



MAY: Here's a riddle for you. Name something presidents Obama, Trump and Biden have in common? I'll give you one answer. None has appeared to understand the theological premises that motivates such groups as al-Qaeda, the Taliban and the Islamic State, nor those that drive the rulers of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Nor have they had clarity about the thinking of those brave Muslims who oppose such interpretations of Islam.

I'm looking forward to discussing these and related issues with three eminent scholars. Gilles Kepel has authored more than 20 academic books, like *Temporary Islam*, *The Arab World* and *Muslims in Europe*, translated into numerous languages. A tenured professor at Paris Sciences et Lettres University, his latest essay, *The Prophet and the Pandemic / From the Middle East to Atmospheric Jihadism*, just released in French, has topped the bestseller list and is currently being translated into English and a half dozen other languages. An excerpt, *The Murder of Samuel Paty*, is in the spring issue of *Liberties Journal*.

Bernard Haykel is a Professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. His research focuses on the political and social tensions that arise from questions about religious identity and authority with a particular emphasis on Islam, history, and the countries of the Arabian peninsula. His books include *Saudi Arabia in Transition* and *Revival and Reform in Islam*.

And Reuel Marc Gerecht, a disciple of the late, great Bernard Lewis, is a former Middle Eastern specialist at the CIA's Directorate of Operations and currently is a senior fellow at FDD.

I'm Cliff May and I'm glad you're with us too, here on *Foreign Policy*.

Okay, I'm going to start with a very wide aperture. Almost 20 years ago, when the attacks of 9/11 were carried out, what was your reaction then as scholars of Islam and the Middle East? Maybe Bernard, tell us first, did you think, "Yep. I knew this was coming," or "Oh my God, there were policies that we could have taken that would have prevented this," or was it something else entirely?

HAYKEL: No, I mean, firstly, thank you for having me. I was in New York at the time, and I witnessed the attacks live and when they did happen, I felt that, yes, this was a bit of *déjà vu* all over again, in the sense that A, I had thought that they would try again to attack those buildings as they had done earlier and that this was going to be a spectacular victory for them, at least symbolically a victory.

So, it was deeply disappointing in particular because if you remember, President George W. Bush, had been elected and came to office in January of that year, and much of the conversation until 9/11 was about the threat from space and how we had to resume satellites and that sort of thing. There was no attention at all given to political Islam and Islamist and jihadist movements.

Moreover, also in the intelligence community, there was a very strong emphasis on diminishing human intelligence and relying much more on technology. All of which I thought would be disastrous for the United States.

MAY: Gilles, same question.

KEPEL: Well, actually a few years before 9/11, I had spent a year in New York as a visiting professor and much to my dismay, no one was interested in anything Islamic at the time anymore. No one was learning Arabic, and this was



perceived as the issue was settled. There had been peace between Israel and Egypt and who cared? I was worried that no one was really interested in what was happening in the Middle East at the time.

No one was reading the books, and no one took the ideology of Islamists seriously. When 9/11 happened I was in Paris and at the time, we were not really concerned from Europe because al-Qaeda had focused on America, what they called the far away enemy – *aleaduu baeidan*.

But then ISIS would come, and ISIS would stop focusing on America because it was too far away actually, and they would focus on Europe and then we would be in the middle of the thing.

MAY: Go ahead, Reuel. A few words on this?

GERECHT: Yeah, I mean, I was wandering around Yemen and Afghanistan before 9/11–

MAY: In the CIA at this point?

GERECHT: No, I was out. I was working for *Talk Magazine* and for *60 minutes*. I was trying to smuggle clandestine cameras into Bin Laden's bases north of Kabul. That was an unsuccessful mission on my part. But it became clear to me, certainly as I was wandering around the battlefields outside of the Panjshir Valley and Massoud, the great Tajik leader, had just pushed back an offensive by the Taliban, they were going through all their ruined buildings.

And it was clear to me just by the graffiti that you could see everywhere a brotherhood between al-Qaeda and the Taliban, that we were just waiting for another hit. That it was going to come and that those two forces were joined at the hip. It is a bit amusing that certain senior U.S. officials today who do have a personal memory of that time are now telling us that there is a split between al-Qaeda and the Taliban, which I find mysterious because the Taliban are about ready to be victorious. I mean, they are going to kick the Americans out of Afghanistan. So, I think it's going to be a triumphant moment for them.

MAY: Let's focus on that for a second because Bernard, you also said that 9/11 was a spectacular victory for al-Qaeda. Based on what Reuel is saying, based on my reading, when we have the 20th anniversary of 9/11 in September, which date for some reason that I find totally mysterious, President Biden says that's the day all American troops will be out. That will be seen as another spectacular victory for al-Qaeda and for the Taliban. Is there any question that that's simply the truth of the situation? Bernard, start on it but I want to hear all of you on this.

HAYKEL: Yeah. I mean, it is absolutely the truth, and you have to remember that al-Qaeda's boast is that they defeated the Soviets with the Mujahideen. And so, one empire was defeated in Afghanistan in '88, '89, and now you see 20 years after the Americans are in or they're going to be defeated again. And that's how it's going to be marketed and framed.

Also, I think, just to pick up on what Reuel was saying, is that al-Qaeda formally acknowledges the leader of the Taliban as their commander of the faithful. I mean, he is the equivalent of their Kalif. So theologically and also politically, they are structurally tied to the Taliban. They can't be seen as an entirely separate movement. So, I'm not sure whether the Americans understand this, but they should.



MAY: Yeah, I guess I'll go to you again, Gilles on this, because it just strikes me as astonishing that somebody in the Biden administration, one of his advisors, didn't say to him, "Look, if you're going to get out, you're going to get out. I understand. The last thing you want to do is have it coincide with the 20th anniversary because that just reinforces that after 20 years we've wavered, we've failed and al-Qaeda, as well as the Taliban, have defeated the United States just as they defeated the Soviet Union. By the way, not just coincidentally, two years later, the Soviet Union was to collapse."

KEPEL: Well, al-Qaeda and the Taliban are exactly the same thing because al-Qaeda is not there anymore. Zawahiri is in retirement someplace and no one cares about him anymore. The Taliban are an indigenous Afghan Islamist and Jihadi movement, and this is another issue. Now, whether there's going to be a U.S. marine who's going to wrap the U.S. banner under his shoulder and get in the last helicopter from Kabul. I mean, sort of reminding people of what happened in Saigon in 1975 is really an issue.

But I believe that the Biden administration, for what I understand from old Europe, as they said, is that Biden's Middle East policy is aiming at having a global deal with Iran and fixing it all so that they consider that the Afghanistan issue is not going to be very important. The fact that there's a U.S. pull out from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover will not be used by the Russians, by the Turks, by the Iranians for their own benefit. This is the big issue, the big sort of Catch 22 of the Biden administration policy in the Middle East today and as of now, we do not know what is to happen.

GERECHT: I would just add on that, I mean, there've been three administrations in a row that have dreamed of walking away from the Middle East, either to pivot to Asia or just to leave the Muslims be and the Middle East, the greater Middle East has a way of pulling us back. So, I mean, I do remember personally watching the Afghan operations and the Afghan task force shrink to nothingness inside of the Central Intelligence Agency and everybody saying it didn't really matter. I just suspect that it might matter, and I also think on al-Qaeda, as an institution and an organization, if you can think of something that could possibly resuscitate it and give it a bit of a spree is the Americans pulling out of Afghanistan.

If then, the Americans completely fail to support the opposition to the Pashtuns, to the Taliban. If they fail to support the Uzbeks, they fail to support the Tajiks, they fail to support the Shiite Hazara. The triumph of the Taliban I think, is inevitable because the Pakistanis aren't going to stop supporting them.

So, it's a recipe for a mess. I think the Biden administration possibly might pull back just because of the visuals that you just alluded to of Vietnam and Saigon. Such a thing is conceivable in Kabul, perhaps not immediately, but certainly in the not-too-distant future.

MAY: Reuel, I want to just keep with you one second on this, because General Petraeus, who was, among other things, head of the CIA for a time, opposes this pullout. Again, he's not saying we should have 100,000 or 150,000 troops again, we have 2,500 now. I think he'd say what you want to have is a platform there to hold Kabul and the provincial capitals. The Taliban is in the countryside, but it doesn't hold any major urban areas and it can be prevented with a relatively small force, we believe, from doing that.

But also, because he would say, or Petraeus has said, having a forward deployed platform in Afghanistan is useful for that purpose so that the Taliban doesn't completely take over. So that al-Qaeda doesn't have a large area in which to train and plan and all that. So, we haven't been entirely defeated, maybe at somewhat of a stalemate.



But also, a platform because there are more than 20 other jihadist organizations in that part of the Indo-Pacific region. Most of those organizations, you guys know well, most Americans haven't heard the names of what they are. Some are based in Pakistan, some are based elsewhere, but if you're going to suppress them in any way rather than let them flourish, you can't do that from Fort Benning and Fort Bragg. You need to be closer to the action for the purpose of gathering intelligence and then hitting them where they are while they're plotting and planning and not letting them be comfortable. It's a long question, Reuel but—

GERECHT: I mean, I would just say something quickly, then I'd pass to Gilles and Bernard on this. I mean, I think the Americans, or at least the Biden administration, is dreaming of going into a European mode of counterterrorism. That is where the emphasis is put on defense, not offense. I mean, now obviously the French do reach out a bit and touch folks, but not nearly—

to the extent that the Americans have. I think that's where they want to go. They want to test to see whether the defensive counterintelligence, which of course costs a lot less, can provide sufficient results in that the damage that we might sustain from terrorist attacks is bearable. So, I think that's where they're headed, and we'll have to see whether it works or not.

MAY: Yeah. Gilles, Bernard, want to chime in on that? Or if not, I've got plenty more things to talk about.

HAYKEL: I mean, Biden in his speech, if you listen carefully to his speech to Congress just a couple days ago, mentioned that there's always going to be an "over the horizon" American capability. I'm not sure what he means by that, and what in practice that would entail. I mean, presumably drone strikes, but I'm not sure that's going to stop the Taliban from taking over. Of the other groups that you mentioned, the Islamic State is also in Afghanistan. It's not just al-Qaeda. So, we'll see. I mean, this could be a replay. We'll see. Of course, we also have another player here that wasn't around in as big a way, and that's China. — that is. And China — in Pakistan, as you know, with the Belt and Road and essentially turning Pakistan into a client state against India, and for projection into the Indian Ocean. I imagine the Chinese will have their own views and plans for Afghanistan. That's something I cannot really talk about because I'm not a China expert, but I imagine that's an element also to factor in.

MAY: Another area where jihadists are likely to be encouraged by this, and they're likely to be encouraged, I think as you said Reuel, anywhere in the world, but might be also in West Africa where the French have been doing a reasonable job it seems to me. Gilles, you can correct me if I'm wrong, of suppressing the various Jihadi groups. But what hurts them is they've got about 5,000 troops in the Sahel region. Their headquarters are in N'Djamena, which is the capital of Chad. The person they've been relying on has been the president of Chad for something like 30 years, Idriss Déby. Which, a little digression. Interesting enough, I knew when he was a young officer back in 1983, I went out into the contested regions of Northeastern Chad with him and his troops to where they wanted to show journalists, which is what I was at the time, that they were fighting a real war against Libyan-backed forces.

Now Macron, Emmanuel Macron, President of France, was the only Western leader who went to Idriss Déby's funeral. I think there's a danger that if Chad melts down, which it absolutely could after his death, Idriss Déby has been the main supporter of French policy and French action in the Middle East, where these 5,000 French troops are based. By the way, people don't know this, but there's about 1,000 American troops in about 10 different bases in various places in West Africa, also supporting this effort and supporting such things as drones. You talk about drones, it's hard to do drones from very far away, you need the intelligence if you're going to target with any precision. Gilles, you want to talk a little bit about France and West Africa and what's going on there?



KEPEL: Well, actually, France had to go to Mali because after Gaddafi, then a number of Gaddafi's mercenaries who had looted his huge arsenals in Libya, and his mercenaries were mainly from Sub-Saharan Africa, went back home. Many of them had embraced the jihadist ideology and then they attacked Northern Mali, and then Timbuktu and other places started to fall. So then Hollande had to finish the job that Sarkozy and Cameron started in Libya with Obama "leading from behind", as the famous phrase goes and then send the Foreign Legion. So, this was a harsh battle. The jihadists were repelled, and the integrity of Mali was restored. But nevertheless, it's an enemy which starts again all the time. It is extremely tiring. This is something that has to do with the security of Europe as a whole.

The French are very much alone there. I mean, there is American help in terms of refueling and everything, but this is an issue where Reuel mentioned the difference between offensive and defensive action. In terms of jihadism, the French have been on the offensive in Mali and fortunately it went well for some time, but then just like Afghanistan, you have to deal with a corrupt state and corrupt institutions. Therefore, this is not giving the results that you expect. Now, I wanted to follow up on that because you mentioned that Macron went to Idriss Déby's funeral. On his way back, he had to deal with the latest jihadist – The day he was coming back, with the latest jihadist attack in France. We had three people who were stabbed to death, one who was decapitated, a teacher, a middle school teacher, Samuel Paty last October and something that developed into a new form of jihadism.

On the weekend that Macron came back from Chad, we had another guy, a Tunisian who had come to France 10 years ago as an undocumented immigrant, who then got his papers. A few months later decided to stab this poor lady who was working as a clerk at a police precinct in the outskirts of Paris. Now, this is a new issue in terms of jihadism, of the threat that we're facing. Like when we mentioned the Taliban or al-Qaeda or ISIS, they were organizations that were different. I mean, al-Qaeda was a sort of pyramidal, top-down organization. ISIS was more of a network-based, bottom-up system. Now we're facing a threat which is much more significant and much more difficult to deal with, which is what I called atmospheric or atmosphere jihadism. On the one hand, we have what we call here entrepreneurs of roth, or entrepreneurs of rage who flood the internet with attacks, slander against bad Muslims, against infidels and the like. They don't ask those people to be killed, but they target them.

Then you have other people who have been socialized in the jihadist milieu or not, who went to some radical mosque, or we don't know. Then suddenly they take it on themselves to implement what they think is the death penalty that those people deserve. Then we have a major problem here, because usually the intelligence agencies, when they catch someone, they search his phone and then they try to see who gave the orders, and whatever. They try to identify the whole network. Now we have jihadism without a network. We have this atmosphere, it's a sort of viral phenomenon. So, the COVID-19 of jihadism, if you want. It's the atmospheric contamination. How do we face this issue? This is what President Macron tried to do with his famous, or infamous depending how you see it, speech on October 2nd on Islam is separatism that was attacked by Erdogan and the others and dubbed as Islamophobic. [the speech] Which actually focused on whether there is a culture, a subculture if you want, of a break away from Western society. It's –

GERECHT: Gilles, can I ask you a question there? And the question also goes to Bernard on this. Do you think, for example, that Saudi Arabia's efforts, MBS' efforts to diminish Saudi support for Wahhabism abroad is going to have any significant impact on jihadism that we see in Europe or elsewhere? Are we beyond that now, that actually Saudi efforts, though very important about for generating Wahhabism's growth, that Saudi efforts now are largely irrelevant to the way this plays out?

HAYKEL: So first, there's no question that the Saudis are no longer in the business of spending money on the promotion of Salafism or Wahhabism. Or frankly, any form of Islam. They are, MBS in particular, and I know this just



from India, for instance. Where a number of Indians who in the past would have received money to build mosques or to build madrasas and schools, and that sort of thing, come up high and dry. I mean, whenever they ask the Saudis for money through the embassy, for instance, they will be given nothing. What the Saudis have spent in India, again, for instance, is on building a hospital, or a wing of a hospital, but they won't put any more money in Islam. I think there will be a long-term effect for that, for stopping that kind of funding.

But you have to remember that slack has been taken up largely by Qatar and by Turkey. This comes out very nicely in Gilles's book and also in the essay that came out in *Liberties*, where he shows that the Turks are very, very engaged and active in spreading, not necessarily Salafism, but certainly a form of muscular Islamism that also has violence embedded in it, or at least the potential for violence embedded in it. So, in other words, the Cold War context in which the Saudis were spending money on promoting Islam as an ideology, as a political ideology against communism and against leftist Arab nationalism, that's gone. It will have an effect, because there's less money in it.

But that said, there's still some money in it, there's still some state patronage coming from other sources and until and unless we end all of that, you will not see as serious decline in Islamism. Because there are careers to be made still in Islamism, and that has to stop. I think states and private funding of that kind of effort has to be seriously, not just regulated, but stopped.

GERECHT: I mean, it doesn't take a lot of money, does it? Or because, I mean, certainly institutionally. I mean, al-Qaeda was getting along with a pretty shoestring budget. I mean, after they failed to take down the USS Sullivans in Yemen, they sank their own skiff. They actually went and lifted the skiff out of the water in port because they didn't have enough money to buy another engine, and so they knew we get it back.

HAYKEL: You're right in the sense, I mean, when we were talking about specific terrorist organizations, definitely al-Qaeda allegedly spent only \$500,000 on the 9/11 attacks, and they got a tremendous return on their investment. I'm talking more about the atmospheric jihadism that Gilles mentions. Because, again, if you look at Gilles's work, you see that there's agency, there are individuals, mosques, institutions, and networks. It also involves building all of that infrastructure, that's human as well as institutional. I think for that you do need funding, and you do need state sponsorship and support.

KEPEL: You know, if you look at what happened this summer, because of COVID-19 the Saudis decided they would not have the worldwide hatch or pilgrimage. So, there are no photos to be shown about the strength of Islam, two million, 2.5 million people gathered together. The Saudis did that also because also they wanted to show that we're good pupils of the World Health Organization, but because they had seen what happened in Iran before where the Mullahs could not afford to not to allow people to go to the pilgrimage or the shrines of the saints, and whatever, because they depend on it particularly. That made of Iran a super cluster of COVID. So, what happened? This created of vacuum, the fact that there was no other pilgrimage, and this is the time when Erdogan decided to re-Islamize—

Saint Sophia or Hagia Sophia on the 24th of July. There you had the new caliph. You had the new guy who said, just like Khomeini did in 1989 after the infamous Valentine's Day fatwa of the 14th of February 1989, "Hey, I am the one. I'm the herald and the hero of the Muslim world. The Saudis actually don't deliver. I'm the new guy." In Europe, we're particularly worried by the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood are now, most of them are in Turkey, refugees from Egypt and everywhere.



In that, there is a European policy of Turkey, in order to send Muslim Brothers to control mosques in Europe, in Germany, in France, in the Netherlands, and the like. There is a lot of worry about that. This is where things are changing. The Saudis or the Saudi government definitely is not interested in that. Mohammed bin Salman is not into that anymore, whatever one thinks of him at the end of the day.

Then there is another thing which is boosting political Islam, and political Islam which is not necessarily jihadi, but which is part and parcel of the atmospherics. Like, for instance, I had the possibility, I had the chance to look at the Facebook wall of the last murderer in France, the Tunisian guy who stabbed this clerk in Rambouillet, in the outskirts of Paris in the police precinct. It goes back to 2011. He was a Tunisian, and he praises Ennahda in Tunisia, he praises the political Islam parties, what we call the Islamo-leftist groups in France. He praises Erdogan a lot.

There is nothing violent in it. There is no ideology. He doesn't say, "We have to stab so and so." Then those atmospherics are set in place, and then the guy stops communicating and goes and stabs the lady, and while he is listening to a nasheed in his earphones, and the like. This is the challenge we're facing now. We're facing a new dimension of jihadism, which is not based on the old organization of yesteryear, like we had with al-Qaeda which was a sort of Leninist jihadism, if you wish. It was centralized and whatever.

Then you had this network-based thing which was ISIS. Now we have another type of challenge. Europe definitely is being the first place where this is being experimented. I believe that America is going to be targeted in the near future. This is something you have to prepare for. Now, to go back to the beginning of our conversation, if America is perceived as weakened, as being expelled from Afghanistan, this is, of course, going to boost the morale of all those guys. Not only of the jihadists in general, but all these atmospherics of jihadism. This is a major issue.

I wonder whether the present administration has taken that into consideration. Everything probably depends on how they will bring Iran back into the international community. If they manage to convince the Iranians they cannot play the Afghan card against them, and, after all, the Taliban just hate the Shias even more than they hate Americans maybe. This is quite unpredictable. This is part and parcel of what 2020, in a way, meant in the region.

It's sort of reshuffled the deck of cards, and this is what we as scholars of the region have to understand in-depth, I believe.

MAY: Reuel, it's my impression, and I think it's yours, that the Islamic Republic of Iran, the rulers of Iran are no less Islamist and, in a sense, no less jihadist than al-Qaeda or the Taliban or ISIS. They know better which fork to use at restaurants in Vienna, and how to order. There is a difference, I guess, between Samuel Paty, who you wrote about, Gilles, in that marvelous article in *Liberties*, which was based on a larger essay on atmospheric jihadism that you've written, who was killed by a Chechen-born Frenchman. I guess, one might say, for having insulted Islam by running a class and teaching about free expression, and saying, "I'm going to show some cartoons of Mohammed, but anybody who's offended please leave the room. That's just fine. No problem."

That wasn't okay. He was saying, "You're not allowed to do this." In a way is he not, Reuel, a descendant of Ayatollah Khomeini who in 1989 said, "Salman Rushdie's book insults Islam and he should be killed. His translators should be killed. His publishers should be killed?" This was an attempt, in other words, to enforce Islamic law in other countries. You talk about this, but this is certainly what is happening, and you described it, Gilles, in France. You talk a little bit about Macron trying to push back, because I think Macron sees where this is going, where Islamic law according to radicals is going to be established in France, and schoolteachers will not say what they're not allowed to say at risk of death.



GERECHT: I was just rereading Foreign Minister Zarif's memoir, which regrettably I don't think that many people have read, and I –

MAY: I'm waiting for the movie myself.

GERECHT: I know. I am waiting for the movie. He's gotten a little portly. I'm not sure which actor should play him.

MAY: Brad Pitt.

GERECHT: Well, he's going to have to get rid of those tummy muscles. I was just noting, I mean I think he's actually being fairly honest. With all Iranian writing, you always have to know what part's true and what part's mendacious. I think Zarif is actually being honest, and that's why the supreme leader has repeatedly protected him from his critics, when he talks about the Islamic Republic having two missions.

One is national welfare, but as important, and in fact Zarif says it's more important, is to support the ideological religious movement, the revolution of the Islamic Republic. Iranians have much greater ambitions than a group like al-Qaeda does. They're not the same. The Iranians have a civilization behind them. They have extraordinary hubris too. What they're aiming for is of a simply different league. That's one of the reasons they have a nuclear program, which, as we all know, is pretty bloody advanced.

I think with the Biden administration, I don't think they have any grand ambitions about integrating Iran into a more "normal" network. I think Obama did. I think that was shot to hell by what happened in Syria, and that is the area that I think most of the Obama administration officials who are now senior Biden administration officials actually feel somewhat guilty about.

I think we're looking at a straight-out transaction here. The Iranians are going to successfully extort the Americans out of billions and billions of dollars. I think all the Biden administration wants is for this to get off the front burner for X period. Whether they get a nuke down the road, that just simply isn't the primary concern. What is the primary concern is that they don't have to stare at a situation where enrichment goes to 60%.

I think that's all they're focusing on. I don't think they're focusing on any of that. I think the Democratic Party is addicted to arms control. I think that the thinking about this ideologically, religiously just isn't something they do. To the extent that they do it, they want to believe that the Islamic Republic has run out of gas.

HAYKEL: I'd like to tie a few of the strands here. Look, even if you cut a deal with the Iranians, you still have to have a legitimizing ideology, worldview or perspective to make sense of it, and to justify it. I think what normally happens, at least in the United States, I'm not sure if this is true in France, is that we have our filters. We try to justify our behavior based on these filters. In the case of, for instance, the neocons when it came to Iraq, we thought of freedom.

We were coming at Iraq in the same way we thought of Poland, or the Czech Republic, or Slovakia, that these were people that were oppressed, and they would rise up, and they would side with the West, because they wanted freedom, just like any human being does. That became the ideology that legitimized the invasion in 2003.

I think the Obama people and the Biden people come at Islamism, whether it's of the Iranian type or of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sunni variety, they basically conflate Islamism with leftist ideologies and leftist movements. They basically



think of Islamists as Third World revolutionary types who are really only about social justice, about getting rid of the colonial burden, and that Islamists as leftists don't actually have their own substantive and normative commitments that are rooted in a particular interpretation of Islam.

In other words, because the Islamic stuff in the Iranian rhetoric or in the Muslim Brotherhood rhetoric is difficult to understand, it's difficult to really make sense of, they just get lumped as leftist. Therefore, we can understand them. We can even sympathize with them and support them, which is what I think a lot of people in the Biden administration feel when they think of Iran. They don't see the Islamic and Islamist dimension of this country and its project. They just see it as a Third World leftist revolutionary movement, no different from the FLN in Algeria back in the old days.

I think that blinker, that filter blinds us from seeing this other Islamist dimension. Also, at the same time, it legitimizes and justifies why we can cut a deal with them.

MAY: There's at least one other subject I want to make sure we have time to, and that's the Abraham Accords. A couple of reasons for that. One is, Bernard, that couldn't have happened without the Saudis saying, "Go ahead and do that, Bahrain and UAE. That's just fine." I could be wrong about this, but when I've talked to the Saudis, not to mention Bahrainis and Emiratis, I've had a very strong sense that they don't really hate Israelis. They don't. They see Israel as standing up to an existential enemy in Tehran.

At the same time, when Israelis look at what the Biden administration appears to want to do, which is to go back into the JCPOA, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action as it's called, which will, I think we all agree, gives Iran's rulers what we call at FDD a "patient pathway" towards the acquisition of nuclear weaponry. They think. "we cannot rely on the U.S. We have to defend ourselves, and we have to figure out what that means and take action. We can't just sit around."

Let me just ask you, Bernard, do you agree with me on how I see the Saudis in regard to Israel, the Abraham Accords and Iran? By the way, throwing this in too, very recently and I think as a result of the Biden administration's maneuvers with Iran, you're seeing a more open attitude, let me say, on the part of the Saudis towards Iran. They're looking to see, it would appear, if they can hedge their bets a little bit. What do you make of it? What do you make of Saudi's calculations and Israel's calculations regarding Iran?

HAYKEL: Look, to be fair I think that a lot of ordinary Saudis, the Saudi population still is very antagonistic when it comes to Israel and feel for the Palestinians. Maybe that's not the case with some of the elites. Let me give you the bigger, broader context. The way to understand Saudi Arabia is to make an analogy. You have a 55-year-old obese human being who has been told they're going to die of a heart attack in five years if they don't radically change the way they live.

Saudi Arabia is confronted with a reality that unless domestically the country really radically diversifies and moves away from oil it is going to hit a wall at 120 miles an hour and going to implode, and the regime will not survive. The regime is operating in this survival mode that, I have to radically transform everything and every way in which I've operated in order to survive. If that means making peace with Israel, or changing my attitude towards Iran, or whatever, we will do it."

I think it is a kind of desperation, and this is true also for the smaller countries, including the UAE, that they realize that the runway with oil is getting shorter and shorter, and they have to build up their own human capital, their internal capacities and their military capabilities, because America may not be there.



But whatever the case is, they're not going to survive if they don't change. That is what's driving, I think, the Abraham Accords, and also much else besides in their behavior.

KEPEL: I would like to follow up on what Bernie just said, because why is it that they sign, the Abraham -- not the Saudis, for reasons that we shall discuss in a minute, but why did the UAE and the others sign Abraham Accords in 2020?

Those of us who traveled through the region know that, for instance, in the Emirates, since, a number of years, they had conferences where you had Israeli ministers online from occupied Jerusalem, who would deliver a speech. They would say, "Okay guys, we had our differences, but now let's wrap it up, and we have a common enemy, Iran or Iran." But they would not make it public.

Why is it that this suddenly took place into 2020? I believe that just like Bernard just said, and I would like to follow up on that, they were conscious that the Aramco oil model was a catastrophe that would destroy society. It would destroy the regime. It will unsettle the regime. But they know they were in a wait-and-see attitude. As long as oil money was coming, why bother, after all? They knew that it would happen someday, but not tomorrow.

Now, 2020 sent a shockwave, suddenly because of COVID-19 and because of Russia that said, "We're going to boost production, oil production, at the OPEC-plus meeting in Vienna on the 6th of March, so that we're going to throw -- Push the Shell or U.S. producers out of the way. They thought, okay, oil would be a weapon in their arms again. Now suddenly the oil barrel price came down to minus \$35, \$30 something in April.

With that, I believe that they knew that they could not procrastinate anymore, that this was time for action. Now they had to engage. They had to deal with the new post-oil policy and their view was that, after all, when you deal with renewables, when you deal with green hydrogen, when you deal with whatever, the issue for them was that they should still be leading and not become like Spain became after they exhausted the gold rent from South America and the country went into decay.

So, as they still have some money, they have sovereign funds, particularly the Emirates, we should now invest in the technologies of the future. Let's benefit from oil as much as we can, but we have now to make the step, the big step forward.

Who has the technology in the Middle East, particularly as Bernard said the U.S. is unpredictable, and why should we trust the Americans? This sends us back to what we started our conversation with, I mean, the Afghans trusted the Americans. They're going to be killed, or they're going to be going to exile.

Now we should make a deal with the Israelis because the Israelis have the technology. They stood up to their enemies and we can make a deal. This is going to save our regimes. This is going to save the Saudi system. This is going to save the Emirati system. This is the big challenge, and this is quite a pace they have been taking. Now, how does Iran fit into the picture, is the big question mark?

As you have noticed under the auspices of Mr. Kazemi, the Saudis and the Iranians started to talk a few days ago. To what extent are the Saudis and the Gulf Arabs ready to be part and parcel of the global deal with Iran? Do they believe that Iran is weakened to a point, due to the sanctions, due to the pandemic, that they will have to come to terms? There's talk, there's Zarif and there's the Pasdaran as Reuel just mentioned.



But on the ground, the Iranians do not fare very well. So, do they have a choice? I believe that there's a trend to a much more real political, realistic politics in the way of the Gulf Arabs, further away from ideology than was the case before.

GERECHT: I mean, I just wanted to add one quick thing and that is, I think the pivotal agreement here is American weakness. Now, whether that is a reality or whether it's because the Americans wish to be weakened, we can have a debate about that, but I think that is the pivotal factor. In 2019, the Iranians let loose with cruise missiles and drones against the oil facilities of Abqaiq and Khurais. We did absolutely nothing and the American hegemonic position in the Persian Gulf I think ended at that moment. I think that was a huge factor for the Saudis, for the Emiratis, everybody in the Gulf, of reorienting their strategic calculations.

I also think to compliment that, the Israelis have been blowing to pieces the Revolutionary Guard Corps in Syria. For the last three years, they've been really pounding them. Foreign Minister Zarif might not have known it, but everybody else did. And they fundamentally change the calculations of the Revolutionary Guard Corps and how they deploy in Syria. Everybody pays attention to that, that here you have one power, obviously nowhere near the strength of the United States, which is demonstrating that malpolitik actually does have a profound effect on the Islamic Republic. Then on the other hand, you have the Americans who just seem to be wanting to retrench throughout the region. It's inevitable that the Israelis are going to rise.

Now whether the Gulf Arab states actually look at Israel as a possible savior, that I don't know. If I had to bet, I would say that MBS actually, because nothing either, after they blew up – Damaged the oil facilities. I would bet that he goes belly up, that he is unwilling to take on the Iranians in any measurable way, and that he'll depend upon others to do that. But a head on confrontation, I suspect he believes the regime, the Saudi family could not withstand that confrontation. I suspect he might be right if he thinks that way.

MAY: This may be my last question because we're running out of time, but Bernard, the Biden administration seems quite a bit less friendly to the Saudis than the Trump administration was. I wonder when the Biden administration is making these kinds of decisions about the Saudis or deciding that the Houthis don't need to be designated any longer as terrorists, and if we do that, I'm sure there'll be very appreciative, and it will change the behavior. But then I'd come to someone like you, who has studied this for years, and say, "Here's what we're thinking. You want to give us some advice." Or are they just kind of flying by the seat of their pants?

HAYKEL: I mean, look, they have not come to me, but I do respect some of the people that are there, like Tim Lenderking.

GERECHT: A very good man, very good.

HAYKEL: A good man. I should say, I think that the way the Biden administration dealt with MBS and with Saudi Arabia was basically to, I think, throw to their own base, their domestic base, a base that basically wanted to have MBS sanctioned. The administration decided, "No, that's not going to happen because the relationship with Saudi Arabia is just simply too important, and this man is likely to be the king for the next 50 years. We're not going to ruin our relationship with that country because of that." I think they made the right determination. They came to the right conclusion that Saudi Arabia is simply too important.



I think MBS understands that and is willing to go along. So far, they haven't really ruptured the relationship in any kind of a serious way. In fact, I think what they're trying to do is to build up institutional connections between the Saudis, the intelligence services, the energy ministry, et cetera, between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. I think that's very good. In fact, I think that the highly personalized relationship that President Trump had developed with MBS was not necessarily good either for the U.S. or for Saudi Arabia.

On how they've managed the Saudis, I think I would give them pretty good points, a pretty high score. I think, though, the Yemen situation is a real problem for them, because they thought that it would be easily solved by just simply putting pressure on Saudi Arabia, not realizing that in fact a full-blown civil war had been before the Saudis got involved, and it's not likely to end even if the Saudis end their involvement in Yemen, which is unlikely to happen. So, it's a good dose of reality for the Biden administration.

MAY: Well, look in partial summary, I'm just going to say, I think it's clear and I think disappointing that so many of America's political leadership doesn't understand either the challenge or the threat of jihadism, either in its most primitive and violent expressions with al-Qaeda and the Taliban, or with the more sophisticated Khomeinist model. But I do think our listeners understand a little bit better based on this conversation. So, with that, let me say, thanks Gilles, thanks Bernard, and thanks Reuel. Thanks to all of you for being with us here on *Foreign Policy*.