People invest into success and success breeds more success. I knew exactly five Chicago Cubs fans five years ago. And then all of a sudden, the Cubs win the World Series and they all, they're like mushrooms all over the country. When we turn this peace into a winner, you're going to see more and more countries follow. And I was encouraged and I'm sure my counterparts were as well. That one of the rare moments and maybe the only moment during the campaign, which was very heated and very polarized and American politics obviously is hugely polarized today.

A singular moment of consensus was the Abraham Accords, where statements were made by then-candidate Biden, and soon-to-be President Biden and candidate Harris, and soon-to-be Vice President Harris that they supported this and they're looking to build on it. So, we were very encouraged by that and we hope we can continue to expand the peace outward to deepen the current peace that we have and ultimately to lead to peace between Israelis and Palestinians as well. Because I think the old approach was, let's get the Israeli-Palestinian peace fixed, and then Israel will have peace with 21, 22 Arab states.

And that was almost tautological. Yes, that's true, if we could do that, but what if we do it the other way around? What if we can first end the Arab-Israeli conflict and then see the momentum behind that, the tailwind that that provides to then engage the Palestinians to empower those moderates among the Palestinians who actually would like to reach a historic compromise with us, to empower them and to marginalize those extremists, whether it's Hamas or other terror factions to marginalize them and say, "Guys, you know what? The Arab world and the Muslim world is not behind you. Yes, they want you to have a better future. Yes, they want you to have self-determination, but they want you to reach a historic compromise." And I think when we all stand together, it sends a very powerful message. And one last thing, which is a – Because I know this is a short answer to a long question, but one last thing, one thing I didn't anticipate, I'm not so sure if Yousef and Abdulla are aware of it, but I've seen this happen now in Israel, the impact that this is having on our Israeli-Arab population.

The dream of Israel's founders was that the Israeli-Arab population, our Arab citizens of Israel would be a bridge between Israel and the Arab world. And it didn't work out that way for various different reasons. But right now, there is great excitement among the 20% of our population who are Israeli-Arabs, because now they're traveling to the Gulf. They're coming back. There is a tremendous excitement there. So not only are the Abraham Accords leading to greater coexistence between Israel and Arab states beyond our borders, it's actually leading to greater coexistence between Arabs and Jews within our borders. And I think that is a great blessing. Something I didn't anticipate, but it's happening and it's gaining steam.

DUBOWITZ: Well, Ron, thank you. I mean, listen, that would actually be a great note to end on, but I don't want to quite end on it yet, but the –

DERMER: You've got to end on something pessimistic, I hear you.

DUBOWITZ: Always, in Washington, always. No, I actually, I think there's also another note of optimism that really builds on this, but I want to bring Abdulla and Yousef into the conversation on this because, you can sense Ron's enthusiasm, his passion. I mean, this sort of vision for what the Middle East could look like and what his country could

look like in terms of the relationships between Jews and Arabs inside Israel. Are you sensing the same level of excitement and enthusiasm in your own countries? And Yousef, if you want to go next.

AL OTAIBA: So, one of the more memorable, I got so many messages and photos and tweets and things that were sent to me in the aftermath of the Abraham Accords that were all positive and exciting and people being hopeful. But the one I really remember was a young Emirati friend of mine from Dubai, a big businessman in Dubai, but he was young, flying to Israel in his Arabic traditional clothes, not in jeans and a t-shirt, in his Arabic clothes and a mask on taking selfies of himself at Ben Gurion Airport. So, there's just, there's a lot of excitement about discovering this country that for most of people's lives was told it was taboo. "You can't go there. You're not allowed to talk to them. It's a bad country. We don't like them." And all of a sudden, all these taboos are gone.

People can travel. People can invest, people can trade, people can research. To me, the most exciting part about this whole thing is not just the jobs that are going to be created or the technology that is going to be unleashed or the research that is going to be done together. I think just on a very basic human level. If people look at each other with a little more understanding, a little more tolerance and respect and get to know each other, get to understand each other. And I say this from a very personal note because I was born and raised in Egypt and all of us basically grew up programmed that Israel is the enemy. Egypt has a lot of wars with Israel. They've had land issues. There was a fight over the Sinai. There's just bad blood. We don't have that in the Emirates.

And so, my 10-year-old son is going to grow up fundamentally different than how I grew up. He's going to grow up thinking it's totally normal to go visit Israel. He's going to grow up thinking it's totally normal to do an investment deal with Israelis, which is very different than how I grew up. To me, and again, maybe it's the personal aspect of how I grew up, to me that's the most important part.

We are a country that is really, really invested and focused on the future. We want to make our country better, stronger, safer. We want to create jobs. We want to create prosperity. We want people to feel safe. We think that the Abraham Accords are going to be a very big part of that. And so, the way I would define or describe the Middle East is you have countries like ours, who are focused on the future, and we're all going towards the future. And you have a group of countries that are really preoccupied with their past and they kept focus and they keep focusing on the past. That's really the major fault line I see in the region today, the forward-looking countries versus the backward-looking countries. And I'm still going to make sure we end up on that positive note.

DUBOWITZ: Well, listen, I think that's exactly right. And Abdulla, I mean, I'd love you to comment on the reaction in Bahrain, but also to sort of bring it back to the topic du jour, which is Iran. And I mean, the sense that you've got a regime that is a regime of the past, and yet you've got tens of millions of Iranians who want to be part of the modern world, who I'm sure would love to interact with their Israeli counterparts, Iranians who obviously, there are a lot of Iranians who are in the UAE. There are some Iranians that are in Bahrain. Some of them who are doing positive things, some of who are doing less than positive things, but in your sort of vision of the Abraham Accords and the opportunities. I mean, do you see one day an opportunity to bring Iranians and their dreams and their aspirations into this Accord?

AL KHALIFA: Look, Mark, I think that first of all, the Accords itself has been built on a foundation of opportunities, hope, positivity. When we look at the ways in which governments can improve the quality of life for its peoples, and you look at untapped potential, this is one of them. And that's why I think there's a lot of appetite to see those MOUs move forward and to see the people come together and to see businessmen meet with one another and work with one

another. It might not come as a surprise for many on the call today that the three countries that are actually leading the charge on vaccines per population are Israel, UAE, and Bahrain. Imagine how much work can be done just sharing information then moving forward. And so, I think that the Accords were built with a lot of positivity in them.

We've always said time and time again, that the Iranian people deserve that same quality of life that people are enjoying in other parts of the world and in other countries and regions as well. So, I think it depends on where they want to go, what they want to do, but we have always been open, Bahrain has been an island. We have people coming in and out for ages and we will continue to be the way that we always are. It's going to be interesting to see what effects might come out of the shift in mindset that my colleagues were talking about, what opportunities that might be unlocked because of where we're headed. And I'm pretty sure that the Iranian people will also one day want to also have a quality of life that's similar to ours.

DUBOWITZ: Well, it's amazing, you brought up the issue of COVID vaccination. So, while Israel, the UAE and Bahrain are leading the world in per capita vaccination campaigns, and really showing, leading the way, working very closely with Pfizer and Moderna and other pharmaceutical companies, the Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei, has banned Iranians from accessing these vaccines, claiming that this is some kind of "U.S., Zionist plot" to infect the Iranians. So, it's just remarkable to see your three countries moving ahead in health and science and cooperation for peace and stability and Ali Khamenei really inflicting tremendous damage on his own people by denying them access to these vaccines.

DERMER: Mark, the fissure, as Yousef said before, the fissure in our region is not between Jews and Arabs. It's not between Shia and Sunni. It's between the forces of modernity and the forces of medievalist. And all three of us represent countries that would like to move into the modern world and to advance our societies. And there were other forces in the region and the Supreme Leader of Iran is one of them, is not interested in modernity. It wants to actually pull us back, and I completely agree with it. And when the forces of modernity stand together, I think it's great, a great blessing for the region and pushes back against those forces that they would like to draw the region backward into time.

And that's what makes it so exciting about this new process, because it was happening underneath the surface. For several years it was happening on the surface, but now in surfacing it, I think we're in a completely different new reality in the Middle East. And we'll hopefully attract other people to allow this to move forward. So, I said the other week that we're the "vaccination nation," but now I hear that the race is on. So, we'll have to see who gets to get the title of the "vaccination nation," but it's pretty good that on one call, we've got the gold, the silver, and the bronze, we'll just have to figure out who stands where, so that's a competition that to be in the top three is not bad either.

DUBOWITZ: I actually think that's a great note to end on. I want to just say that it's on a personal level, it's been an honor to know you three, to count you as good friends and to see the incredible changes that you as individuals have affected for the region, for your people, for the United States. The three of you deserve tremendous credit for these historical changes. Obviously, you've also got leaders who had the vision and the insight to understand that this was the way forward and to give you the running room to do so, but these would not have happened, these Accords would not have happened without Abdulla, Yousef, and Ron. So, thank you. Thank you for all you've done for the United States, for the region, for the world. And thanks for joining us on this discussion. We look forward to more discussions in the future.