

MAY: Hello and thank you for joining us today. I'm Cliff May, FDD's Founder and President. We're pleased to have you joining us today for an event to mark the release of my colleague, Jonathan Schanzer's excellent new book, *Gaza Conflict 2021: Hamas, Israel and Eleven Days of War*. It remains the first and the only book on this topic.

Many describe the May conflict as an expression of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but that's not exactly right. More accurately, Gaza has become ground zero in a proxy war between Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The 2021 conflict, instigated by Tehran-backed terrorists firing over 4,000 missiles at Israeli cities, towns, and villages, was the latest installment in a longer and larger conflict, one that we should expect to continue for many years to come.

As talks in Vienna continue over Iran's nuclear weapons program, it's timely and essential to look back and reexamine Tehran's role in fueling terrorism in Gaza and other theaters with the benefit of a little hindsight and with the fog of war somewhat clearer. It's also essential to look at how the war started, who was involved, and what was misunderstood or misreported at the time.

With that, I am pleased to formally introduce my colleague, Dr. Jonathan Schanzer. He's Senior Vice President for Research at FDD, and he's a groundbreaking scholar of Middle Eastern affairs. He previously worked as a Terrorism Finance Analyst at the U.S. Department of Treasury, where he played an integral role in the designation of numerous terrorist financiers. His latest book is the fourth he's published.

I'm also very glad we have a first-rate journalist here to lead today's discussion, Catherine Herridge, a Senior Investigative Correspondent at *CBS News*. She's had a long and impressive career covering national security and intelligence issues. She's reported from nearly a dozen countries, including Israel, Qatar, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

As many tuning in know, FDD is about 20 years old. We are a nonpartisan research institution, exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. FDD is a source of timely research, analysis, and policy options. We host three centers on American power in the areas of military, economics, and cyber, which urge the use of all instruments of American leverage to strengthen American national security. We recently also launched our Barish Center on Media Integrity to address the national security threats posed by misinformation campaigns, disinformation campaigns – there's a difference, and influence operations. We take no government or foreign corporate funding, and we never will.

For more information on our work, we encourage you visit our website, just [FDD.org](https://www.fdd.org). You can follow us on Twitter. On Twitter, it's @FDD.

So, thank you again for joining us for this important and timely conversation. Catherine, I'm pleased to turn the floor over to you.

HERRIDGE: Thank you very much for the introduction. Congratulations on the book, Jonathan.

SCHANZER: Thank you.

HERRIDGE: Let's start with the most basic question. Why did you write the book?

SCHANZER: It's a good question. I obviously watched the outbreak of the war in May of last year and thanks to the available technology, which has really evolved over the last several years, I was able to watch almost the entire thing on Middle Eastern news channels. So, I watched several Israeli channels as well as Arabic channels. The more I watched, the

more I realized that there was a huge disconnect between the American reporting, what we were getting here from our news television channels, but also what was being reported on Twitter. Even print journalism, which generally has the ability to wait a beat before coming out with the story, I felt like there was a huge gap.

So, when the war was over, I took a weekend to relax. When I got back to work, I realized that I wasn't quite done with the war and I set about writing the first draft of the book, which was about 120 pages. I wrote it in eight days. And then from there –

HERRIDGE: Oh, eight days.

SCHANZER: In eight days. The first 120 pages.

HERRIDGE: All day, all night, or –

SCHANZER: All day, all night. Told the family to leave me alone and –

HERRIDGE: You closed the door.

SCHANZER: Exactly. Exactly. Turned up the music and tried to just stay focused. Admittedly, there were a lot of pieces that I had written already about Hamas in the past, so there was a lot of historical information that I could bring to bear from previous pieces and previous books, for that matter.

But after I was done with that draft, I took a trip to Israel and went there for 10 days. It was right before the outbreak of the Delta variant. So when I arrived, nobody was wearing masks, and everybody was just allowing for all sorts of public meetings. By the time I left, I felt very lucky that I was able to get those meetings in because the country was shutting down again.

But I came home and really spent a lot of time integrating those interviews into the work that I had already written, and then spent a good bit of time editing. And the end result was going from ceasefire to bookshelf in 166 days.

HERRIDGE: That's very quick.

SCHANZER: It was. I don't think it's a publishing record, but certainly, it was one for me.

HERRIDGE: So just set the scene for us. You're watching this conflict unfold. Are you in your study and you've got different TV screens up? Is that how you –

SCHANZER: That's exactly right. So I'm watching on TV. I've got my laptop up, I've got my phone out, and I'm watching all three at the same time. Apple TV is a remarkable technology to be able to watch on the big screen, two Israeli channels, and a large number of Arabic channels. So, I'm flipping back and forth between these, and I'm watching the coverage at home, and I'm thinking something needs to be written about the gap and that's ultimately what drove the project.

HERRIDGE: So, tell us more about the gap. You're watching this conflict unfold in real time, and you're saying to yourself, "why do I feel like I'm watching a conflict through a certain lens on this channel, and then I'm seeing and hearing something, is that what was happening, completely different on another channel?"

SCHANZER: No, absolutely. Part of it was the description in our media that this was yet another round of Arab-Israeli violence. When in fact, what we've seen over the last several years is that the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors is shrinking, right? We've seen four different peace agreements emerge and kind of an overall normalization effort that's underway, still underway today.

HERRIDGE: Within the context, though, of recent history when you talk about [Israeli-Arab] normalization.

SCHANZER: Absolutely. So, the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, Morocco, they all normalized with Israel in 2020 and that continued into 2021. In fact, one could argue, as I did in the book, that the war was actually a stress test for Israel and its new peace partners. In fact, they got through the test and they're stronger for it now that the war is over, but that's not what was being reported.

There were also, I think, a lot of people who were framing this as a Palestinian-Israeli issue, which of course one can certainly make that argument. The fight between the Palestinians and Israelis persists. However, I think it's important to note that the fighting was in Gaza, and the rulers of Gaza are Hamas. Hamas is a terrorist group that is funded and backed by Iran.

HERRIDGE: So, let's just sort of set the table for our viewers who may not know who all the players were during that period. So, let's start with Hamas. What is Hamas? How does it operate? Where does the money come from?

SCHANZER: Sure. So, Hamas is a designated terrorist organization, designated here by our Treasury and State departments. They've been carrying out attacks, gruesome acts of violence against Israel since the late 1980s, since the outbreak of what was called the First Intifada. This was an organic Palestinian uprising against the Israelis. The organization has really made a name for itself by carrying out suicide bombings, firing rockets blindly into Israel, and digging tunnels designed to be commando attacks. They are funded in large part by the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism.

Now, this doesn't mean that there weren't organic reasons for these groups to want to tangle with Israel, but the support that they get from the likes of Iran is really hard to ignore at this point.

HERRIDGE: So let's talk about those two points. First of all, let's address what would the organic reasons be, and number two, what would Iran's objective be for financing Hamas?

SCHANZER: Sure. Well, the organic reasons are quite simple. It's a conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis. It's a clash of nationalism that dates back to 1948, if not before, when Israel was created. So there have been different iterations of groups that have tried to undermine or destroy Israel over the years. Hamas is one of many and so they certainly have their own reasons for wanting to war against Israel. But with the help of Iran, their abilities skyrocketed.

Of course, Iran has been, since the 1979 revolution that brought the Islamic Republic to power in that country, they have really –they've made it their primary goal. Other than just simply regime survival, one of their primary goals is the destruction of the State of Israel, and they enlist terrorist groups to help them in that regard. So, Hezbollah is another group that you've probably heard of in Lebanon. That's another group that's on the Iranian payroll. There's [Palestinian] Islamic Jihad, which also operates out of the Gaza Strip. Then there are Shiite militias in places like Iraq and Syria. There's Houthis in Yemen. All of these groups are part of a constellation of Iranian support.

HERRIDGE: That's about this Iranian influence, what they call sort of that crescent, right?

SCHANZER: Correct. So, the crescent stretches primarily from Western Iran through Iraq into Syria, into Lebanon, and we could probably also include the Gaza Strip into that sphere of influence.

HERRIDGE: Okay. So, in the late spring of 2021, what tangible resources was Iran providing to Hamas, based on your reporting?

SCHANZER: So, it's actually a great question that has a somewhat more complex answer than I think most people –

HERRIDGE: Always, right?

SCHANZER: Always, right.

HERRIDGE: No more nuance.

SCHANZER: Yeah. So, there were those that said there were no Iranian fingerprints on this war because there was nothing that you could see where Iran had just only recently provided X amount of dollars or X amount of weapons. We did see some variance of rockets that we could trace directly back to Tehran, primarily fired by the Islamic Jihad organization, not by Hamas. But when we look at the sheer number of rockets that Hamas had it in its possession, which is about 15,000 –

HERRIDGE: 15,000.

SCHANZER: Yes. When we looked at the number of drones that they had, and I don't know if there was an official count, but we saw dozens of them deployed during the war, underwater drones as well. In addition, we saw tunnels that had been built under the Gaza Strip – commando tunnels, with the intent of having commandos pop up and kill Israeli soldiers or to drag them into the tunnels in order to kidnap them. All of this was done with Iranian assistance over the course of decades.

SCHANZER: And so there is that old adage, “you give a man a fish and he'll come back the next day and ask for another. But if you teach a man to fish, he'll feed himself for the rest of his life.” The Iranians have, in essence, taught Hamas how to fish, and they've been doing it since the late 1980s. And so there didn't need to be direct fingerprints on this war for us to see the vast influence of the Iranians.

HERRIDGE: So, you're saying it's a historical –historical support is what it came down to.

SCHANZER: Absolutely. Dating back to the late 1980s, training, funding, arming, every kind of assistance that you could –

HERRIDGE: But not a specific shipment of weapons or artillery.

SCHANZER: Correct.

HERRIDGE: Okay.

SCHANZER: I think everybody would be hard pressed to say, well, this one thing, "well this one thing happened." But I think you could actually see at the end of the war, and even during the war, where Iranian regime officials were bragging about the help that they provided to Hamas and were sort of crowing about it. Talking about how this wouldn't have happened were it not for Iranian support.

HERRIDGE: Almost the sharing of a tradecraft?

SCHANZER: Correct. Yeah.

HERRIDGE: Okay. Okay. So, Hamas, Iran, the IDF. What is the IDF? What was its functional role during this conflict?

SCHANZER: Sure. So, the IDF is the Israel Defense Force. This is an army, a professional army. Arguably the most advanced army in the Middle East.

HERRIDGE: How big is it?

SCHANZER: It's several hundred thousand [forces]. It's not massive and it's –

HERRIDGE: But it's massive considering the population of Israel, right?

SCHANZER: Yes, you're looking at a population of nine million people and it's a tiny country. This is smaller than the state of New Jersey, but this is an army that unfortunately, and Israeli military officials will sort of joke about this, that they've got a lot of practice. Too much practice, in terms of going to war because this just – In terms of Gaza conflicts alone this is the fourth since 2009, so every couple of years they go back to it again. Hamas –

HERRIDGE: We're going to talk about the pattern in just a minute-

SCHANZER: Absolutely, but Hamas knows that they're sparking a war with an advanced military that has been collecting intelligence and preparing for these conflicts. I think they handled themselves well. We can talk about where they didn't and where they did, but ultimately it was a frustrating war, I think, for the IDF because even though they probably achieved all their military objectives Hamas still rules the Gaza Strip today. We now see ourselves set up for another round, the fifth Gaza war certainly looms large right now.

HERRIDGE: So just briefly what would you say they did well and where did they fail or not perform adequately?

SCHANZER: They did well in terms of targeting the Hamas elements that they knew they were going to hit well in advance. They'd been collecting intelligence. They did so with precision munitions. They're very surgical in the way that they strike. The total number of casualties was somewhere in the vicinity of 250 over 11 days of war with a massive amount of ordnance. So, you could get a sense of the care in which they conducted this war, but they perennially do a horrific job of explaining what they're doing in real time. Most of the time the IDF likes to bare its teeth at other potential enemies that may be considering joining the war. In other words, they're very fearful of a two or three-front war and that is certainly possible in an area where they're surrounded by enemies. So they, I think, did a rather horrific job, as usual, of explaining what they were doing and why they were doing it. Hamas takes advantage of this and so does Iran as they allege war crimes, and other horrific things that I don't – I saw no evidence that the Israelis were responsible for.

HERRIDGE: So, in this particular case there's the importance of a settlement or sort of like a housing development, or project. What's it called and what's the backstory there?

SCHANZER: So, this is – It's an interesting story. The way that this all erupted there were a lot of stories in the press, and even to this day we still hear about this one neighborhood, it's called Sheikh Jarrah. It is in East Jerusalem. If you've been to Israel, you've been to the Old City, it's right outside of the Damascus Gate. It's right near the American Colony Hotel and actually near the Palestinian Consulate.

HERRIDGE: How big is it?

SCHANZER: It's a very small neighborhood. I mean, it's tiny. As the entire country is.

HERRIDGE: Like several blocks or –

SCHANZER: It's a few blocks.

HERRIDGE: Okay.

SCHANZER: A few square blocks. We're not talking about –

HERRIDGE: A little patch of real estate. Okay.

SCHANZER: Exactly. There were homes that were potentially set to be evacuated, pursuant to an Israeli legal ruling. Now the story actually goes back almost 100 years, where Jews bought this territory before the creation of the State of Israel. Then during the 1948 War of Independence it was taken over by the Jordanians. The Israelis won it back in 1967 and then a legal process began, where the families tried to regain control of this real estate. It's dragged on for decades now.

It was really remarkable to me to watch the coverage of this particular neighborhood because we saw often in our press, that people were saying that it was the cause of the war. As I note in the book real estate disputes especially ones that are being adjudicated in a legitimate legal process, they don't cause wars. Guns cause wars, rockets cause wars, explosions cause wars. This was one political issue, maybe even a commercial issue –that was being hammered out in a legitimate process. So, the idea, and we still hear it today, that Sheikh Jarrah caused the war was very curious to me and I think really represented a certain lazy level of analysis that persists in –I don't think it's only the Arab-Israeli conflict but certainly we see it a lot in this space.

HERRIDGE: So, when you say lazy analysis, your view –I'm not trying to put words in your mouth, but your view is that this was used as sort of the wedge issue here or as a sort of the spark on the fire. Is that right? There was something bigger going on here?

SCHANZER: There was absolutely something –

HERRIDGE: Okay.

SCHANZER: –bigger going on. I mean, you could look at any number of things that were happening at the time. It was Ramadan and it was Jerusalem Day. These are all emotional moments in the Middle East, but the biggest thing for

me, actually was that the month before the Palestinians were slated to have elections. Now the Palestinians, without getting into all the details, they'd been in a state of civil war since 2007. There was a really bitter split between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority or the PLO. In fact, there is actually a territorial divide between the Palestinians. People don't really ever think about this, but Hamas controls the Gaza Strip, which it won in a war in 2007, and the PLO has clung to power in the West Bank.

There was going to be an attempt to bring the two parties together again through elections. It was a dangerous gambit by the Biden administration and by the Palestinians themselves because if Hamas were to win there were all sorts of complications that would arise. It would prompt a cutoff in political relations with the United States. It would prompt a cutoff in funding. By the way, these are all rules that have been put in place by a guy you may have heard of named Senator Joe Biden. So, there was this moment where the Israelis, pragmatic Arab states, and the United States finally prevailed upon the Palestinian Authority to cancel those elections. Hamas was furious and in my view, it was looking for an opportunity to reassert itself politically among the Palestinians – sort of within the political system –

HERRIDGE: There was a political undercurrent here as well.

SCHANZER: Absolutely. And that, I think, was really the driver for Hamas, in terms of deciding to launch the fifth round of war with Israel. They were –

HERRIDGE: To reassert itself?

SCHANZER: Absolutely.

HERRIDGE: Okay.

SCHANZER: To regain the hearts and minds of the Palestinians. In fact, even to this day we see efforts undertaken by the Israelis and by the Biden administration to try to strengthen the Palestinian Authority again.

HERRIDGE: Is it just a Biden administration question or did we see something similar under previous administrations?

SCHANZER: Oh this has been – since 2007 there has been this tug of war between the PLO and Hamas. We've been looking for ways to strengthen the PA at the expense of Hamas. Every couple of years Hamas wages war again and draws attention to itself, and it purports to be the liberator of Palestine, if you will, and that resonates.

HERRIDGE: So, this is really an issue that multiple administrations have had to deal with, Republicans and Democrats? Okay.

SCHANZER: Absolutely.

HERRIDGE: Okay. So, in May of 2021 it officially becomes a conflict. I guess I can't think of better words for it. What was that moment where it crossed that threshold?

SCHANZER: Sure. It's actually interesting, the Israelis won't call it a war. They call it an operation. They try to make a difference between –

HERRIDGE: So, what's the difference?

SCHANZER: Well, they basically try to tell their population, "If it's a war you'll really know it." This is a small, localized conflict in one small area. I mean, the Gaza Strip, most people don't realize this, it's about the size of Washington D.C. –a population of about two million people. It's a tiny, localized conflict. It still is painful for the Israelis. They're getting 4,000 rockets fired upon their cities and towns but –

HERRIDGE: Was that the red line? Was that the red line that was crossed where it became an operation, in the Israelis' terms?

SCHANZER: The way that I would describe it is the Israelis almost –weekly, monthly they're absorbing the occasional one-off rocket. It happens all the time. The red line is usually multiple rockets fired and usually it is they're fired in salvos at either Jerusalem or the most populated area of Israel, which is that slim waistline around the Tel Aviv area between the West Bank and the Mediterranean. But once a certain number have been fired or the target is deemed too sensitive that's usually when the Israelis start to fire back, and we begin to–

HERRIDGE: And what would be a sensitive target?

SCHANZER: Again, populated areas.

HERRIDGE: Okay.

SCHANZER: The capital. These are things –actually it's a source of frustration for a lot of Israelis. You see rockets fired in the environs just outside of the Gaza Strip, Israel will simply try to knock those down with its air defense system known as Iron Dome. Then it's back to business as usual, but if you fire into these metropolitan areas well that's when the Israelis begin to respond. It's actually a source of anger for those in that immediate area–

HERRIDGE: Sure.

SCHANZER: right outside of the Gaza strip.

HERRIDGE: So how many rockets are we talking about? I mean, like what was the moment where it crossed that line and –

SCHANZER: So, the first couple of salvos were I think, more than a hundred, which was actually the largest salvo, I think to date, fired by Hamas. The first salvos were fired into the environs of Jerusalem. Again, this was an attempt, I think, by Hamas to say, "Look, we see what's going on in Sheikh Jarrah, we see what's going on with Ramadan and the restrictions that the Israelis have placed on Palestinians wanting to pray at the Al-Aqsa Mosque. We're now firing on Jerusalem to demonstrate our solidarity with the cause." But once you start to do that that is going to trigger an Israeli response, so the Israelis knock down the rockets and then start firing back at Hamas and the escalation of this fourth round of conflict begins.

HERRIDGE: So, what does the escalation look like?

SCHANZER: It's actually fairly formulaic. Hamas fires these rockets, they are all unguided. So, they don't know exactly where they're going to land. Which, by the way, I would just note is technically a war crime. The Israelis do what

they always do, which is they knock down the vast majority of those rockets with Iron Dome. This is a system that's been around since – I think it was 2007 when it was first introduced. Iron Dome is really – I mean, it's almost magical in the way that it protects the citizens of Israel. By the way, in turn also protects the Palestinians because really what it does is by knocking down these rockets it ensures that the conflict doesn't spiral out of control. It keeps it contained. It allows the Israelis to kind of breathe and take a beat before deciding how they're going to respond to each salvo. But –

HERRIDGE: How does it work, just sort of technologically?

SCHANZER: So, they track a rocket that's coming out of the Gaza Strip. They look at the speed, they look at the height, they look at the trajectory, and then they either decide they're going to target it because it's going to land somewhere that is sensitive or concerning or if it's going to land in empty desert, they just let it go. It's remarkable that it works in both ways. There's something like a 90% to 95% success ratio, but even as that's happening the Israelis are now targeting what is known as their target bank. These are targets that they've collected over the last several years. In this case since 2014, since the last major round of conflict with Hamas. So, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of targets associated with Hamas that they begin to dismantle, surgically, with really precise munitions. But then we start to see this back and forth with rockets exploding in the sky as a result of the Iron Dome system, things exploding inside of the Gaza Strip, an occasional rocket getting through inside Israel. It looked very chaotic as –

HERRIDGE: Let me just ask you, when you're talking about surgical strikes, you're talking about taking out operatives, right?

SCHANZER: Yes. Or sometimes specific –

HERRIDGE: Or bomb-making factories or –

SCHANZER: Correct.

HERRIDGE: or things like this?

SCHANZER: Correct.

HERRIDGE: Okay. Well, what about the argument that they're kind of playing judge, jury, and executioner, in this particular case, without some due process?

SCHANZER: Well they are. I mean, in the sense that any country that is waging war will be doing the same. I don't think anyone asked the United States for permission as we targeted al-Qaeda or ISIS in Iraq, or Syria. You know, we have a system. The question is – is that system legitimate? In the case of the United States and the Israelis, and a number of other professional militaries, they identify those targets and then they adjudicate them internally. So, Israel's Ministry of Justice will adjudicate these targets, as will IDF lawyers and others involved in that system, the Shin Bet – the internal security services as well. So, they look at the intelligence, they look at the veracity of it. They try to determine how trustworthy it is. Then they look for the right moments to minimize casualties and to minimize collateral damage. So, the Israelis are, again, unfortunately very practiced at this. I think the record shows that they minimize casualties significantly. Of course, this is a densely populated area and there will be mistakes. There will be collateral damage. It will always happen that way.

HERRIDGE: Do they do a good job addressing the mistakes?

SCHANZER: I think so. I think they will often hold tribunals after the fact to determine whether there were serious mistakes made –serious errors in judgment. Sometimes holding soldiers accountable. However, I would say that when one looks at the fog of war, when looks at the fast pace of how all of this happens, one does get a sense that the Israelis are not interested in trying to placate its critics –

After the fact, what they will do is they will dig in and say, “We had every right to defend ourselves because this is an Iran-backed terrorist group attacking us. Look at what we did in real time. Look at how we minimized casualties. We don’t need to answer to you.”

HERRIDGE: Before we talk about how this escalated over that nearly two-week period, let’s talk about the pattern because you’ve alluded to that several times. So, what is the pattern and based on your reporting, what do you see as the role of Iran in driving that pattern?

SCHANZER: Sure. So, start now. We just ended a conflict last year. Right now, Iran is helping Hamas rebuild and replenish its rocket supply. That is happening as we speak, whether that’s through help in engineering, whether it’s smuggling parts of rockets or whole rocket systems. That is happening right now. There are Hamas commandos that are training in Tehran. There’s money that is flowing. There is any amount of assistance that we could expect here. The rebuilding of tunnels, for example. Israel is watching this activity because remember this is a territory that is small. It is identifiable for Israel. There are borders to it and they’ve got incredible intelligence, whether it’s human assets, they’ve got satellites that pass over the area. They’re watching and they’re collecting targets. They’re adjudicating those targets as we discussed. Then there will be moments where rockets will fire. Israel will determine whether or not it’s going to respond. When there are enough, when the intended targets are serious enough there’s a red line.

HERRIDGE: This line is crossed right? What’s in it for Iran to instigate in your view, these conflicts every few years? It sounds like we’re looking at something like this every few years.

SCHANZER: Yeah. Well, first of all, it keeps the fire burning, which is in Iran’s interest. They want to try to whip up anger against Israel across the region. Again, I think we see it subsiding in the Arab world, but it’s still there thanks to Iran’s efforts. There is a strong sense among Israelis that I’ve talked to that Iran would like to see how Israel responds to certain kinds of rockets, variants, certain salvos – large numbers and small numbers. They want to see if they can overwhelm the Iron Dome system. They want to test the system for weaknesses.

HERRIDGE: Well, it’s an intelligence gathering opportunity as well.

SCHANZER: Correct, but it’s done at the expense of two million people living in the Gaza Strip who may not want this war to begin with.

HERRIDGE: Mhm, I see.

But nonetheless, Hamas is very willing to do it. They know they’re going to lose, by the way. The likelihood of a ragtag terrorist organization that gets assistance from Iran overpowering a regional military that is operating with precision-guided munitions, F-16s, and Apache helicopters, it’s really almost impossible for them.

HERRIDGE: It's really a David and Goliath situation.

SCHANZER: Exactly. And so, there is no chance, really. I mean, there's less than 1% chance that they're going to emerge victorious from these things, but there is a messaging component to this. There's a PR component for Hamas and then there's this intelligence gathering operation. All of these things appear to be worthwhile for Hamas. I've got to say, I doubt that the people of Gaza agree.

HERRIDGE: Okay. So, let's talk about this escalation in May of 2021. What are the events that really stand out to you in this escalation?

SCHANZER: So, I'd say there are probably two or three that we could point to, the first was this what I would call an information operation that the Israelis likely carried out. They won't admit to having done so, but they tweeted that they were about, or that they had troops on the ground inside the Gaza Strip. This seemed very unlikely to me as I was watching this play out on TV. In fact, as I watched, it was really the interesting, the U.S. media was reporting that there were in fact troops on the ground –that there was a ground war taking place. The Israeli media could not acknowledge this. They could not confirm it. I saw multiple reporters standing on the hilltops, overseeing the Gaza Strip saying, "None of my sources can confirm. I don't see anybody behind me. I don't see columns going in."

HERRIDGE: So, was the confirmation coming from the tweet?

SCHANZER: It was the tweet. And then it was also, there was a statement that was put out by the IDF Spokesperson. But as it turns out, the intended audience was likely Hamas. They started the –

HERRIDGE: It may have been an influence operation.

SCHANZER: Correct.

HERRIDGE: Okay.

SCHANZER: Yeah. I think disinformation, misinformation, whatever you want to call it, but they [Hamas] started to insert their commando fighters inside the tunnels. That's when Israel started to destroy the tunnel system known as the Metro. The Metro was dozens of miles of tunnels that were created again to kidnap or kill as many Israeli soldiers as possible. The Israelis took that opportunity to destroy a large portion.

HERRIDGE: You say large. How big?

SCHANZER: We're talking about miles of tunnels that they destroyed. I think they ended up getting less than half, because they couldn't hit all of it because some of it snaked underneath hospitals, schools, apartment buildings and things like that. So, the Israelis had to be very careful about what they hit. They mostly hit the tunnels that went underneath streets, that where they didn't see cars, they could destroy it.

HERRIDGE: How sophisticated are the tunnels? Are these like dirt tunnels? Are they somewhat finished?

SCHANZER: They are semi-finished, I suppose.

HERRIDGE: You know what I'm getting at, right?

SCHANZER: Yeah. This is cement primarily and reinforced with steel often. What is actually shocking about them is, I mean, they are still at the end of the day, somewhat crude. However, they are made out of materials that were diverted. These materials were supposed to go toward the rebuilding of Gaza after the last war in 2014, but a lot of it was diverted. In one tunnel tour that I took during that visit in June, you could actually see some of the bags from the cement, from the UN Relief and Works Agency, which is the agency that is designed to help Palestinians, those that call themselves refugees. So, you get a sense of the cynical nature of all of this, but nonetheless, it was a moment that getting back to the Metro moment, it was a moment where I think the American media was furious at the Israelis for misleading. However, the Israelis looked at it as kind of a victory that they were ultimately able to destroy this tunnel system that Hamas had tried to keep a secret for the better part of five to seven years.

HERRIDGE: So just to follow it through, your connection of the dots is that the Israelis indicated that they had people on the ground when they didn't to cause Hamas to do what?

SCHANZER: To flood that tunnel system with their commandos that were trained in Iran, highly trained people. So, they were able to take out some of their top personnel as well as a key military asset that Hamas had been preparing for a surprise attack.

HERRIDGE: So, it was a trap.

SCHANZER: Correct.

HERRIDGE: Okay. So, if that's one of the seminal moments, what's another one?

SCHANZER: Another one was the destruction of an office tower known as Al-Jalaa tower. You may recall this was the building that housed AP [Associated Press] and Al Jazeera. The Israelis decided somewhat hastily, at least in the media, that they were going to be destroying this building. What they did was they called the owner and warned them that it was going to happen.

HERRIDGE: Is that based on your reporting or?

SCHANZER: Oh no, this is all open source.

HERRIDGE: Open source now. Okay.

SCHANZER: They also have this ability to call every cell phone inside the building or in a certain radius. So, they did that too, warning everybody to get out. Then they dropped what is known as a knock-knock bomb on the roof. This is a small explosive, enough to shake the building, enough to warn people what is about to come.

HERRIDGE: I see.

SCHANZER: Then a few minutes later they destroy this building. It really was remarkable as I watched it on TV. It was played on repeat here in the United States and all around the world. It almost looked like a controlled explosion. It buckled inward as the building was destroyed, but what was so fascinating was that Israel was immediately charged with trying to obstruct media reporting of the conflict.

HERRIDGE: When you take out a building that houses media organizations, you have to expect a significant –That's going to be under the microscope, right?

SCHANZER: Absolutely.

HERRIDGE: There'll be criticisms.

SCHANZER: 100%. Okay and they took it.

HERRIDGE: But what was the objective? It would have to be an extremely important objective.

SCHANZER: Correct. So, as it turns out, the Israelis reported, and we can now say that this has been reviewed and accepted by the White House, that there was some signals intelligence operation that was being conducted out of that building, that the goal was to in fact, jam the Iron Dome system with signals intelligence tools. The Israelis decided that this was crucial if they were to be able to continue to protect their citizens, that this needed to be destroyed. The allegations flew as expected, I think as you suggest.

HERRIDGE: Well and quite right. I mean, when you see the bombing of a media organization's building.

SCHANZER: Right. Of course, there were many other things in the building and that's what the Israelis were alleging, but then they brought the intelligence to the White House. As we understand it, this was accepted as a legitimate intelligence operation that they agreed with in terms of Israel's assessment to attack. Now that didn't, of course, placate the media watchdogs here in the United States and around the world.

HERRIDGE: Well, how did you see, did you see a sort of dissonance between the coverage of this event here in the United States and the coverage of the event in the region?

SCHANZER: I would say that there were a lot of questions in the region and not a lot of rush to judgment. It was more out of curiosity of what was in this building, why did Israel destroy it? The immediate approach by many, not all, organizations here in the United States, certainly analysts on Twitter were immediately alleging that this was an obstruction of media coverage. Eventually the story began to leak out and then the Israelis actually began to tweet about it as well, but I think they wanted to share the information first and get it out to their most important partner here in the United States.

HERRIDGE: Was anyone hurt in that –

SCHANZER: To my knowledge, no. There were no casualties. They actually did a good job of clearing everybody out, again, with that process that I described, but it was by far the most contentious moment of–

HERRIDGE: Well, I think for reasons that are obvious.

SCHANZER: Correct. Correct and I would assume as a journalist that you yourself would I'm sure have questions about something like this, but what I would say, what was really interesting is kind of an aftermath of all of this, is people began to unpack what happened. There were two things that I think are worth maybe noting further. One was that AP has actually been accused by some of its own employees in the past of turning a blind eye to Hamas' activities and

directives. In other words, there's a guy by the name of Matti Friedman who's works for, used to work for AP in the region. Basically, he said that AP would abide by the rules set by Hamas. That they were there—

HERRIDGE: That's a big accusation.

SCHANZER: It is a big accusation. There was another reporter that came out and echoed Matti Friedman's comments as well. This was an *Atlantic* piece from back in 2006, but it certainly raised questions about what did AP know, did it know anything? And I don't know if they did or didn't, but it was—

HERRIDGE: And we certainly don't know what their point of view would be on this.

SCHANZER: Correct. Absolutely not.

HERRIDGE: It goes to this idea, I think is what you're going to because I want to leave that to one side, because I don't know what their position is.

SCHANZER: Correct.

HERRIDGE: It wouldn't be fair to them, but it goes to your, I think one of your larger questions or conclusions about the media coverage at that time. Is that fair?

SCHANZER: I think that —Look, I don't want to say that media organizations that were complicit in some way, I think that's probably a bridge too far. What I would just say is that the coverage immediately jumped to Israel's responsible for war crimes, also it's deliberately obstructing media operations, and it's trying to distort the coverage of the war.

HERRIDGE: Isn't part of the challenge in a 24-hour news cycle, that people have to move so quickly that they don't have that opportunity to assess the information in a way that maybe they need to, or should in a situation?

SCHANZER: That's absolutely.

HERRIDGE: As the story begins to develop because you're describing to me a situation where there were initial allegations, and then as the information started to evolve and develop that you saw a shift.

SCHANZER: We saw a shift, but I would say that in many ways the initial damage was done. In other words, all these accusations of war crimes and deliberate obfuscation of coverage. That was, I think, what most people took away. Then it's always the case that corrections that may come later, they get short shrift. The other thing that I'll just note is that *Al Jazeera* was treated during that time as a run of the mill media outlet. People, I think forget that A, this is a news organization that is owned and controlled by the government of Qatar, which is a sponsor —a fiscal sponsor and financial sponsor of Hamas. But also people forget, and you may remember this from covering Iraq and Afghanistan, *Al Jazeera* somehow was on the scene of a huge number of terrorist attacks.

HERRIDGE: Well, we're not going to re-litigate *Al Jazeera* in this conversation, but I hear what you're trying to get at. So, we're in an inflection point right now with the Iran nuclear talks, correct?

SCHANZER: Correct.

HERRIDGE: Okay. So, what does that mean for the United States? Then what does it mean for the conflict that you put under the microscope in your book?

SCHANZER: So, as you know there are negotiations going on in Vienna right now. There is a, I would probably call it, desperate attempt by the Biden administration to reenter the 2015 nuclear deal. They would like to be able to get back to— whatever regulations they had on Iran's nuclear program. It doesn't look like they're going to get what they had before, which was in my view, probably not perfect, far from it. It actually still gave Iran a paved pathway, if you will, to eventually acquiring nuclear weapons with not a lot of oversight from the international community. We appear now to be on the verge of something even weaker than that, a deal that my colleague Mark Dubowitz calls, "less for less." We get less out of it at the end of the day and the Iranians give us less in return.

But the concern here really is that there will be, as it relates to the Gaza conflict, is that we will see a flood of sanctions relief flow toward Iran. We know that Iran will then use that cash to support a number of its proxies, including Hamas. So, the question then becomes, will we be in the fifth Gaza conflict? We just had the fourth in May. Will we be funding both sides of that next round of war? I think the likelihood is high. In other words, we provide assistance to the Israelis, military assistance, according to a memorandum of understanding. I think that's congressionally approved and it's broadly embraced by the foreign policy community. Then there will be this agreement, which will not be congressionally approved and will not reflect the consensus of the foreign policy community here in the United States. We will likely be seeing a very large amount of money, I don't even know how to estimate it. But it won't only go to Hamas, it'll go to Hezbollah, it'll go to the Houthis, and it'll go to Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria. This we know is how Iran operates. So, there is real cause for concern about the financial implications of such a deal, let alone the nuclear stuff that I think, some of my more technical colleagues are watching day and night.

HERRIDGE: I think it's worth explaining here the significance of the Shiite Crescent. Because I think this is what you're getting at with the funding of these different groups. I mean, what is the Shiite Crescent? What is Iran's objective? And how does that work through these different proxies?

SCHANZER: That is the big question, I'm glad you asked it. So, we always describe Iran's goal in the region as hegemony – they would like to be a regional power.

HERRIDGE: A superpower?

SCHANZER: I mean a regional superpower, let's call it. I mean, they're never going to go toe to toe with the United States or—

HERRIDGE: If they have nuclear weapons, this certainly starts to put them up at that table.

SCHANZER: It is the ultimate insurance policy for everything else that Iran does in terms of its malign activity and it's destabilization of the region.

HERRIDGE: Is that how they see it like an insurance policy?

SCHANZER: Absolutely. I mean, there is a debate about whether the Iranians would use a nuclear weapon against Israel, against Saudi Arabia or any of its other enemies. Whether it would do that, we don't know. But we do know that if it wants to be able to continue to fund groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, and to really do damage to a lot of American

allies around the region. Once it gets that nuke, it's almost untouchable. I think it understands this, this is the ticket to becoming that regional power that they aspire to be. It's one of the reasons why it's so dangerous.

HERRIDGE: So, on the Shiite Crescent. So, they have monies released by the United States. How do they use that money in your view to start building this Crescent? What does it do for them strategically in the region?

SCHANZER: Sure. So, the Crescent, if you have to look at the countries of the Crescent including Iraq. This is a country where I –

HERRIDGE: I wish we had a map here.

SCHANZER: Yes.

HERRIDGE: Just imagine in your mind.

SCHANZER: Right. So, you got Iraq just right alongside that western Iranian border. This is a country where the Iranians have undermined America's presence there since our entrance into the war. But over time, they've also infiltrated the country and what Shiite militias that are known as PMUs or PMFs, Popular Mobilization Unit or Popular Mobilization Forces. These are forces that are funded and trained by Iran and they have dual loyalties. They're not loyal to the Iraqi government per se, they answer to Iran. So, what we have right now is a country that is heavily influenced by the Iranians. There are some efforts to fight it, but it is still a very precarious situation. So that's one territory. The next territory over is Syria. That's the Assad regime that's been under fire for years since the civil war broke out. The Iranians have actually inserted militias there, including Hezbollah to prop up that state. But in the process, they've taken control of it. They've got their arms around the neck of the Syrian state. Then you have Lebanon, which is owned and controlled by Hezbollah. This entire area, this land bridge –

HERRIDGE: I was going to say, this creates a land bridge now.

SCHANZER: Correct, and that is smuggling of weapons, including precision-guided munitions – very dangerous weapons. All of it is designed to flow west toward Hezbollah. Hezbollah is by far the most lethal of the proxies that Iran supports. The goal really is to gain control over this territory, destroy Israel, and establish that solidified foothold in the Levant in the Middle East. So, there is this strategy that continues to play out. The Israelis are constantly fighting it wherever they have to and there is by the way, a shadow war that I describe in the war as well, they call it the “war between wars”, where the Israelis are constantly trying to take out Iranian assets that are moving throughout this land bridge or Shiite Crescent area.

HERRIDGE: What's the historical significance? I mean, this is not just happening, because it's a good idea in 2022, right? I mean, isn't there some historical significance to creating this?

SCHANZER: Sure. Well, I mean, you've got an Iranian nation that sees itself as wishing to reclaim its former greatness. It was once a regional power, centuries ago, and it would like to be that again. There's also I think, a sense that the United States is beginning to retrench.

HERRIDGE: I was going to ask you, so the U.S. government, the previous administration, the current administration, if we put Ukraine and Russia to one side right now, there's been a pivot to the Pacific.

SCHANZER: Correct.

HERRIDGE: So, what does that mean for Israel, the Middle East and the conflicts that you lay out in the book?

SCHANZER: Oh, look, that's the big question. It's the biggest question. I mean, here you have what I would call neo-isolationist trends here in the United States on the left and on the right. During the Trump administration, we saw maximum pressure on Iran. Even as we look to draw down from the Middle East. Now we have no pressure on Iran even as –

HERRIDGE: Or say less pressure. I mean advocates would say controlled pressure. Right?

SCHANZER: Very little. We're looking at really, an attempt to get back into a deal to provide sanctions relief, not a lot of restrictions put in place to keep Iran in check. So, the Iranians see this, and they smell opportunity. They look at this as a moment where we want to get out of the Middle East. Again, this is a fairly bipartisan sentiment, right now and we want to pivot to Asia. The question is, I think, and I raised this in the last chapter of the book, who are we going to tap to take our place when we leave? Because we are drawing down. Afghanistan was, I think one example, but we're looking at other places as well where the U.S. military is looking to get out–

HERRIDGE: Who fills those vacuums?

SCHANZER: That's right. So, then the question becomes, are we going to try to empower our allies like Israel or the United Arab Emirates or I don't know, Bahrain or Saudi Arabia? or – are we going to allow the Iranians to fill that void? Right now, I don't see clear answers to those questions. I think that is really the thing that I challenge the U.S. foreign policy community to think about that at the end of the book.

HERRIDGE: We're having this conversation in the third week of February where 190,000 Russian troops are concentrated around the border of Ukraine. I can't sit down with you and not ask your prediction of what you think is ahead for that region and then also for the United States?

SCHANZER: I would say that this is a test for the United States first and foremost. There are other crises right now where malign actors are watching carefully to see how the United States conducts itself. I would say that the Biden administration has thus far done a good job in terms of coordinating with its allies overseas, warning about the consequences, primarily through sanctions, but perhaps in other ways as well. However, this is far from written and if the United States does not deter an invasion of Ukraine, we could see an impact in terms of the way China looks at a possible invasion of Taiwan. We could see an impact in terms of the way that Iran would view a possible dash to a nuclear weapon. This could have an impact on the way that North Korea looks at our deterrence in the region. Any number of conflicts that I think bad actors are watching. So, it's not done, but it is certainly cause for concern.

SCHANZER: Now, as for trying to predict what Putin does next. I have no idea. I would say though that a full invasion – a full occupation of Ukraine seems like a lot for him to take on. I could imagine him taking kind of a slice of Ukraine

HERRIDGE: A half measure?

SCHANZER: A half measure and then waiting to see what the response is. If there is not a concerted global response to his aggression, well then he might see that as a green light to press forward. If he does feel like his sword meets steel, so to speak, then perhaps he might be deterred and there may be a way of walking him back. But this is not an easy moment for American policy because again, I believe that a lot hangs in the balance and really, probably more than anything, it's that credibility as we enter into this great power competition with China. If we cannot deal with Russia, which is an economically – this is not a powerhouse and militarily–

HERRIDGE: So many factors are going against Russia – economically, demographically, and natural resources.

SCHANZER: Correct. Right. So, this is– I mean, people always talk about Putin as a guy that's got a weak hand, who plays it well. If we can't tackle this, how are we going to tackle all of these huge challenges that await in the realm of East Asia, specifically looking at China, Taiwan and other theaters as well?

HERRIDGE: So, any final thoughts before we leave the conversation on the book?

SCHANZER: I don't know. You tell me? I mean, I would say, first of all, thank you for doing this. Thank you for asking all the right questions, I think. I would say, expect the Middle East to remain a hotspot, even as we pivot to other parts of the world. Even as other parts of the world continue to grab headlines, but the Middle East unfortunately has a way of not going anywhere. So, it's for that reason that I wrote the book and I hope that it's helpful for Americans and folks all around the world to understanding a conflict, which will come back.

HERRIDGE: Jonathan Schanzer, thank you so much for the conversation today.

SCHANZER: Thank you.