The Islamic Republic's Weaponization of Global Terror

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Featuring Edmund Fitton-Brown
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DUBOWITZ: Today on The Iran Breakdown, we're stepping back from headlines and asking a bigger question. How does Iran fit into the global landscape of terrorism, proxy warfare, and international diplomacy? And why have so many policy makers struggled to see the full picture?

For decades, Western governments treated threats like ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Iran's proxy network as separate challenges. Different actors, different ideologies, different playbooks. But on the ground, the lines have never been that clean. Militias, state sponsors, sanctioned networks, and international institutions all operate in the same ecosystem, often exploiting the same gaps in Western policy.

My guest today has had a front row seat to that reality. FDD senior fellow Edmund Fitton-Brown is a former British ambassador to Yemen, a veteran diplomat with deep experience in the Middle East, and the former coordinator of the UN team responsible for monitoring ISIS, al-Qaeda and Taliban sanctions. He has worked at the intersection of diplomacy, intelligence and counterterrorism from Yemen to the UN, watching how state and non-state actors adapt, cooperate, and evolve.

And that's why this conversation matters. Because the Iran challenge isn't just about nuclear negotiations or centrifuges or enriched material. It's about a wider terror network, proxies, ideology, illicit finance, and the ways Tehran leverages instability from the Red Sea to the Levant and, indeed, globally. So, today we're going to explore what policymakers often miss. How Iran's model compares to Sunni jihadist movements, what the West got wrong about groups like the Houthis, and whether the current trajectory points towards containment or greater escalation. This is a conversation about lessons learned and lessons ignored. I'm Mark Dubowitz. This is The Iran Breakdown.

Edmund, welcome.

FITTON-BROWN: Thanks, Mark. Great to be here.

DUBOWITZ: Now, it's wonderful to have you. It's wonderful to have you as a colleague and thank you for your service to the cause of counterterrorism over the years. I want to start with kind of the big framing question on ISIS, al-Qaeda and the state backed actors at the UN. You've tracked all of this; you've certainly moved diplomatically and economically against it. And the question is, where does Iran fit in that global threat landscape? Is it entirely different category or is it part of the same terror ecosystem?

FITTON-BROWN: I would say it's definitely part of the same ecosystem, and I would maybe make a small distinction between before October 7th, 2023 and since October 7th, 2023. One of the things we can say is that ISIS sits a little bit aside from most of the other members of the ecosystem. ISIS, as you know, has got a long history of being very rejectionist. Rejectionist towards – not towards us, but also towards al-Qaeda, towards Hamas, towards Iran. So, ISIS is a little bit of a separate issue. It's a death cult and even the most determined state sponsors of terrorism, amongst whom I would certainly put Iran at the front rank, working with ISIS is a step too far. That said, I do want to make one distinction since the 7th of October, it is true that ISIS has used some of the angst about the Gaza-Israel conflict to do some recruitment. And so even ISIS is aware, more aware than it used to be, of a political context in which it operates.

But leaving them aside, the really big point about Iran is that it will work with anybody. And the most significant development, in my view of recent years in regard to al-Qaeda, was the killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri in Afghanistan back in 2022. Unintended consequences include the fact that that meant that the new leader of al-Qaeda was no longer based in Afghanistan. It passed to his number two. His number two Saif al-Adel, who is now the leader of al-Qaeda, lives in Iran, is a host of the Iranian government. And what has changed since 2022 is that there has been a rapprochement between Iran and al-Qaeda. al-Qaeda by some analysis could be said to have joined the axis of resistance that Iran likes to talk about. I think we don't always agree to call it the axis of resistance.

DUBOWITZ: . Yeah, we call it the axis of misery around here.

FITTON-BROWN: Exactly. But there are a number of practical impacts of that. One of them is that whereas al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula used to be at loggerheads with the Houthis in Yemen, they're now friends and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula actually helped the Houthis to develop a relationship with al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Somalia. And then of course, once again, coming to 7 October 2023, which is in so many ways was a sort of watershed moment, that changed the whole propaganda environment in which these terrorist groups operate. And that includes Iran, it includes all of its proxies, and as I said, even to some limited degree, it includes ISIS. And you end up with a rather different terrorist ecosystem to look at. We've seen it on the streets of Western cities, you know, with people marching in support of the Houthis or Hamas or Hezbollah where they're allowed to. And in some cases, they're allowed to do it even though it's technically against the law. And so, I would say that Iran is evermore the spider at the center of this web. And since al-Qaeda effectively joined its axis, we can say that it is the single main state sponsor of terror and the main source really of likely attacks in the future.

DUBOWITZ: So Edmund, I want to zero in on this relationship between Iran and al-Qaeda because for years, particularly under the Obama administration, there was a real denial in Washington that al-Qaeda and Iran would work together. Well, one Sunni, one Shiite; they may have common enemies, but they don't necessarily have common views – certainly not common theological views – so they don't work together. And our colleague, Bill Roggio, who runs FDDs Long War Journal, he painstakingly detailed these both ideological and operational ties between AQ [al-Qaeda] and Iran. And again, the conventional wisdom in Washington was that this was not something that we should worry about. And in fact, if anything, FDD was just making too much of this and trying to malign the Islamic Republic by associating with al-Qaeda. But it turned out to be absolutely the case. In fact, the Treasury Department began designations of Iranian entities and individuals who were creating what was then called the facilitation pipeline for al-Qaeda's operations.

And then under the first Trump administration, then CIA director Mike Pompeo declassified tens of thousands of documents that illustrated these connections and, actually, FDD was early on in translating those documents. Many of these were documents that were captured from Abbottabad when Bin Laden was killed, really showing that Bin Laden and top al-Qaeda leaders were in close touch with the Iranians. And as you say, were also getting not only material support, but ultimately refuge inside Iran. So shed a little bit more light on this just for our listeners. I mean, Iran and al-Qaeda seemingly very different but working very closely together against the United States and the West?

FITTON-BROWN: I think that's exactly the point. It's very much of my enemy's enemy. If you are Iranian or if you're al-Qaeda, you look at sort of a hierarchy of enemies, where with Israel, probably as you know, perhaps the country that you would most like to attack, it might be more true of Iran. Maybe it's with al-Qaeda, maybe it's the United States. But you know if it's one and two in one case, then it's the other way around the other case, the US and Israel are at the top of both lists and then the rest of the West, the UK, NATO, et cetera. And so, there's a huge amount of common cause here that is being made. And by the way, this goes back a long way. And you know, of course, you know I've been appearing on Bill's Generation Jihad for years, including when I was with the UN, and I always agreed with him and supported his hypothesis on this.

The fact is that the Iranians are flexible. They're tactically flexible. They're not extreme idea ideologues. They may have an extremist government, and they may have an extremist foreign policy, but they are opportunists and realists. And to a lesser extent, but still to a significant extent, that is also true of al-Qaeda. And again, that comes back to that distinction I made at the beginning between al-Qaeda and ISIS. ISIS isn't really capable of that kind of tactical flexibility. They are real head bangers, and, you know, if you don't completely subscribe to their ideology, then you are a *kāfir* and you should be killed. And that includes al-Qaeda. Whereas in the case of al-Qaeda, they've always been capable of making accommodations, whether it's tribal accommodations in Yemen or in Africa, or whether it's political accommodations with Iran, alliances of convenience. So, this has been going on for a long time.

You can also see other examples of this. For example, the longstanding relationship between the Haqqani network in Afghanistan and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. So again, you have a tactical flexibility if you think you can achieve something, and that in order to achieve it, you need to work with people who are not your ideal partners, not necessarily people you would worship with, but you're nevertheless, you're going to be happy to do it. And then, as I said, really since Saif took over as the head of al-Qaeda and is actually a guest of the Iranian government and has been increasingly arguing that, you know, this is not about Sunni and Shia, this is about the enemies of Islam. And then after the 7th of October 2023, that then became you know, that became the entire environment in which we swim.

DUBOWITZ: Right, so, conventional Washington thinking al-Qaeda and Iran never worked together. Of course they do. I think now there's very few people who follow the issue who would argue against that thesis. But you mentioned this with respect to ISIS in Iran, and I think it's interesting. Now, clearly, I haven't seen evidence of ISIS and Iran working together, but there's no doubt that ISIS took advantage of the conditions created as a result of Iranian involvement in both Iraq and in Syria. And I wonder if you could just sort of maybe clarify those conditions? Because what I saw over those years was you saw – you had Iran cooperating with Russia and [Bashar al-] Assad brutalizing the Sunni population of Syria. You had Iran cooperating with Iraqi Shiite militias, butchering the Iraqi population or the Iraqi Sunni population of Iraq. And then faced with those kinds of threats and that kind of slaughter, ISIS is able to capitalize on that and rock into town and say to the Sunni populations, both in Syria and in Iraq, that "We're here to protect you. Now to do that, you're going to have to grow your beards long and you're going to have to stop smoking and drinking, and you're going to have to be faithful Muslims based on the ISIS interpretation of that" – of the very radical extremist interpretation that ISIS has of Islam. And unfortunately, you know, too many Iraqis and too many Syrians had no choice but to just let ISIS into their towns and comply with that. Is that a fair characterization of the role that Iran played in actually helping ISIS?

FITTON-BROWN: Yeah, it is. It's absolutely fair. It's one of the great frustrations that I've had throughout my adult life has been watching the way that the Iranians have created these, they've exploited conditions sometimes that we have created through our actions, and they've exploited them in the most cynical and negative way. And that was also true of the Assad regime in Syria, which as you say, was closely allied with the Iranians. ISIS doesn't exactly form partnerships, but it is also – it is tactically aware, exactly as you say. It knows where an opportunity arises, it knows how to exploit it. And in some cases, you can see that somebody who appears to be a potential enemy of ISIS, may actually find ISIS very convenient. I was following the Syrian civil war close up, particularly between 2011 and 2014 when I was based in the region. And what was really striking was that both Asaad and ISIS saw any kind of popular consultation, any kind of democratization, any kind of progress towards a more liberal or more law-abiding Syria to be a threat.

And quite early on in that period that followed the so-called Arab Spring, there was a sort of a Molotov ribbon pact between Assad and ISIS where they were effectively saying, "If we can successfully radicalize the population so that it's either on my side or on your side, but nobody feels safe in the middle and there is no middle ground, then that's going to be good for both of us. Now we can get on and do what Germany and Russia did later and kill each other, but for now, what we need to do is to make sure that any hope of an improvement or a flowering in Syria is choked at birth."

DUBOWITZ: And that also was clearly undermined American support because the United States and our Western allies would see the Syrian opposition not as a moderate opposition we're supporting against the Assad regime and against Iran and Russia, but increasingly as a radical Islamist opposition in bed with ISIS. And I think that was the conclusion the Obama administration reached and was part of the reason that they decided not to actually support the Syrian opposition. I think Obama had claimed at the time that not only was the Syrian opposition feckless, they were group – I don't remember exact phrase, but I think he called them a bunch of farmers and townspeople who didn't have the military capabilities to take on the Iranians and Assad, but also this growing fear that the opposition was becoming increasingly radicalized and the United States did not want to get in bed with a radical ISIS-like opposition. So, it was actually – it was very much as you're saying, it was to ISIS advantage to keep the Americans out, and it was to Assad's advantage to radicalize that opposition, or at least for that opposition to be perceived as radical so that the United States would not intervene.

FITTON-BROWN: Exactly. The policy worked. And if you were an Alawite who had doubts about Assad, you were so frightened of ISIS that you, nevertheless, you stuck with Assad. And if you were a Sunni you probably ended up being dragged into the ANF [al-Nusra Front] coalition or joining ISIS because it became a completely polarized situation, a binary choice. And of course, that's one of the reasons why the Assad regime never made any serious attempt to clamp down on ISIS smuggling. So, ISIS were able to finance a lot of what they did through control of hydrocarbons and smuggling. The Turks also were colluded in that so that ISIS was able to establish itself with plenty of revenue. Whereas if the Assad regime had been at all serious about being opposed to ISIS, they obviously would've had lots of levers they could have used to stop them from getting established.

DUBOWITZ: Okay, so you've got Iran causing havoc in the region, obviously causing a lot of bloodshed and radicalizing these populations. You've got Iran cooperating with al-Qaeda providing a facilitation pipeline for al-Qaeda operatives and the movement of weapons and money. You've got Iran providing refuge to al-Qaeda to now al-Qaeda's top leader. And then you've got Iran cooperating with Assad and Russia to brutalize the Syrian population and working with Shiite militias in Iraq to brutalize the Iraqi population, thereby driving even moderates into the arms of the radicals or the regime. Alright, so that's their playbook. So, let's move to Yemen. You were UK ambassador to Yemen. You saw the Houthis really transform from a local insurgency and really become a sort of central pillar of Iran's regional proxy strategy. When did that happen and when did the West miss that turning point? And when did the Houthis transform from the Houthis rebels to essentially a Yemeni version of Hezbollah?

FITTON-BROWN: So the Houthi movement is 30 years old, and for the last 20 years it's been ruled by Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, is the supreme guide of the Houthis; the younger brother of the original founding al-Houthi, who was the first leader of the Houthis who was killed by Ali Abdullah Saleh. And then from about 2004 onwards, the Houthi movement was increasingly anti-Saleh because he'd killed the older brother.

DUBOWITZ: Say a few words about him first. I mean, before the Houthis even became an insurgency, what did Yemen look like politically?

FITTON-BROWN: So, I mean, Yemen has a sort of very interesting and complicated history, but it's probably worth essentially starting with the fact that you had a period from the sixties until 1990 when you had two Yemens. You had the southern part of Yemen was the People's Democratic Republic of [sic] the Yemen. It was Arab socialist or communist. And in the north, you had the Yemen Arab Republic, which was a sort of classic Arab nationalist entity. And the leader of north Yemen was Ali Abdullah Saleh, who became a very, very interesting and complicated character with whom the West had a lot of frustrating and difficult dealings over many, many years. When Yemen united in 1990, Ali Abdullah Saleh became the leader of the whole of Yemen. Then there was a brief civil war or a kind of an uprising in the south, which was brutally put down by the north. So, you effectively, this was really a takeover of the south by the north, and that has modern resonance, of course, because the Houthis are from the north and they are also brutalizing the south whenever they get the chance to do it.

So, Saleh was in charge. He wasn't a very successful leader. He thought that he was the only person who could govern Yemen. He said that governing Yemen was like dancing on the heads of snakes and that only he was able to dance on the heads of the snakes successfully without getting bitten. He believed that propaganda made many mistakes. He allowed al-Qaeda to embed and become a force in Yemen from the 1990s onwards. Of course, you had the USS Cole attack. After 9/11, his options narrowed because the US took an entirely different approach to counterterrorism. Basically, went out to people like Saleh and said, "Unless you want to declare yourself to be an enemy of the United States and a supporter of international terrorism, you're going to work with us." And so, he did halfheartedly, but he did work with the US. When he did that, that alienated the Houthis. The Houthis had started off as a Zaydi revivalist cult, the Zaydis being the sort of Shia adjacent Yemenis in the north. And in 2004, Ali Abdullah Saleh killed the leading Houthis because they were rebelling against him. The reason they were rebelling against him was that they were very much influenced by Iran and by Lebanese Hezbollah, and they were very anti-American. And they thought that Ali Abdullah Saleh was selling out by doing his counterterrorism cooperation with the Americans after 9/11.

DUBOWITZ: His CT cooperation with the Americans was mostly against al-Qaeda.

FITTON-BROWN: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: This was what became as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Is that right?

FITTON-BROWN: Absolutely, yes, yes. That was the target. And it remained the target really until quite late in the previous decade.

DUBOWITZ: And the relationship between al-Qaeda and the Houthis, it was a relationship of convenience. It was tense. They were at each other's throats. What – what was the sort of the relationship at the time?

FITTON-BROWN: So, they were generally at each other's throats. The al-Qaeda and the Arabian Peninsula from – let's sort of take it from 9/11 because that's really the sort of watershed moment. It was an increasingly important terrorist force in Yemen, but it wasn't particularly focused on Yemeni politics. They wouldn't even have been particularly aware of the Houthis as an issue because the Houthis were up in the north and doing their own thing in a different part of the country. But of course, once you had the civil war breakout in Yemen, because you had the Arab Spring so-called, arrives in around 2011, and then Ali Abdullah Saleh falls from power. You have President Hadi takes over the – previously the vice president – he's a southerner and a Sunni. And so, the Houthis didn't like that. And Saleh, once he, sort of, stopped and thought about it and recovered from injuries that he'd suffered, he thought, "I don't know why I stepped down, I really ought to be still governing this country."

So, he mended his fences with the Houthis and helped them to sweep across Yemen, initially taking Sanaa in 2014. And obviously from that point on, you have a civil war in Yemen, which is still continuing to this day. Now, in that civil war, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula aligned itself against the Houthis, and there were quite a lot of bloodshed on both sides. Whereas after Saif al-Adel took over as the leader of al-Qaeda based in Iran, the Houthis and al-Qaeda and the Arabian Peninsula reached a deconfliction agreement, and ultimately more or less, an understanding with each other. I think it's probably too much to call it a wholehearted alliance, but these days they collaborate with each other. And al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula helped the Houthis to develop the relationship that I mentioned earlier with al-Shabaab in Somalia.

DUBOWITZ: So interesting. So, the relationship between the Houthis and al-Qaeda and the Arabian Peninsula starts to reflect a more conciliatory approach that the Iranians are having with al-Qaeda in general?

FITTON-BROWN: Exactly.

DUBOWITZ: Giving al-Qaeda leader refuge, starting to provide this key facilitation pipeline for a l-Qaeda militants and weapons. And so, it's really, it's the hand of Iran that you can see most visibly, right? Starting to get its proxies regardless of their local grievances or historical conflicts, starting to get them more aligned in this axis of resistance that Ali Khamenei and his key deputy Qasem Soleimani are building over the years.

FITTON-BROWN: Exactly

DUBOWITZ: Right. So disparate players, different geographies, maybe even theologically inconsistent or theologically hostile, but that matters less than this grand Iranian enterprise to build this axis using these proxy forces, but also using, and in fact, in many cases, creating territories of violence and anarchy that they can exploit. I mean, that becomes the Iranian proxy strategy.

FITTON-BROWN: That's exactly right. And of course, we should probably just briefly mention that it's not a complete innovation for them to work with Sunni extremist groups, because of course they've had this historic relationship with Hamas.

DUBOWITZ: Right, right. Okay. So now we're getting a sort of sense of the Iranian proxy strategy. Let's talk a little bit about what happened after October 7th, because that should have been the moment, that should have been Soleimani's moment. Now, of course, Soleimani wasn't there to see this moment because he had been eliminated by President Trump in President Trump's first term. But this is really – was the access that Soleimani had built, providing weapons, training, financing, operational support, intelligence support to this whole proxy network that spans across the Middle East and then October 7th occurs, and one of those proxies – the Sunni proxy – Hamas – launches this invasion of Israel. And then in the ensuing two and a half years, the Israelis go after this network, this so-called ring of fire that Khamenei and Soleimani had built around them. And they go after Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the two sort of Palestinian Sunni Iranian proxies.

They go after Hezbollah, obviously the main – major – major domo of proxy terror groups in Lebanon. They increasingly are drawn into a fight with the Houthis as the Houthis are firing missiles and drones at Israel and the Shiite militias in Iraq. There's some scuffles, but they are mostly staying out of the fight because of fear of Israeli retaliation. Where do you see this Iranian proxy network today? What has been transformed? Where are there still elements of danger and how do you see, if you could maybe also introduce into the conversation, the current crisis that's going on between the Saudis and the Emiratis, where there also seems to be a very different perspective on how to deal with these local conflicts, terror groups, and elements of crisis throughout the Red Sea in the Horn of Africa?

FITTON-BROWN: Yep, absolutely. Well, I mean, first thing I'll say is it would be fascinating to sit down and review what happened on the 7th of October and since with an open-minded representative of the Iranian regime, if such a thing there is, because the Iranian sort of policy of making Israel a sort of a boiling frog was quite effective. They were basically building up this ring of aggression around Israel, and had they continued, had Hamas not attacked on the 7th of October, it's an interesting question as to how much further they could have developed their capabilities before they sort of made that big attack. Now, as it turned out, of course, it was a catastrophic attack, and from Israel's point of view, traumatic. And I think probably still a lot of that trauma is still to be worked through, but it was also on a certain level, premature, because of course Israel is more than capable of defeating Hamas militarily as it has done.

And more importantly, what it did was it suddenly changed the debate in Israel that you could no longer tolerate this, you know, you couldn't be the boiling frog any longer. And the most striking – first most striking example of this was when Israel decided that it would take Lebanese Hezbollah on absolutely full frontal. And of course, we had all been conditioned to think – because of previous conflicts between Israel and Hezbollah – that they were more evenly matched than that, that Hezbollah was a more dangerous opponent. It was certainly dangerous, it was making it impossible for people to live in northern Israel. But once the Israelis really went after it, and of course the genius of Israel is the speed of adaptation. It's the fact that when they identify a threat or a challenge that they're going to have to react to, the speed at which their intelligence moves, the speed at which they integrate that with their military capabilities. And of course, we saw that amazing pagers and walkie-talkies operation, which was perhaps the most sort of stunning feature of their defeat of Lebanese Hezbollah.

DUBOWITZ: I mean, you've been involved in counterterrorism for many, many years. Have you seen anything like that?

FITTON-BROWN: I've never seen anything like that. I know of no former colleagues who have seen anything like that. It blew all of our minds. It really did. And literally blew theirs. And you know, there was that. There was also the fact that they had such good intelligence on where everyone was. So, some of the decapitation strikes were brilliantly done. And of course, it's worth mentioning, slight diversion, that later they did exactly that with the Houthis as well. Amazingly, the Houthis were not even an intelligence requirement for Israel before the 7th of October 2023. It was Yemen. It was a long way away. They had so many other things to worry about. Why would they care about Yemen? That's Saudi Arabia's problem. And yet all of a sudden the Houthis are attacking Israel and they're thinking, “Well, we need to try and do something about this.” Now, the flash to bang until the 28th of August 2025 when they decapitated the Houthis leadership in Sanaa, again, an absolutely astonishing intelligence and military achievement.

So going back to Lebanon and Lebanese Hezbollah. I mean, first of all, this punctured an image that Hezbollah had built of almost invulnerability. They were sort of mythical. They were the master terrorists, the master insurgents, the people who controlled the Lebanese state, could do whatever they wanted to, but you couldn't hit them. And all of a sudden that turned out not to be true. So that had a huge effect, I think psychologically, on Hezbollah and of course on the Israeli population who could actually say, “Actually, we could live safely in northern Israel now.” But also, of course, that added to the weakness of Russia because of its distraction in Ukraine – led to the other great unintended consequence, which of course was the fall of Assad in Syria. And that's vital because even though Syria was not exactly a proxy of Iran – Syria was an independent country rather than a militia.

It was the arena for the Iranian proxies. And it was because of the civil war because, essentially, it was the Iranian proxies that were propping Assad up. Lebanese Hezbollah had complete freedom of action in Syria, so did the Iraqi Shia proxies. And all of the resupply that was going to Lebanese Hezbollah was coming across Syria. And of course, that was something that nobody could actually prevent at the time. So, the fall of Syria, even though we all worry a great deal still about what's going to happen there, we worry about [Ahmed al-] Sharaa and where that's actually going to end up. For now, though the weakening of Iran, the weakening of Iran's proxies is really important. And you mentioned the Iraqis. I think the Iraqis might have become more of a factor in the last year or so, but they were completely wrong footed by the fall of Assad.

So all of a sudden, instead of having this sort of friendly regime in Damascus and a kind of training ground where they could go and get involved in fighting the civil war on Assad's behalf, all of a sudden the Iraqi Shia militias said, "Well, we've now got a government in Damascus that might actually mean us harm. It might actually – and it's likely also to be angry with us because of our role in brutalizing the Syrian population over the previous period of the civil war." So, the Iraqi militias have gone quiet, not completely. They're still there. They're still very loyal to the Iranians, but they're also conscious that the political realities constrain what they can do. And so, they were kind of the dog that didn't bark in the June war last year.

DUBOWITZ: So the things that I still worry about: I worry about the Iraqi Shiite militias because they didn't bark, but they're still there and they're still well armed and well supplied and well financed by Iran and clearly, deeply embedded within the Iraqi political system and exploiting it to the fullest in order to maintain their power and their leverage. I worry about – around Israel, I worry a lot about the West Bank and about Hamas and other terror activities and terror groups operating out of the West Bank because I think that's still the dog that hasn't barked yet. And I think that's still to come. And I still worry about the Houthis because I think, and this is where I want to direct the next part of the conversation, is give us a sense of Houthis capabilities today. I mean, you mentioned Israel's pretty devastating strike on Houthis leadership, but there's still clearly Houthis leaders who were not, hit military and political leaders who were not hit. They seem to have transitioned from having missile capabilities that were mostly dependent on Iranian supply to having set up some indigenous production capabilities that give them the ability to produce pretty lethal and long-range missiles on their own. And they certainly don't seem to have backed away from the fight either with Israel or with the United States or going after international ships in the Red Sea.

How do you assess Houthis strengths and weaknesses today, and what should the United States and Israel be doing to go after this perhaps last remaining and very deadly element of Iran's proxy network?

FITTON-BROWN: Yeah, I mean, it's a great question. I think the Houthis think of themselves as being now the loudest and proudest of the axis. They feel that they were never defeated. They took a lot of hits from the US between March and May last year, but it ended up in a ceasefire, a very unsatisfactory ceasefire where essentially the US, I think for reasons of just feeling that it wasn't achieving enough and it was spending too much on it, decided not to press on with that campaign. I was sorry when that ceasefire happened, it was yet another piece of mischief by the Omanis who just will always try to kick the can down the road if they can. So, you know "Oh, let's freeze this conflict between the Americans and the Houthis."

DUBOWITZ: And the Omanis host Houthi leadership. Is that correct?

FITTON-BROWN: They do. That's right. So, the Houthis have a large office in Muscat that I dealt with directly when I was ambassador. That office has got larger, and it's no longer just about foreign liaison. It's also a gigantic intelligence station, procurement center, smuggling coordination. If I could get into a preparatory meeting for a US Oman summit, I would say you need to say to the Omanis, "Look, you're our friends. We like you, but you're doing some things wrong and you need to stop. And that's one of them." They need to clamp down on that office. If not, absolutely close it, they should.

DUBOWITZ: But it also seemed to be providing quite a rich target environment for foreign intelligence agencies that we're looking to eliminate Houthi leaders and Houthi capabilities. So, the Omani better be careful.

FITTON-BROWN: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. No, I mean, they walk a tight rope, the Omanis. But going back to the Houthis capability, they claimed they won the war with America. Of course they didn't, they didn't win it, but of course, just not losing it or just still being standing means that they feel that they won. They feel that they've come out of the conflict with the Israelis. I suppose they probably call it a draw, even though obviously Israel inflicted a great deal more damage on the Houthis than they ever did on Israel. And so, they are completely undeterred, as you said. And although they've suspended their campaign in the Red Sea, they reserve the right to resume that at any time and I think that one of the great concerns I have about the way that the West addresses policy is that when an issue goes quiet, we think it's resolved.

But of course, it's not resolved at all. From the Israeli point of view, they will be preparing to defend themselves against future attacks from the Houthis. The Houthis have expended a great deal of their weaponry, but they've also resupplied. As you said, they're also capable of indigenous production. You've got technology transfer, knowledge transfer, which has made its way into Yemen. And remember the Houthis control approximately 70 percent of the Yemeni population. Not the land mass, but they control the most populous areas and the key areas, including the capital, including the main port of Hudaydah, and including, of course, many of the military bases from north Yemen. So, they have a very significant indigenous capability. As a defacto state, they can tax people, they have good revenues. They've been able to play the international community in the United Nations to divert aid to enrich themselves.

DUBOWITZ: No, they convinced the Biden administration to de-designate the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization. I recall it was the first thing that President Biden did when he came into office was actually to take the Houthis off the foreign terrorist organization list. Now, thankfully, President Trump has put them back on, but talk about playing the international community using the humanitarian card in order to try and push back against any efforts from the United States or from any other Western countries to use any kind of course of instruments. The Houthis have been quite adept at that.

FITTON-BROWN: They are absolute masters. I mean, if I have a grudging respect for them, it's in how well they understand us and our weaknesses and our neuroses. And they know exactly what the peace lobby thinks in the West. They know exactly what the humanitarian community thinks in the West, and they – essentially, they're sort of creating photo opportunities for it. And they knew that if they were able to engineer enough casualties in Yemen that gradually it would sap Western will to support the Saudi campaign there. So, we have this enduring threat, and the Houthis, they have this scream – they call it the scream, and it is of course, "Allah is the most great," "victory to Islam." But of course, more to the point from our perspective, "Death to America," "death to Israel," "a curse on the Jews". That is their organizing scream. That is what they teach and indoctrinate young children in Yemen.

So, you have a radicalized group, with an increasingly radicalized young population, which is determined to resume its attacks on Israel at some point, is determined to resume attacks on the US and the UK as and when that becomes necessary and, of course, remains implacably hostile to Saudi Arabia. So, coming back to your question about what do we do about this, I think the thing that is missing there is a really important missing piece of the jigsaw. And this is the Saudis having completely lost their nerve on Yemen. And I don't understand. Well, I do understand how it happened because the Saudis went into the Yemen campaign in 2015 thinking that it would be an easy win. And of course, as these things often are, it turned into a quagmire and they weren't ready for it, and it was embarrassing for them. It caused them massive international PR damage and it's expensive.

And it was also tied up with the rise of Mohammed bin Salman. It was his project. And so, from his point of view, it was, if this is a humiliation, this is not good for his authority and for the prospects for his rule. I think we all expect him to be the ruler of Saudi Arabia possibly for decades. So, it was really difficult for them. The Khashoggi thing came in the middle of it that was hugely problematic for them, caused them massive problems with the United States. Even under the Trump administration, the Trump administration, its hands were tied at that point. It couldn't support Saudi Arabia any longer once they were obviously responsible for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. So, it's been an absolute nightmare for them. But what really struck me was that when the Houthis decided that they were going to grab the headlines and shut the Red Sea and attack commercial shipping in the Red Sea, the Saudis were completely auto-combat.

They didn't do anything about it. And my feeling at the time – I argued at the time, but again, difficult to get people to focus on these, on Yemen, it's – it's always difficult. Even when the US got involved in the campaign, it was short-lived and reluctant. And in my view, the US should have prioritized this. It should have gone to the Saudis and the Egyptians and said "Look, this is a direct act of aggression against you. The Red Sea, it's a Saudi-Egyptian lake is what it is. And the Egyptian economy is partially dependent on Suez Canal revenues. Saudis, you've got ports on your East coast that can't go anywhere if the Iranians close the Strait of Hormuz, and now your ports on the West Coast can't go anywhere because the Houthis have shut the Red Sea." So, in my view, it was a missed opportunity to build an international coalition to stop the Houthis, to shut them down.

But of course, the other point, the remaining point that I think is important to cover here is to what degree does the US harmonize its Yemen strategy with its Iran strategy? Because here we are discussing Iran and discussing Iran's proxies, and that takes us to the Houthis. Well, if you're building a strategy against Iran, you need to have a strategy against the proxies at the same time. And if you're building a strategy against the Houthis in the Red Sea, that strategy has to be also a counter-Iran strategy. There was an Iranian spy ship, as you know in the Red Sea, which was helping the Houthis to attack commercial shipping in the Red Sea. So, this is where I think we probably come back to the issue of what has happened in Iran over the last six, seven weeks, where clearly there is, at last, a real prospect of regime change. And I think the key to defeating the Houthis ultimately is going to be to take away their patron. It's going to be the end of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Islamic Republic's Weaponization of Global Terror

February 20, 2026
Featuring Edmund Fitton-Brown
Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: So what's interesting to me – I mean, you mentioned the Saudis – so I've been in Saudi Arabia many times, I'm sure as you have as well. You probably received the same briefings from the Saudi military that I received where they were very clear about the role of Iran and particularly Lebanese Hezbollah in training the Houthis. And we watched videos at Saudi air bases and spoke to Saudi pilots and targeting officers and made it very clear how difficult it was to try to strike the Houthis because the Houthis were embedding themselves and embedding their weapons in mosques and schools and hospitals and using Yemeni civilians as human shields. And when Saudi pilots were trying their best to minimize civilian casualties – maybe it wasn't their best, but they were certainly getting at least over time some support from the United States and the UK and other Western allies to become more precise in their targeting – how difficult in an enterprise that was because you'd ultimately were hitting civilians because they were being used as human shields.

What I found ironic was that after October 7th, as the Israelis faced the exact same situation in Gaza and in Lebanon, as both Hamas and Hezbollah were using civilians as human shields and embedding their missiles and weapons in hospitals and schools, that the Saudis were vociferous in their condemnation of the – of Israel. Now, I understand the politics of this within the kingdom and within the broader Arab and Muslim world, but it always struck me as really flagrant hypocrisy that the Saudis who were trying to make the case that the Houthis were using civilians as human shields and had been trained by Hezbollah to do so, were now condemning Israel for having to face the same kind of urban warfare and battlefield tactics. So, I just wanted to sort of put a finer point on that, and I've made that point to my Saudi friends.

FITTON-BROWN: Well, and of course that point does then bring us back to the point you made earlier about where are we currently with Saudi Arabia and its orientation? And I think there are a number of things to say about this. And one is that of course, Saudi Arabia is dreadfully hypocritical over Israel, as much of the Arab world is. I think we just have to recognize that that is the case. It's undesirable, but that's the way it is at the moment. The Abraham Accords obviously will thrive if the Saudis sign up. The Saudis are playing hard to get. I did live in Saudi Arabia in two separate stints, and one of the things that really struck me while I was there is how heavy the burden of the holy places is on them. They struggle to live up to that responsibility. And of course, I wouldn't want to organize the Hajj or security on the Hajj or public safety on the Hajj.

And, you know, every single year people die on the Hajj, as would happen, probably anywhere where that many people gathered in confined spaces. And of course, the rest of the Muslim world kicks off, especially the Iranians, but others too, saying that "The Saudis are unworthy and they don't organize it properly, and they're not living up to their responsibilities." And a number of Saudis said to me at different times, "You know, you don't know how hard this is for us. We have to be more Catholic than the Pope," as the saying goes, "And, therefore, we have to worry about our reputation at every turn." Now, I think that is in play on the Abraham Accords. I think that's one of the things that's going on. It's one of the reasons that they're loud in their criticism of Israel, loud on a number of sort of pan-Islamic issues, is because they're trying to deflect against that kind of criticism.

Now, what's disappointing to me is that Mohammad bin Salman over the early period of his effectively dominating the Saudi scene, has shown a great deal of leadership. I mean, he's shown the ability to face down difficult opponents, and perhaps most remarkably, he's faced down the Islamist constituency over all of the sort of internal reforms. So, "I want tourism. I don't care what these sheikhs say over in the Najd, we're going to do it. We'll do whatever it takes. We'll have women unveiled. We'll have Western businesswomen coming in and sort of sitting in smart hotels in Riyadh and Jeddah." And I went back to Saudi after a longish gap. I went just before COVID, and then there was a six-year gap before I went again. And the changes that he had brought about were staggering. I mean, really staggering. For somebody who'd lived in Saudi Arabia, it felt like I'd arrived in, not quite Dubai, but it could just as easily have been Doha or Kuwait.

It felt very, very relaxed, and it was clearly – it had clearly opened to the world. Now that he lacks the courage to take it that one step further and say, "This has to become about driving peace in the Middle East. And Saudi Arabia has a central role in driving that peace. And I've already made enemies of the religious establishment so what does it matter if they don't like my foreign policy?" I had hope that he would seem bolder over the Abraham Accords. Now, there is an argument that still says that although Saudi Arabia doesn't feel any urgency over the Abraham Accords, it's biding its time. It feels that we can see what plays out. Maybe some other countries will join, maybe Indonesia will join, who knows? And maybe eventually they will join. But it is frustrating that at a time when I think that kind of dynamism would really help in the Middle East if the Saudis properly joined that party. That's why this falling out with the UAE is troubling.

DUBOWITZ: Well, that's why I want to go next, and I think that'd be a good place to bring the conversation to a conclusion, is where we sort of started the conversation, which is back at Yemen and your admonition to policymakers not to forget about Yemen. Because December of 2025, while everybody was sort of getting ready for the holidays, all of a sudden – seemingly out of nowhere – this crisis blew up between the Saudis and the Emiratis over Yemen. And maybe, I mean, you could talk a little bit about what happened and why it has such consequences not only for Saudi Emirati relations, but for greater regional normalization, greater regional integration, as well as US interest in the Middle East, as we see two of our closest Gulf allies at each other's throats?

FITTON-BROWN: Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, I know we experts, we're all supposed to scratch our heads wisely and say, "Oh, I saw it coming." Well, I did not see it coming. That came as a shock to me when that blew up between the Saudis and the Emiratis in Yemen. But you can draw a number of conclusions from it. I mean, one is obviously that there were other areas of disagreement that had been festering. So, you know, some differences over which parties to back in Sudan, a tolerant attitude that the Emiratis had perhaps towards defacto independence of Somaliland, although it was Israel that actually recognized Somaliland as an independent country. Some evidence when you look at all this, that the Emiratis have been very comfortable dealing with sub-state actors. The Saudis tend to insist on dealing with national state governments, even if those national state governments have objectionable policies or objectionable members of those governments. And so, there was some sense that the Saudi and Emirati approaches in the region had drifted apart. And then the Abraham Accords, of course, because the Emiratis were at the vanguard of that, they were very decisive. The Saudis, of course, as we said earlier, have been hesitant.

DUBOWITZ: No, the Saudis had blessed the Bahrainis entering the Abraham Accords, right?

FITTON-BROWN: Absolutely.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. Bahrain never would've entered the Abraham Accords without Saudi support. So, there seemed to have been strong tacit support from MBS [Mohammed bin Salman] for the Abraham Accords. And then right before October 7th, even MBS had gone on CNN and was speaking publicly about this. It looked like some kind of deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel was imminent, and obviously that got completely blown up after October 7th. But tell us a little bit about what happened in south Yemen between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, because again, very few people understand that actual spark that seemed to have lit this relationship on fire despite these perhaps doctrinal differences in these other areas of the Red Sea in the Horn of Africa that had preceded it.

FITTON-BROWN: So, I think what it tells you is that you can't ignore a conflict, or if a conflict comes frozen and you turn your back on it, then things happen that you're not expecting. We mentioned the Stockholm Agreement in December 2018 when the Saudis were prevailed upon not to take the Port of Hudaydah. And the Port of Hudaydah stayed in Houthi hands with consequences that we've seen since then. You could say that effectively in the seven years since the Stockholm Agreement that the civil war in Yemen has been a sort of a frozen conflict from the point of view of the Saudis. The front lines have moved slightly, but not very much. And the Saudis have really just wanted out. They've been trying to get out of Yemen for that whole time. And meanwhile, the Emiratis were playing in Yemen in a much more, sort of purposeful way. They've done a lot of counterterrorism work in Yemen, with the US as well.

The Emiratis, unlike the Saudis, they put forces on the ground in Yemen, and they became very comfortable with two constituencies. One was the nephew of Ali Abdullah Saleh, who leads the forces that would take the Red Sea coast if the conflict were to start moving again. And the other was the Southern Transitional Council. So effectively, the Emiratis ended up making common cause with southern separatists. So, the southern separatists in Yemen, it's worth sort of, again, just referring back briefly to what we were talking about earlier in the history of Yemen, they are really fed up. They just feel that they have been hammered from the north again and again and again. First by Ali Abdullah Saleh, now by the Houthis. They've had enough. They want an independent state. Again, they want to go back to the PDRY [People's Democratic Republic of Yemen], but as opposed to it wouldn't be communist this time.

So, the Emiratis were comfortable with that. Again, as we said, comfortable with sub-state actors, and they'd managed to drive a relationship between Tareq Saleh and the Southern Transitional Council. So those guys were – they were the most effective opposition forces against the Houthis, and they were operating on the ground in Yemen quite successfully. What happened, though, is that with the conflict effectively frozen with the pro-government, northern politicians not really doing much, not pulling their weight, with the exception of Tareq Saleh, there was sort of disenchantment setting in the south. The Saudis sort of had their back to this. They were sort of saying, "We don't want anything to do with this. We just want to get out. We want a deal with the Houthis if we can possibly get it." And of course, the southerners started to draw their own conclusion and say, "Well, actually, no, we don't want anyone to make a deal with the Houthis. We want our independence. And if the northerners don't want it enough, well, they can be dominated by the Houthis, but we don't want to be."

And they saw some things they didn't like that were happening at a tactical level inside Yemen, including specifically in the governor of Hadhramaut, where there were some local maneuverings over control of oil fields and things of that kind. And so, you had a combination of local initiatives with the government not taking any notice. The Southern Transitional Council deciding they wouldn't tolerate it. And suddenly you had this bursting out of southern forces, which went into Hadhramaut, went into Mahra, and effectively took over most of the south of Yemen. And that all happened within a matter of weeks. It was a very sudden development. And it shocked the Saudis. They hadn't seen it coming. They thought that if they just sort of covered their ears, then somehow it wouldn't be happening.

But it did happen. Now, the thing that really angered the Saudis was that they realized that the Emiratis were involved in this, and they said, "Well, this is our national security because we have a border with Yemen. You don't have a border with Yemen. What are you doing? What are you doing? This could break up Yemen. It could lead to fragmentation. We could have sort of a completely Balkanized – you know, Somalia on the Arabian Peninsula, effectively on our border forevermore. We need to hold to the unity of the internationally recognized government and ultimately to the unity of Yemen so that we're just dealing with one entity on our southern border." And of course, the Emiratis had not realized how much this would upset the Saudis and it would upset them enough, as you know, that they actually took kinetic action against a resupply operation in the Port of Mukalla on the Arabian Sea.

And so, the Emirates, I think, have done everything that they could to reassure the Saudis. They said, "Okay, we didn't mean to upset your national security. We certainly, it wasn't our intention. And if that's how you feel that we've behaved, then we will back out." So, they've withdrawn from Yemen and the internationally recognized government has been reconstituted. It's sort of back in place. The former leader of the Southern Transitional Council is now a fugitive. So, the Emiratis probably feel that they've done what they need to do to reassure the Saudis that they didn't mean any harm. I think some trust has been broken. The Saudis certainly feel, "Hang on a sec, these are our little brothers. They're our best friends. And yet they've created a problem for us, and we are still angry with them." But I think we can't extend that argument to say that Saudi has definitely reoriented itself because that's where some of the commentary has gone.

It said, "If the Saudis have fallen out with the Emiratis, that means they're now friends with the Qataris. That means they're now friends with the Turks. That means there's now a Sunni crescent building between Riyadh, Islamabad, Ankara, and Doha to replace the Shia crescent with the Iranians sort of being in the doldrums after their military defeats last year." I think that is over interpreting the evidence. I see every reason in the world why the Saudis and the Emiratis will successfully patch up this division. A, they have no real grounds for disagreement other than the style of their engagement, but that can be managed. B, they're both extremely close allies of the United States, not just in every respect, including commercially, including in the artificial intelligence sphere. The US has a strong strategic interest in them getting on with each other. And whereas the Emiratis have evidently erred in upsetting the Saudis in Yemen, it's hardly a comparison with the way that the Qataris were systematically trying to undermine the kingdom through *Al Jazeera* for years on end, leading to the four-year blockade of Qatar.

DUBOWITZ: Mean, the Emirati perspective on this, I met with both Saudi and Emirati senior officials in recent weeks. And I think you've well-articulated the Saudi perspective on this. And I agree with you. I think there is an effort from Riyadh and from Abu Dhabi to patch things up between them, but also with important constituencies in the United States. I think the Emirati perspective is the Saudi preference for dealing with national governments and trying to respect territorial integrity and really build broad coalitions, which sometimes include bad actors like the Muslim Brotherhood, hasn't worked. And they'll say there's just no evidence that it's worked in Yemen or in Libya or in Sudan or in Somalia. In fact, if anything, it's failed miserably and they're backing some of these very effective sub-state actors and carving out territory from these countries that you can use as a model for economic development and greater prosperity and greater stability, that actually has more chance of working. Because I think what's happened in Yemen now is that now the STC, the most effective counter Houthi force, has been significantly undermined by what the Saudis have done, and that only re-downs to the advantage of the Houthis and ultimately to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

FITTON-BROWN: So I think that's exactly right, and I tend to come down on the Emirati side of this argument, and I think the Emirati side of this argument is much more in line with the way that this US administration thinks as well. You know, thinking in terms of breaking the mold, thinking in terms of saying, "That long-term containment strategy, it just didn't work. Things just got worse over years or over decades in some cases. And instead, let's act decisively. If you have a region of Somalia that has not been governed from Mogadishu for 30 years, let's recognize it. Let's say – Somaliland seems to work, it actually has elections. It's a stable commercial environment where you can actually achieve real outcomes. And if you need to have a military base against the Houthis, you can have one there. So why should we pretend it doesn't exist? Why should we pretend that this ridiculous failing government in Mogadishu has anything to do with Somaliland, which is hundreds and hundreds of miles away?"

So, I get the way the Emiratis are approaching this, I guess where they mis-stepped was to think that Yemen itself would be anything other than an absolutely core concern for the Saudis. That the Saudis would not be neuralgic about uncontrolled change in Yemen. And then I guess the thing I wanted to come to perhaps finally is there is a real worry about Saudi Arabia's weakness in the face of Yemen and weakness in the face of the Houthis. The Houthis, they claim the holy places. They claim Mecca and Medina. They arrogate to themselves the right to shut the Red Sea whenever it suits them. When I look at the way the Saudis are currently playing their relationship with the Houthis, I see a disaster in the making. Yes, they would love to deal with a unitary Yemen. Maybe they're even willing to deal with a unitary Yemen which is dominated by the Houthis because that's essentially the deal that they've been trying to make with the Houthis.

It's, "Let us get out of your civil war and we will pay you protection money, which can be dressed up as reconstruction funds, and you leave us alone. Just don't destabilize our southern border and we'll sort of help you to reconstruct the country." What they don't seem to understand is that the Houthis are – that we're really talking about gangsters here, or the hungry wolf that is just coming back again and again and again. And they'll buy themselves peace for a couple of years, and then the Houthis will be back and demanding more. And so, if Riyadh can't see that, if MBS can't see that, then he is setting himself up for failure.

DUBOWITZ: Well, MBS should call the Israelis and ask them how that containment strategy with Hamas and to some extent with Hezbollah played out before October 7th.

FITTON-BROWN: Exactly

DUBOWITZ: Because in some respects, that's what the Israelis try to do, is they try to buy themselves peace on both borders while both Iranian backed terror organizations built up capabilities and plan for war. And that war exploded on October 7th.

Edmund, fascinating conversation. Thank you so much. Thank you for your service to this cause and thank you for helping us understand better the Iranian proxy network, their access of misery, and how they use these terrorist organizations all across the Middle East in order to advance their agenda. Hopefully Iran is on the back foot. Hopefully these terror organizations have been significantly undermined by Israeli and American and to some extent by Emirati power. And we're moving towards a more stable and integrated and normalized Middle East, but a lot of work to do. And so, it's great to have you on the team to do that work.

FITTON-BROWN: Thanks, Mark. It's been a pleasure.

DUBOWITZ: Thanks, Edmund.

DUBOWITZ: Thanks to my FDD colleague Edmund Fitton-Brown for his dive into jihadists movements through a lens of the Islamic Republic. As we ask ourselves how Iran fits into a world defined by Sunni jihadist movements like ISIS and al-Qaeda, what we found is that the lines are thinner than they appear, and the gaps in Western policy are precisely what state backed networks exploit. This is most evident with the regime in Iran who build the masterclass of this client-state relationship of terror with terror organizations like Hezbollah, the Houthis, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Shiite militias in Iraq. As Iranians chant "Death to the dictator!" in the streets, they also are very clear in their calls to stop funding terror proxies and use this money on the people of Iran. The Iran challenges is an evolving ecosystem of illicit finance, ideology and asymmetric power. The trajectory depends on whether the US chooses appeasement containment or to face the Islamic Republic head on. One thing is clear. Our policy path is a choice, one which has lasting implications on the Iranian people.

I'm Mark Dubowitz, and this has been The Iran Breakdown. Until next time when we break it down all over again.

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