

June 11, 2026

Featuring Hussain Abdul-Hussain and Morgan Ortagus

Moderated by David Schenker

Introductory remarks by Clifford D. May

MAY: Well, welcome, and thank you so much for joining us today, whether here with us in person, watching our livestream, or catching us later on our podcast. I'm Cliff May. I'm the founder and president of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. It's Thursday, June 11th.

We're going to talk today about a book that I highly recommend, that I believe deserves to be read widely and argued about seriously. It's called *The Arab Case for Israel*, and it was written by FDD's own Hussain Abdul-Hussain. Hussain, as some of you may know, grew up in Beirut, Baghdad, and Baalbek. He was raised in households and societies that treated hostility toward Israel as normal, something close to a cultural inheritance.

He marched in anti-Israel protests as a young man. He covered the Middle East as a journalist based in Beirut. And then through rigorous research, through direct exposure to Arab politics, to Hebrew source material, to the texture of life across the region, he arrived at a set of conclusions that challenged nearly everything he had been led to believe.

His core argument in this book is deceptively simple: the Arab world's continuing refusal to accept Israel's existence has been a catastrophe, but not just for Israelis, even more for Arabs; decades of war, proxy conflicts, diverted resources, and stunted economies. Hussain's contention is that normalization is not a concession; it is profoundly in the Arab world's own interests.

The question now is whether Arab leaders, who, as Hussain argues, often support normalization privately but lack the courage to do so publicly, will step up and do what's right for the Arab world. With that, I'm pleased to introduce Hussain Abdul-Hussain, who these days is a research fellow here at FDD, focused on Arab-Israeli relations, Gulf affairs, and Iran's regional influence.

We're also proud to have with us Morgan Ortagus, who served as State Department spokesperson during the first Trump administration, played a central role in advancing the Abraham Accords. She returned to government as deputy special presidential envoy for Middle East Peace in the second, or current, Trump administration.

By the way, she bears a striking resemblance to somebody who used to work at FDD, her identical twin sister, Megan. Both beautiful and both brilliant, and I hope I'm not getting myself in trouble, but – but this is just between you and me, so don't tell anybody I said that.

(LAUGHER)

With us, too, is our good friend David Schenker, also beautiful and brilliant.

(LAUGHTER)

There we go, I got myself out of it. Today's moderator, David served as Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs from 2019 to 2021, the principal Middle East advisor to the Secretary of State, overseeing U.S. policy across 18 countries, from Morocco to Yemen. He's now a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and Director of the Program on Arab Politics.

Before we dive in, just a few words about FDD. For almost 25 years, to my astonishment, FDD has operated as a fiercely independent, nonpartisan research institute, exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. As a point of pride and principle, we do not accept foreign government funding.

One final note: after the discussion, Hussain will be signing copies of *The Arab Case for Israel*. That'll happen right outside of this room, immediately following the conclusion of the panel. And with that, David, the floor is yours.

SCHENKER: Thank you. Thanks for the opportunity to moderate this panel; I'm really pleased. The book is a great read, and it's going to be a lot of fun to talk about it. And, of course, a lot of fun to be here with my friend and former State Department colleague, Morgan.

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So, there's so much to discuss. Hussain, I want to start with your – your book. You write about your own personal story in the book. Can you tell us about your days at AUB [American University of Beirut]? I have been on campus, and for some reason, I have this image in my head of, like, posters of Che Guevara on the walls and the dorms there. What's it like at AUB? And what was it like for you?

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Well, that's pretty accurate. You would see posters of Guevara. By the time I had joined AUB, I had broken ranks with the tribe that I – that I had grown up in. And I grew up in a religious Shia family. And as time went by and I broke ranks with the tribe, naturally, when this happens, you move left. I mean, you know, there's no other way to – to go to.

Left is Marxists, Trotsky, Lenin, you know, all the guys, the nice guys. And this was the time when I was at AUB and, of course, AUB was mostly leftists as well. So, I pretty much spent my whole years at AUB with a kufiya on my shoulders. I also had a beard, mainly in military. I really thought we were going to liberate the whole thing by the time I had graduated.

But listen, there's one thing really important. All of these Marxists, Leninists, you know, all these organizations, they claim that they seek equality and democracy. Even North Korea has the word "democracy" in its official name. I mean, the guy thinks he's a democrat. And pretty much everybody else on the left.

So, I really believed that part. And because I believed that part, liberty and democracy, I started reading and, you know, one thing led to another. And then I discovered that, you know, Che Guevara doesn't really look like democracy. And that my – my brand of democracy was more the life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

And this is what put me on a, you know, on a course to change from being on the left to, you know, endorsing America and, you know, what the American principles are and what America stands for.

SCHENKER: So, it wasn't one particular incident that you had the epiphany and woke up and left Arab nationalism and became pro-American and making the case for Israel?

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Actually, there were two. The first one was when Israel pulled out of South Lebanon. And I used to work for the *Daily Star* at the time, and I drove to the border, and I could touch Israel. And this was really life-changing for me, because I suddenly saw Israeli families, mothers driving their kids to activities and stuff, men working the fields.

So, this made me really curious. And I wanted to learn, but I didn't have the sources to get to because, you know, everything is controlled in Lebanon. Mostly, if you want to learn about Israel in Lebanon, you have Edward Said, [Norman] Finkelstein, or [Noam] Chomsky; you take your pick.

So, I wanted to learn and I thought, OK, then I'll have to learn Hebrew, because I could get their stations on the FM and the AM. So, I had to learn Hebrew to listen to the debate, so that I could, you know, understand what was going on. So, this was one major turning point.

The other turning point was the Iraq War. And as someone who had left Iraq when I was eight, and as someone who couldn't attend the funerals of my grandpa and grandma in Baghdad, and as someone who – I mean, in the family, we hated Saddam. My dad hated Saddam. That's was – that's how it was.

And when the United States showed up, because, you know, the conspiracy theory in most of the Arab world has it that America installed Saddam, that the CIA installed Saddam and was keeping him to keep the Iraqis and the Arabs behind.

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So, now, the superpower is here to remove Saddam. And I thought, OK, of course, you know, I'm on board. You know, we're removing Saddam, we're spreading democracy. And that's when all my left – most of my leftist friends, maybe except for two or three, said, "No, no, no, no, now we're not supporting democracy. Now we're countering imperialism. Now we're fighting imperialism." And that was when we, you know, parted ways. And I said, see you later, and I moved here.

SCHENKER: Nice. Morgan, you wrote the foreword to Hussain's book, mostly focused on the Abraham Accords, something that you played a role in. Can you talk about your role and the ongoing significance?

ORTAGUS: Well, I mean, you were there; you and I worked it together. It's – it was really – I mean, the Abraham Accords is a pivotal point, obviously, in anybody's career, in any diplomat's career. I think it's something, David, you and I both – you work on your entire career, and you think maybe at the end of it you're going to get something as historic as what we were able to achieve in Trump one.

And it was, you know, for me – maybe some of you have heard this story, but for me, as a Jewish mother, to sit in the Oval Office with the President of the United States, and I was very pregnant – if you look back in the pictures – don't look actually, I'm like 50 pounds heavier.

But if you look back in the pictures, and you were there as well, to be on the phone with the President of the United States when he's on the – Bibi Netanyahu on the phone, the leaders of UAE and Bahrain, those are the first that went into the Abraham Accords before Morocco and Sudan.

And to be in that moment with this now five-and-a-half-year-old beautiful Jewish baby girl in my belly, I was sitting there thinking, what a different Middle East this will be for her. And not only for her, but for the children in UAE and the children in Bahrain at the time; they're going to grow up being able to have one passport and not have to bring two passports to go to Israel or to, you know, Dubai for the weekend.

And so that was such a really hopeful moment for our careers. It was obviously devastating, October 7th, in many ways, to see just how many people in the region would fight back against more peace and more normalization and more integration of Israel.

But I think a crucial point that we have to remember is it wasn't luck – where – which is how we got the Abraham Accords and Trump one. It was a series of policies that we started pursuing probably about a year into the Trump administration in Trump one. And it was principally the max economic pressure campaign against Iran.

We took this, you know, call it a crazy approach. We took this approach where we said we wanted to completely shift the balance of what President Obama and his team had done in the Middle East. They had obviously given billions of dollars in sanctions relief to the Islamic Republic of Iran, and they were penalizing our friends.

I mean, look at what they did to – to Israel – the last vote of the United Nations in, what was it, January, December, right before...

SCHENKER: December.

ORTAGUS: Right, December, right before President Trump was inaugurated, embarrassing the prime minister of Israel, giving him, you know, the exit out the side door of the White House. It's not how you treat friends and allies, especially not ones that actually fight for you and with you.

So, we wanted to completely change that balance. We wanted to actually punish our enemies and reward our friends. And so, it was the max pressure campaign over three or four years; obviously, taking out Qasem Soleimani, I think, was a crucial point and one of the best days of my life.

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SCHENKER: Me too.

ORTAGUS: And I remember very vividly – and for the Iranians listening, definitely one of the best days of my life. And I remember sitting in Pompeo's office with Dave right after we called jackpot. And we were just all – me and you and Pompeo and...

SCHENKER: I think Brian Hook.

ORTAGUS: ...Brian Hook. We're all kind of just staring at each other like, I can't believe we just did this.

SCHENKER: Yeah, remarkable.

ORTAGUS: But – so taking out Soleimani, max pressure against Iran, really getting Iran in a box. But – but even almost more importantly, showing Israel and the Gulf Arab states what it means to actually be a friend and ally of the United States, that we would stand with you, that we would reward you.

And I think those policies are what led to the Abraham Accords. So, as we look towards today, and I'm sure we're going to get into this, when people constantly ask me – because, of course, President Trump's – my title in this administration was presidential envoy for Middle East peace. So, the whole point is to get more countries into the Abraham Accords.

How do you get there? It's the same formula that we did in Trump one. Nothing is new under the sun. Iran has to be in a box. The regime has to be diminished. And the countries in the region that are threatened by Iran have to feel like the United States will stand by them.

SCHENKER: Thanks. You know, Hussain, Morgan talked about sort of October 7th as a turning point. Before October 7th, the Biden administration was engaging with Saudi Arabia about the prospect of normalization.

Is that delayed indefinitely because the Saudis suddenly are concerned about Palestinians, or is it delayed because of internal Arab stuff, the new Gulf rift, you know, wanting to be as far away from Abu Dhabi as possible?

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Well, that's a great question. And just to say before I start answering is that I've been, or I was, Saudi Arabia's friend and ally for the longest time over the past 10, 15 years. The only time we disagreed when – was after Lebanon had ejected Assad's forces from Lebanon and then Saudi had to turn around, and then they took [Rafic] Hariri and made him, you know, kiss and make up with Assad.

And that was the only time when the Saudis and myself – I found myself on the other side from them. But since then, we've been pushing in the same direction: disarm Hezbollah, weaken Iran. And after MBS came to power – his dad came to power in 2015, and he started raising, by 2017, all these 2030 plans, I was sold on all of them.

I cheered for all of them, supported all of them. And with this plan came the idea of normalization with Israel. And when we say normalization, what they meant, and what they told us, and what we believed, was that this would have been bilateral. It wouldn't really have to wait for the Arab League and, you know, the unicorn things that will never happen.

Now, unfortunately, starting a year ago, I think they've been reversing their steps on this. I tried to explain it. I don't have many explanations. Maybe the economy is the biggest driver and factor in this. And the reason I say it's the economy is because even though Saudi Arabia is a rich country, they do export or sell nine – nine million barrels of oil a day.

They have huge...

SCHENKER: Not anymore.

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ABDUL-HUSSAIN: I mean, now they're down to seven, I think. Yes, thank you. They have a relatively big and expanding population, and oil money will not really go around for everyone. And I think the whole idea was that MBS wanted to copy Dubai and have – and wean Saudi Arabia off of oil and oil revenue.

And once that happens, you start having tourism, you start having, you know, a piece of the services economy, global pie, you know, AI, other kinds of things. And Israel becomes the most important piece in your puzzle if you're trying to transform the economy into something that's – that's a knowledge economy, that seeks technology and AI and these kinds of things.

And for a while, this – this looked to be like the Saudi direction. Starting a year ago, I started sensing that these guys are now – it seems to me that they don't think that 2030 is happening anymore. And when this happens, when there are headwinds facing your economy, like everybody, like every ruler in the Middle East, the first thing you do is that you start cheering for Palestine.

And my fear is this is what's happening now. It doesn't help that Dubai has succeeded in the model where Saudis have not succeeded. Dubai is friends – or the UAE is friends – with Israel and Saudi Arabia is not. So, it's – it's anyway put them on different sides of how each one of them looks at the region.

ORTAGUS: But it's not just – you're right, it's economic. It's also very much security. Because I started doing the track two and helping Amos and Brett in the Biden administration on the negotiations between Saudi and Israel, with Senator Graham, in his office.

And the – what really happened – and we met several times, of course, after October 7th as well – the threats to MBS and to the King and to the whole government in Saudi Arabia went up exponentially after October 7th. I mean, it was very low before. So, I think it's also very much a security situation as well.

And when you look at it from the lens of MBS – everybody, you know, is a politician of some sort. What's the most important thing that he has to do in the next few years? Actually, become king.

SCHENKER: Yeah.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Yeah.

ORTAGUS: Right? So, does getting a deal with Israel help him become king or not? Does it help that peaceful transition? You know, he sort of – he got there in a very interesting manner and took out a lot of his family members in order to get where he is.

But he still has that hurdle of becoming king and getting through the Shura Council and having that peaceful transition. And I think, as for most politicians around the world, certainly here in America, that transition is more important to him than a peace deal with Israel.

SCHENKER: Yeah, certainly in the short term, certainly.

ORTAGUS: Yeah.

SCHENKER: So, Morgan, Saudi Arabia off the table for now. In the...

ORTAGUS: I don't know.

SCHENKER: Push – push down the road a little bit.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: I wish they were.

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SCHENKER: So, early on in the Trump administration, the second Trump administration, you're an early proponent for direct Israeli-Lebanese negotiation. Kudos for that. Where is this going? How's it going? You know, do you believe that they're going to be the next Abraham Accords country?

ORTAGUS: I hope they have the courage to do so. I will say that I think that President Aoun and Nawaf Salam have rhetorically gone further than any administration has in Lebanon in the last 20 years. So, they've gotten very good at talking and saying the right things, and now it's time for action.

The principal problem that we have in Lebanon, and everyone knows this, and the Israelis talk about this, is, of course, Hezbollah, the disarmament. We face a similar problem, you know, in Gaza. But I think another crucial challenge that we have in Lebanon is we have a – I'll just say it – a Hezbollah-sympathetic CHOD, chief of defense.

And so, when you look at what the LAF [Lebanese Armed Forces] has the capability of doing – I sat at the mechanism, I got the mechanism meetings that Amos Hochstein put in place after the cessation of hostilities. They were meeting.

Last summer I revived that. I sort of beat everybody on both sides to make them come to the Naqoura. We were there like every two weeks. And it was actually many beautiful moments, because you have at the Naqoura – it's this tiny, tiny room.

You have the UN there making coffee. That's about all they were good for. And you – it was good espresso, though. And you had great pastries from the Italians. And you had – you had the Israelis on one side of the room and the Lebanese on the other side of the room.

This was – at the beginning, it was military only. I'm in the middle, sort of, you know, forcibly bringing these two sides together, being mama bear. And at the beginning of these mechanism meetings that I was forcing every two weeks, both sides of the room could barely look at each other.

And I'm really proud to say, by our last meeting in December, which included civilian representatives in the first direct negotiations in 32 years, people were shaking hands. They were smiling at each other whenever they came in the room.

And we were slowly and tediously and quietly – I purposely kept it out of the press in order to try and build trust between the two militaries. And Admiral [Brad] Cooper was a big proponent of this, and his team were the Marines. We brought the Marines back to Beirut; also, pretty proud of that.

So, we were – we were making a ton of progress, but I think it comes down to the capabilities – not just the capabilities of the LAF, but the institutional will to actually do the disarmament of Hezbollah, which just fundamentally is not there.

They want to continue to talk about national consensus and national dialogue. But I would say that – one important note that I want to make sure that we make, too, is that while the disarmament of Hezbollah is very important in these negotiations, and especially important when it comes to the militaries, this is a little bit controversial. You may not even agree with me, David. I don't know if you agree with me, Hussain.

I am a big advocate of peace simultaneously with disarmament of Hezbollah. I think Iran would love nothing more than for us to kick normalization and to kick peace between Israel and Lebanon down the road.

So, the more that Americans and Israelis, the more that we say Hezbollah must be disarmed first. First of all, Hezbollah has to be disarmed. I mean, there's no love lost between the two of us. Clearly, everyone knows where I stand on Hezbollah. I still have the ring on. So, Hezbollah absolutely has to be disarmed. It's not a question.

I would argue the reason why these negotiations that Michel Issa and Mike Huckabee and Dan Holler are leading right now are so important is you have to take the narrative away from the Iranians that peace comes after disarmament.

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Because I think that's just playing into their handbook. Get peace. Let the people of the south, especially the Shia, start to see the economic benefits, the peace dividend, what would happen for them as a people.

I mean, no matter who you are around the world, if you have to sell a peace deal, people want to know what's in it for me.

And I think that we have to do a better job of making the argument, specifically to the Shia – and I mean, Hussain is a Shia from the south, so you could tell me. But we have to make a – we have to continue to make the argument to them that you will have a better life whenever your neighbor, who is 15 minutes away, that you can actually talk to them, and that you could trade goods with them, and that you can, you know, interact like normal human beings and normal neighbors.

So, Hezbollah has to be disarmed. But let's not fall into the trap of saying we can't have peace until they disarm, because then Iran wins, right? Because Iran is always – as long as there is breath in anyone in that regime, they're always going to try to fund them.

SCHENKER: Yes, the so-called enemies of peace, right? You can't let them get in the way.

ORTAGUS: Yes. Yes.

SCHENKER: Hussain, do you agree with that? That you can do both at the same time, or put peace before disarming?

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: No, absolutely. I mean, I even used to say, let's start talking, and then we sort out the, you know, the disagreement, because what the point of – the whole Arab Peace Initiative and thinking over the past 75 years has been is, OK, let's sign peace first, and then we start talking.

And it doesn't make sense to me. I mean, if we disagree – the Arabs and the Israelis, or the Lebanese and the Israelis – OK, let's sit and talk and be friends.

And by the way, when we become friends, it makes it easier to solve things, because it builds trust and friendship between the two sides.

Now, the two of you have been to Lebanon so many times, have met all these Lebanese characters, especially [Nabih] Berri and the other guys.

SCHENKER: Nabih...

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: And by now, we know that these guys, they hedge all the time. They don't want to be stuck on the wrong side of the world and the region.

And now, they're looking and they're thinking, if there's a deal between the US and Iran, then they might be stuck on the wrong side. So, they're hedging all the time.

And like Morgan was saying, President Trump is doing the right things – doing great things actually, you know, the joint agreement that they signed last week here at the State Department. These are all great things.

Now, the question is, when do we get moving to peace? And I don't see – I mean – you know – a friend of ours, Maria Maalouf, was just sentenced to 15 years in prison for going on an Israeli network. I mean, that's really silly. You know, so...

ORTAGUS: It's not just silly. It's asinine. And the government of Lebanon needs to reverse that.

(CROSSTALK)

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Absolutely.

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SCHENKER: Yes, it's anachronistic.

And personally, I think, actually, with Maria – yes, she's been sentenced in absentia – but you have everybody else from LBCI, This is Lebanon, you know, from NBC, et cetera, now routinely engaging with Israelis.

And this government – if this military court does that, you'll see Congress cut funding for the LAF. So, they're not going to do it, I don't think. And I think the floodgates are now – are now open.

But, Hussain, let me ask you about Hezbollah. You wrote a lot about Hezbollah in the book. Is it – Morgan's opinion – is that right, that this is more a matter of will, or lack of will, than capability? And, you know, that the LAF just won't do it because the government is afraid of civil war – or civil war really means Hezbollah attacking the government, right? Is that – is that the problem?

And second, what's the mindset of Hezbollah right now, and the Shia population? Are they sick of all this war, or are they starting to lose popularity?

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: So, if you grew up Shia back in the time – 70s, 80s – Palestine was never a Shia issue. And, you know, in this Levant – Israel, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories – there are no Shia. The only Shia exist in Lebanon. There's not a single Palestinian Shia.

So, if you were growing up back in the 70s or the 80s, or any time at that time, Palestine didn't mean much to you. It was a Sunni issue. And the Shia don't really like the Sunnis that much.

And these two mosques, they're trying to liberate the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque. These were built by Sunni people that the Shia hate like the plague. So, I really find it hard that these guys want to liberate these mosques.

So, this said, I think what Hezbollah did was that they dragged the Shia to this. But if you are sitting in a, you know, within Shia circles – Shia only – it doesn't mean much to them. The only way that Hezbollah can rally the Shia around them is to tell them that, if you don't stick by me, the Sunnis are coming after you. Al-Baqarah is coming after you. And this is – I mean, we hear this might be happening. So, this might – this will drive everyone crazy. Or the Christians are coming after you, or someone, or the Israelis.

So, this is the way for Hezbollah to keep the Shia around them, is that we have to stick together because we're under attack. But it's not, "we have to stick together because we have to go and liberate Jerusalem." It's not the Sunni rhetoric that they have.

So, at this point, the Shia are hurting and they're still on a war footing. So, they haven't been back to their villages. So, they are aware that they lost their houses, but they're not aware of the amount of damage. For some reason, they keep on imagining this as a repeat of 2006, that we will go back and everything will be fixed. And so, I think by the time they get to realize the amount of destruction, it'd be hard for – for Hezbollah to keep them in check.

One of the reasons that I think they may have rescheduled elections two years from now – they were supposed to happen on May 10th. And I think if they had been held this May, I think Aoun would have probably swept the other guys. This is to say that the Lebanese – the mood in Lebanon supports disarming Hezbollah and peace.

SCHENKER: Thanks. So, let's move on to the war, right?

ORTAGUS: Which one?

(LAUGHTER)

SCHENKER: The war – the war – the war in Iran.

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Hussain – Morgan, I'll go to you. You recently had a piece in the *National Review*. Are we winning the war?

ORTAGUS: Yes, I think so. And all of these protestations by Europeans and other, you know, feckless individuals who never get in the fight are wrong.

It is a – you know, obviously, I think we had a moment of opportunity after the protests earlier this year, where we had to decide on action – probably a little bit earlier than we had planned on, because it was the moment when we – when the president clearly told the people of Iran, the protesters, that we were going to stand by them and that help was on the way. So, help had to get on the way.

Nothing about war now is easy and simple. No one is going on a ship anymore, right, to sign a declaration at the end of the war. It's just not how it happens.

So, you have to look at the president's and the administration's goals. And as much as people like to critique every single thing this president and administration does, he is the only president in 47 years of the Islamic Republic to be willing to take kinetic action in order to coerce the regime back to the negotiating table.

So, you know, his negotiators, by the way, should be able to get a great deal because of the amount of leverage that he's given them.

The president talks about this all the time. He talks about what he's done to destroy their nuclear facilities, their military capabilities, their navy, their air force, and that we fly with impunity over their skies.

So, there is no doubt. I mean, when you look – they're on their third-string quarterback at best, if not fourth-string, on most of their top positions. So, I think the unfortunate reality is that so many people believe the bluster of this regime.

When they send out their hyperbolic tweets, I laugh. It's sort of like when my five-year-old does a tantrum. I think we need to stop taking them so seriously.

They've been – they've been degraded. Do they have capabilities? Of course, they still have capabilities. They have capabilities because of flawed American policy across multiple Republican and Democratic administrations that allowed them to build up, that allowed – that, unfortunately, led to the decision that President Trump had to make last June to target their nuclear facilities.

So, of course, they are still capable. Of course, they didn't fall overnight. I don't think anybody expected that they would.

But if you look at the regime now versus the regime that the president inherited – I mean, I was very concerned coming into the administration. I swore in 15 minutes after the president at the State Department.

We had – one of the – in September or October was when the JCPOA basically expired, the provisions that – the UN provisions – the UN sanctions were expiring. So, we knew coming in that we had a short window, through negotiations or through kinetic activity, to take care of the nuclear program.

And people often ask me this and say, well, who's the one sort of leading Trump on Iran policy? He's the leading hawk in the White House. He has fundamentally understood this issue since his very first campaign in 2016, of how destabilizing it would be for the region if Iran were to obtain a nuclear weapon. He set red lines for himself and said it will never happen on my watch.

And I think he very much understands that any deal cannot be like the JCPOA; has to make sure that they can't actually obtain a nuclear weapon. I think he's very clear on that. I think his negotiators are.

So, to everyone sort of prognosticating that this has somehow been a failure, look at the metrics, right? Look at the facts. Look at the capabilities and look at the regime strength today.

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And look at their economy, right? The inflation is through the roof. Job – they've lost millions of jobs. They have to turn on and off their internet because they're afraid of their own people.

And I think Secretary Bessent and the Treasury team are doing an amazing job at tightening the screws. They're going to continue to do it.

And I just think it's a matter of time before this regime falls. I don't know when it will be. None of us knows. It's like when we all woke up and Assad finally fell.

It will happen. The people of Iran will be victorious, and the United States and our ally Israel are going to see this through.

SCHENKER: Hussain, where do you come down on this?

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: No, I think I agree. I think they are weak. And I'm happy that, you know, Trump was the first president to take them on.

I mean, he really defanged one of the big, you know, mysteries that everyone thought – that Iran is this superpower and there'll be World War III and something terrible will happen. And none of that happened.

We all knew that they were a spent force. But look, I mean, the model that they have – even Saddam Hussein, the notorious Saddam Hussein, signed on a document saying that, OK, the war stops and I'm out of Kuwait.

Now, he declared it a victory, of course, like they always do, which is fine. But these – what you see now, what Hamas has been doing – look at Hamas. They just lost half of the Gaza Strip. And they refused to stop. They refused to.

And Hezbollah, I think Hezbollah did roughly the same thing. In November 2024, they signed on the cessation of hostilities. Today, they refuse to abide by what they signed on. And they're – they're trying to get a new ceasefire that's a total ceasefire that does not include any stipulation that they disarm. So, what you see now – we see a new way that these people are thinking: OK, you win, but I'll never admit. And we can just keep on going like this forever.

So, if Iran ends up doing what Hamas has been doing, this means that we have to find alternative routes to Hormuz. And I think the Emiratis are working on this. I think the Qataris are connecting to the Emiratis to work on this. You know, they have this Dolphin Gas line between them. And so maybe everyone is thinking, OK, goodbye Hormuz.

And I hope this is not the case. But, you know, what do you do? The Iranians are just sitting there. And even if they're beating – they're beaten, they're not willing to concede on anything.

SCHENKER: So let me ask you, one of Iran's demands is basically to say that there has to be a complete ceasefire in Lebanon for Iran to agree to move ahead with the Memorandum of Understanding to open the Strait of Hormuz.

The president, the administration, appears to have accepted, in a way, this linkage, because they have asked Israel – we're looking to limit Israel's freedom of action in Lebanon. No Beirut bombings, no Dahiya bombings.

What do you make of this? Is there a linkage? Are we going to – is the United States going to accept it? Will Israel accept it?

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Look, I think we have an issue here because we, Washington, have two different policies and views on Lebanon, and we carry them at the same time.

(LAUGHTER)

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: And we don't notice. And I think, so Ambassador Michel Issa, whom many of us love and know personally, he's been doing a great job.

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He's been part of the government-to-government direct talks here at State Department. And this – these talks indicate that the government of Lebanon is in charge.

But then, two or three days ago, Ambassador Issa also went to Speaker Berri to get from Speaker Berri Hezbollah's response.

So now we're doing two things. We're talking to Hezbollah, and at the same time, we're talking to the government. And I think, you know, knowing Lebanese politicians, I expect President Aoun to run for the exit. He's thinking, if they're talking to Hezbollah too, then talking to me doesn't mean much.

So, I think we, in this town, are not really resolved on which direction we're going. And I want us to go in the direction of: we will not do the ceasefire the way Hezbollah wants it to be.

The governments of Israel and Lebanon have agreed on a joint agreement. They signed on it. It has a roadmap. It has pilot zones. It specifies exactly who does what and when. And I think it's a great plan.

Now Hezbollah, what they're trying to do is they're sabotaging this plan by not stopping firing missiles. You know, they're saying, "OK, you think you can do it? Let's see who's boss." And they're firing missiles.

So, can we overcome Hezbollah? Can the LAF overcome Hezbollah? I mean, you know, Morgan said that they probably have the muscle to do that.

SCHENKER: 80,000 men and women under arms versus Hezbollah, right? This is the LAF. They have capabilities. It's just a matter of whether they make the assessment that there will be civil war, and whether that's realistic or not.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Civil war assumes that, you know, many groups will fight one another.

There are no groups who have guns other than Hezbollah. Even within the Shia community, Amal is not armed. I mean, you know, Hezbollah can beat everyone within the Shia and everyone in Lebanon.

Now, the Christians are not armed. Druze are not armed.

ORTAGUS: And everybody's running around like, you know, hair on fire, worried about civil war. Well, you have 600,000 Shia displaced, villages destroyed. This is the second time in just a matter of years that Hezbollah has dragged Lebanon into a war that they don't want to be in.

So, I sort of look at it like, what are you trying to save and prevent? You're currently destroying your country with this policy.

SCHENKER: Agreed. Morgan, let me ask you. So going back to, you know, your point on us winning the war. Undoubtedly, we have degraded Iran's conventional capabilities. We buried their so-called nuclear dust.

But now we're talking about what the president's objectives were beforehand, right? We got – you've got enriched – enrichment – enriched materials. You've got the proxies. You've got the ballistic missiles.

There was an early draft released that I think the White House acknowledged was – was credible, that the president and the administration had agreed to discuss limitations on enrichment, not an end to enrichment.

What do you see as the bottom line for a good deal?

ORTAGUS: Well, I don't want to – listen, there's so many versions that go on. And I can tell you, having been Steve Witkoff's deputy during our negotiations last year before the June bombing, I can tell you it changes – not only daily, it changes on the hour.

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So, I don't – I try not to comment too much on this version, that version, because I've just been on the inside and seen how much churn there is. And ultimately it comes down to what the president will accept, what the president will sign.

And I think that he's been very clear-eyed about what a deal needs to look like for Iran to never have a nuclear weapon, because that's what he's pledged. And we all know that that's zero enrichment, obviously, and 24/7, anytime, anywhere inspections, all of those things.

It has to be clearly much stronger than anything that the JCPOA had. But I think whenever you – when you look at the bigger picture of what this administration is ultimately trying to get at the moment, and I think if you look at Secretary Condoleezza Rice's *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, I think from last week, I thought she laid it out very – it was very prescient, right, and very astute.

And she made the case at the end of her op-ed that no deal – the status quo – is somewhat better than a bad deal. I think the President and his team understand that. I think they see that.

The other big missing piece, I think, in this discussion is our U.S. Senate, who gets very much – literally gets a vote on what happens in any agreement with Iran. I think most of you in this room and those people watching online will remember when we passed INARA during the Biden administration, which was somewhat of a Republican effort to tie the Biden administration's hands on their negotiations with Iran, and turned out to be a self-own for our administration as well.

And you have people like Ted Cruz, Tom Cotton, Lindsey Graham, and others – and anybody who's not a freshman senator was around during JCPOA. And Republican Senators have been very on the record for what they would accept in any deal with Iran, certainly even during the Biden years.

So Republican Senators are going to get a say in whatever the final deal looks like. And so that's the beauty, I think, of our democracy, as this comes down to not only what the president is willing to sign, and I happen to think that he's one of the hawkish – most hawkish people in the room on this issue.

It also comes down to what the U.S. Senate, what Republicans in the Senate, are going to abide by. And I think for the last 12 years, we have sort of beaten the JCPOA to death. So, we all know where you – where the three of us stand on that issue.

So, we shall see.

SCHENKER: So, Hussain, how are our partners in the Gulf doing? How do they see Washington right now? Do they see us as a reliable ally? Should we be consulting with them on our negotiations with Iran? Are they going to want us to return to our bases in their countries?

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: So, this is an interesting question. But we have to first qualify that they used to be Gulf countries and GCC, and I don't think they are anymore.

I think there are at least two or three blocks. You have the more – the closer to Israel and the United States – at this point, the UAE, Bahrain, maybe to an extent Kuwait. I think Kuwait is gravitating toward this block.

And then you have the Saudis, Oman, Qatar on the other side. So, these – they think differently, even though some people are saying that the Qataris are now, you know, not really happy where they are. So, it'll be seen whether they decide to move to the UAE and Bahrain and Kuwait side.

I think if you are Saudi Arabia, this is good for you. The oil prices have gone up. Iran is there: weak, beaten, something – something that looks like Saddam Hussein after 1991. If Iran becomes a different government and maybe becomes an ally of the United States and maybe signs peace with Israel, and it'll throwback seven or eight million barrels of oil a day on the market, I'm not sure if you're Saudi Arabia, you'd like to see that.

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So, I'm only being realistic. I'm speculating here. So, what they see now, they like. Now, the other guys don't like. So, Kuwait – they haven't sold a drop of oil over the past two months. The same applies to Qatar. These guys are thinking, now what? What do we do now? So, I think they have – they have varying degrees of approval or not.

Now, we've seen the UAE go really hawkish on everything connected to this war. They said, the regime must fall, you know, we support this war, we are happy that we are allies of the United States and Israel. I mean, they've said everything that nobody else would like to say in the room.

So which direction will it go? I think, look, I think the smaller countries, the ones right on the Gulf – Kuwait, Bahrain, the UAE, and now Qatar to an extent – these guys are scared of Iran, of this Iran. And this Iran is proving to be crazy, you know?

America targets them with five missiles, and then they're bombing everyone – Kuwait and Bahrain and Qatar and the UAE. And you're thinking, who does that?

ORTAGUS: A theocratic revolutionary regime does that.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Exactly, it's crazy. So, I think one more point about this is that the Saudis also – are also carving for themselves a position that's not really with the Gulf now. You see them more often than not caucusing with Turkey and Pakistan.

SCHENKER: Yeah, but with Egypt, the quad.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Well, I mean, Egypt is Egypt, you know?

ORTAGUS: Don't use that term.

(LAUGHTER)

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: I think, you know, Egypt is great. I don't think – I'm not sure they bring a lot to the table on this, but – but this is to say that the Saudis think that they have options outside of the GCC, whereas the GCC tend to stick together more than the Saudis.

SCHENKER: Yes, and of course, on the GCC, you know, the UAE is not part of OPEC anymore.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: That's right.

SCHENKER: So this whole political entity may be going the way of the dodo.

ORTAGUS: True.

SCHENKER: We will see.

So, I want to move on from the – from the war. We can talk about the war, and hopefully we'll get some Q&A about this from the audience, but elsewhere in the region, the administration was early on, and still appears to be today, bullish on Syria, right. Ahmed al-Sharaa, the president's going to see him when he goes to Europe – or Turkey – I don't know where he's going; he's going to meet Sharaa.

But how do you see the governance there? Is there going to be some sort of Israeli-Syrian agreement along the border, if not more than that?

The administration appears to be trying to leverage the removal of the state sponsorship of terrorism designation for some sort of movement on the border with Israel. How do you see that?

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ORTAGUS: You know, our very first national security meeting of this administration was on Syria, and I sat in a chair a couple of chairs behind Secretary Rubio, who I think articulated a very strong argument and a really beautiful policy, which was essentially a step-by-step approach policy, where we were, of course, demanding things like protection of minorities and Christians and Kurds, and you know, and everybody. And so, it was sort of constantly keeping the carrot in front of their nose.

I take a – you know, I've met with Jolani in September, I think, when I was there with the UN, under their auspices, and obviously met with his team. For me – I mean, I'm no longer a Trump administration official, so I can just speak as Morgan, but the jury is out for me. The proof's in the pudding.

I think that we are giving them an opportunity with the release of sanctions in order to try and turn Syria around. I mean, no one wants to continued civil war in Syria.

I don't think it would also be palatable to have a government led by jihadis. So, is the former jihadi – did he have the – you know, road-to-Damascus conversion from Saul to Paul? I hope; it would be great for Syria if he did. I remain – I don't want to say skeptical; I'm observant. Sort of, you know, we'll see what they're able to do.

I will say that the one thing that they have been fantastic on is working with us on Iran and the IRGC. And I think, as hard and as difficult as this is for us to do as American people, in foreign policy, we have to look at every issue around the world and in the region and say, what is America's strategic interest here? Because we can't be everywhere at all times.

So, when we look at Syria – and this was actually one of the things that Secretary Rubio brought up in that very first national security cabinet meeting, was what is our American interest here? It's obviously keeping ISIS down, so they can't plot attacks against – against the homeland, against Europeans. And it's keeping the Iranians out.

And of course, you know, things that we care about as a democracy, and things that we care about as a predominantly Judeo-Christian nation, which is protecting Christians and minorities there. But the first two, I think, are really like our strategic, you know, interest.

So, sometimes you have to hold your nose and accept people and policies that you wouldn't want to, in order to get what is in the best interest of the American people.

So, I think Syria's going to continue to be a challenge. But what we need to be – and I think the president is nimble enough to do this – is we need to judge them every day by their actions. And if they start to backslide, then thank God we have the Congress that can be there to slap them back into shape.

SCHENKER: Yes, they've no doubt, done a pretty admirable job of ending or limiting the arms shipment to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

(CROSSTALK)

ORTAGUS: Yes, I had this very weird...

SCHENKER: ...stories...

ORTAGUS: ...meeting at the UN when – because there's the U.S. sanctions and then there's also the UN sanctions, and it was some time in the fall, and we were having a meeting at the UN with the – with the Chinese and Russian ambassadors to discuss relieving of Syrian sanctions. And getting a lecture from the Russian and Chinese ambassadors on – on sort of the threat of radical Islam and how it opposed to their embassies was just one of those moments where you think, gosh, this is why I don't really read fiction.

SCHENKER: Tremendous.

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Hussain, the untold story, I think, of the war so far has really been Iraq, where you had Iranian-backed militia, the Hashd, the factions – the terrorist factions of the Hashd popular mobilization forces, not only attack, send 800 missiles and drones at their fellow countrymen in the Kurdish regional area, but also at Kuwait, Saudi, Jordan; they hit a nuclear facility in the UAE.

Now, you have a couple of these factions saying that they're going to disarm. Do you believe them? What do you think of the new government in Iraq? And how does the region, the Arab Gulf, view Iraq right now?

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Can I quickly squeeze something on Syria?

SCHENKER: Yes, yes, yes – yes, sure. I know, I'm sorry about it, it's your panel, man.

(LAUGHTER)

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: OK – thank you. Well, over the weekend, President Trump said that maybe we would – we might consider having Sharaa go into Lebanon and discipline Hezbollah. I think it's a terrible idea; don't do it, please. You know, I – I mean, whoever is listening, this is the worst idea in the history of ideas of foreign east – Middle East foreign policy.

SCHENKER: Yes.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Now, to the Iraqi war – listen, I'm one of the people who supported the Iraqi War, took a lot of heat for it, never changed. I insist that, you know, I'll still take this whatever we have now over going back to Saddam Hussein.

And I think if you look at Iraq now, Iraq is doing OK. I mean, you know, they're corrupt. Well, who's not in that part of the world? And, you know, things are moving in a way that's better than other countries.

I mean, they do hold elections every four years, and the supporters of Iran – so, you have a big chunk of Shia who pledge allegiance to Khomeini and support Iran and think they're one nation. And in 2021, when these people were running for election, they lost 100 seats in Parliament.

And that was a great lesson. So, many of these same people now, in this past election, 2025, they switched – they started saying "Iraq first." If there's war between America and Iran, we should stay out of it, because it's our interest to stay neutral. And these same people now won the majority.

So, now they learned that OK – you know, even if you're Shia, the Iraqi Shia do have their own patriotism. They do value being Iraqi and not being Iranian. And this is why you see now that these factions that are surrendering their arms to the government, of course under a lot of U.S. pressure – you know, we insisted that they must surrender their arms – but you see them surrendering their arms.

Now, some are questioning this and saying, well, this doesn't look genuine, and they're only acting and it doesn't mean much. Well, you know how you know that it does mean much? The three most loyal and biggest Iranian militias are opposing it and are screaming against it. And this is what tells you that this is serious. I mean, the other guys are giving up their guns.

So now the question remains to be told – to be asked: what do we do if Kata'ib Hezbollah and Nujaba and the Sayyid al-Shuhada do not surrender their arms? And you know, one of them – I think the other day, [Akram al-] Kaabi of Nujaba – he came out and said, "We will only give our arms to the 12th Imam when he shows up." OK, well, that's a policy.

SCHENKER: We'd be waiting for a long time.

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ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Yeah, we can build a policy on that. So, I think eventually the Iraqi government will have to send its military forces after these guys. And one note about these guys: when the Iran war started and these guys started targeting U.S. bases and places, including the embassy, the Iraqi intelligence went after these people and hunted them down, and they struck the Iraqi intelligence headquarters. So, you see them doing what the Lebanese should be doing, but thankfully, the Iraqis are now, you know, they look ahead on this.

SCHENKER: Yeah. I mean, important to note, the Iraqi government has more leverage in a way than the Lebanese government has vis-à-vis its militias. The Iraqi government pays their salaries.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Yeah, that's – I mean, that's a good point.

(LAUGHTER)

SCHENKER: Yeah. Alright, two more questions. Morgan, Turkey. So reportedly, Erdogan's coming to Washington. He's a favorite of the administration. President loves Erdogan. They've got this issue with the S-400s, the Russian advanced anti-aircraft, anti-missile system. And they want to be able to somehow fix this issue, right? They have [Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act] CAATSA sanctions against them. They can't purchase the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter that they should be entitled to as a – as a NATO partner. Where are we going on this? Plus, I think it's important to mention, Erdogan said this week, very publicly, that what Israel is doing in Lebanon and in Syria is a threat to Turkey.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Beirut and Damascus.

SCHENKER: Yeah. So...

ORTAGUS: Well, maybe he should stop threatening to take over Jerusalem in his speeches. That would be a good start. Yeah. I mean, listen, CAATSA is very clear. If they'd like the F-35, which is a fantastic fighter, get rid of the S-400. I mean, that's – what do you want? This is very simple stuff. You could try to cajole as many people in this administration, sweet-talk them as much as you want. The U.S. Senate will not be sweet-talked out of CAATSA.

So, this would be one of these – I feel like I answered this a million and five times when Trump one, from the podium. And every time I get all of these Turkish bots sending me very big angry faces. But it's the law, right? You want the F-35, you give up the S-400. Life's all about choices. As long as you continue to keep Russian advanced weaponry in your system, you don't get our best toys. So, you know, it is what it is there.

I think, as it relates to, you know, our broader relationship with our frenemy, Turkey, our NATO ally, and where we're going in the region – and you know, I mean, clearly Netanyahu talks about this, and Bennett, I think, and Lapid also, but I think definitely Bennett has also given speeches. You know, I think Israel definitely sees, once they have sort of taken care of the Iranian regime, they see Turkey as the next big threat. And this comes from Erdogan's own words. And so, this is certainly going to be a challenge for us, because they are a NATO ally, they are a partner with us. Clearly Israel is our strongest and most important ally in the region.

But this will be, you know, once we sort of get through this period – I'm almost 44, so I hopefully still have a little bit more time left in foreign policy in Washington. I'm sure this isn't my – one of the next big issues that I'll deal with. Nothing is easy in the Middle East, ever. Erdogan is young enough to be around for a while longer.

But you know, I think what they – what Turkey is asking the United States and Israel and the rest of the world to do is to ignore Erdogan's speeches where he threatens to take over Jerusalem, because this is just for domestic political consumption. And I would just ask everybody, when we have ignored despots and tyrants in the Middle East, when we have taken them figuratively and not literally, how did that work out for us?

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SCHENKER: Not well. Alright, last question. Hussain, we were talking about Turkey; let's move to, like, Turkey's best friend in the region, Qatar. Qatar is a major non-NATO ally, but some of our friends in the Middle East describe Qatar as a terrorist state. What are they? And maybe talk a little bit about the Muslim Brotherhood as well. Do you think we should sanction them? Because you talk about the Brotherhood quite a bit in the book.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: I do. The short answer is yes, we should sanction everything called Muslim Brotherhood or everything that's connected to the Muslim Brotherhood, because sometimes they tend to rename themselves as the Party of Justice and Love or something, you know, whatever name they take. So, whatever they do, we have to sanction them.

(LAUGHTER)

ORTAGUS: That's like opposite day.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Now look, Qatar is many things. They pretend to be our allies; they host our base. They also, you know, do us favors sometimes, but they also work against our interest. I'm not sure which Qatar we're talking to. There are different Qatars all the time. But the biggest problem that I personally have with Qatar is that this *Al Jazeera* thing – it's a tool with the biggest following in the region, everywhere.

And the main message of *Al Jazeera* is that the principles of the Age of Enlightenment – liberty and democracy and equality – do not work, and that the best alternative is Islam as a government. So, this takes you to the main motto of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is "Islam is the solution." And this is what *Al Jazeera* is putting on the air day and night. And this is what I disagree with, and many people disagree with, and we keep on telling the Qataris you have to decide, you know. And if these guys get their way and Islam is the solution, the first one who'll be out of the door is Prince Tamim.

So, you have to choose. We're telling the Qataris, you have to choose. And you know, I have a whole chapter about this, how we got to here. Qatar, in 2000-something, received Shimon Peres when he was the acting Prime Minister of Israel, in Doha. And they rolled out the red carpet. So, what changed? You were going in a good direction, and all of a sudden you became all Muslim Brotherhood and stuff.

SCHENKER: You've gone full circle. Alright, it's time for Q&A. Anybody in the audience have a...

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Bassam, I see.

SCHENKER: Please, Bassam.

BARABANDI: My name is Bassam Barabandi. I'm a former Syrian diplomat and I have been in DC for quite long time. Morgan, number one, we communicate through emails. Maybe you don't know me in person. And you helped us to release a Syrian prisoner from Lebanon. You introduced us to Ambassador Issa, and your role was very important to push the Lebanese to take the case seriously. And I just want to thank you very much for that. Number two, in dealing between Syria and Lebanon, I just have some comments – quick comments about it.

During the Syrian revolution, the Lebanese army left. They were positioned on the old Syria-Lebanon borders. They were coordinating with Hezbollah in all his operations inside Syria, smuggling Captagon, weapons, so on and so forth. And the same group still exists today.

So, today when we think about is the Lebanese army is willing, capable, has the will, has political will to counter Hezbollah, I think all these are the right questions, but the real question, I think, is there's – there's financial interest between some part of the Lebanese army and Hezbollah, which goes far beyond the government, Lebanese government regulation.

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They're getting salary. They get benefits. They get smuggling. They facilitate smuggling. Until today, this is processing. And this is one of the major problems between Syria and Lebanon today, that Hezbollah is stopping its machine gun on the Syrian border and launching attacks on Syria. Syria put its forces on the border. Then Hezbollah says, "Syria will invade Lebanon again."

And, unfortunately, we don't see the wills of some part of Lebanese part[ies] to counter that narrative, to counter that issue. So, it's very tricky what Hezbollah is doing inside Lebanon as an institution, away from the government regulation.

And I just want a question – a quick question now about the Syrian-Israeli peace. I think the Syrians publicly, they announced they are willing to make peace with Israel, or peace in steps – not steps – peace like Jordan or Egypt.

My feeling from talking a lot with Damascus, saying we don't feel the same sympathy or the same feeling from the Israelis toward having the conflicting zone with Syria. Rather, we see the Israelis as more hostile. They don't want peace, and so on and so forth. What's your assumption on that?

SCHENKER: Morgan, you first.

ORTAGUS: Yeah, so basically the question is, where are we on Syrian-Israeli peace?

SCHENKER: Yeah. Do the Israelis want it as much as some in Syria, I guess.

ORTAGUS: Of course, there are elements of both sides that want it. They have – I was a part of their – with Tom Barrack – a part of their negotiations in Paris last year. I mean, we started talking about this pretty – very early in the administration, actually even before the president met with Sharaa, because we were trying to think of what we wanted to put on the table.

Listen, the entire Middle East should know that the president has been very clear that his policy is the expansion of the Abraham Accords. And he said this even recently to all of our – to Saudi and to Turkey, and everybody who wanted us to go into an Iran deal: that I expect all of you to join the Abraham Accords. I expect normalization in the region.

These things take time. You know, we point to the Abraham Accords. And I think it's easy to forget that we didn't get them until the fall of 2020, you know, a couple of months before the election. So, we're only a year and a half into the administration. It's still early days. There's still a lot that can happen.

I fundamentally believe that we are going to be able to expand the Abraham Accords throughout the region. I hope that Lebanon and Syria are at the forefront. I don't think we can yet say when it will be. Everybody's got elections this year. Bibi has elections in a few months. We have elections in November. So, I do think election years in general are tricky to get these sorts of deals.

So, I think it's going to happen, but I think that – listen, it all fundamentally comes down to how we deal with the head of the snake. And if we deal with it the way we did in Trump one, and as we have continued to do in Trump two, and they're not a threat and a menace to the region, then it opens up a lot of historic possibilities and opportunities. And I – and I believe, based off my experience with this president, that he's going to do so. So, I'm still hopeful that we could get there with Syrian-Israeli peace.

Listen, this happened when I was in the State Department. We worked together in Trump one where we recognized Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights. I would say that a fundamental thing happened at the State Department, which is that we actually changed and we redrew all of the maps for what we recognized.

So, that settled U.S. policy and shouldn't change. So, to the extent that Sharaa can understand and appreciate and accept U.S. policy on President Trump's specific policy on the Golan Heights, then we could probably move forward.

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SCHENKER: Hussain, do you want to say anything? Joe? Oh, sorry.

CHESLOW: Hi. Thank you so much, and especially since I'm a longtime caller, first-time seer of your faces. Yeah, I wondered, to your knowledge, who in the government right now is handling the Lebanon file?

And Morgan, you spoke a little bit about the risk of civil war, but maybe you could get into that a little bit more, you know. Is there a risk that people who see their homes demolished don't blame Hezbollah but blame Israel, or blame their own government for not defending them?

ORTAGUS: There's a risk for everything. First of all, let me say, my dear friend and colleague Michel Issa, our ambassador – yeah, he's our lead there, and we had a – I helped him out in the fall before I transitioned out in February, and we worked incredibly closely together. And I think we have, really, a historic opportunity with him as ambassador.

He's Lebanese-American, grew up in Lebanon, speaks the language. And he has this really unique ability, I think, to speak to the Lebanese people in a way that, you know, a non-native Lebanese-American ambassador would not be able to do. So, I think he's doing a great job. He's working closely with Ambassador Huckabee.

And, crucially, Secretary Rubio is really the point person on this. He speaks with Aoun regularly. He tries to bolster him and his credibility. I thought – if you didn't see the interview that President Aoun did on CNN with [Christiane] Amanpour, fantastic. But he made it clear that for Lebanon, he doesn't want Lebanon to be a bargaining chip at the negotiating table between the US and Iran, either.

So, you know, the threat of civil war – of course, the threat of civil war – there's a threat that I could walk out and get hit by a bus. But we – the leaders of Lebanon – the CHOD and others – have to stop basing their policy on fear of what may happen.

Your country is currently being destroyed by Hezbollah. Your country is currently seeing hundreds of thousands of residents displaced without food, without running water, without homes. And you're – and you're still sitting around like, you know, twiddling your thumbs, worried about civil war. Why don't you worry about the current freaking war that you're in and take care of that?

SCHENKER: Hussain?

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: I think the civil war – we said this – it's – it's not happening. You know, everyone in this room who grew up in Lebanon, this is – this is an excuse that has been used all the time. When Assad had his forces in Lebanon and people like us were demanding that he withdraw his forces, the same thing. They said civil war. It didn't come. You know, Assad withdrew; no civil war came. I think it's just one of the talking points they use to scaremonger.

MANOK: (Inaudible)

SCHENKER: Yeah, it's on.

MANOK: First of all, I just respectfully disagree. I think when you were representing Lebanon – when you were representing the United States in Lebanon, we considered you as a native as well.

SCHENKER: Aww.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Yup.

(LAUGHTER)

ORTAGUS: I sort of became native.

June 11, 2026

Featuring Hussain Abdul-Hussain and Morgan Ortagus

Moderated by David Schenker

Introductory remarks by Clifford D. May

MANOK: When you went on TV – I think it was Lebanese television – right after the cessation of hostilities in 2024, and I remember you used the word "peace and normalization." Even the host, like, paused for a few seconds and said, whoa.

In less than a year, even the host and almost everyone else is normal with it, like normalizing the concept of normalization and peace. What do you think changed in public opinion in the past year in Lebanon?

SCHENKER: Hussain, you go first.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Well, look, there's a center in Lebanon called the Lebanese International something Information International. It's owned by a guy who is SSNP, so he doesn't really like Israel or peace with Israel. He held two surveys. The sample was 2,000 Lebanese. One was in August 2025. The other one was in May, this May 2026.

And when you compare them, you can see that the number of Lebanese who support disarming Hezbollah and peace with Israel has doubled. And this is only because, you know, we started talking about it not only on TV, but the president and the prime minister have said yes.

Now, if you look up the numbers like this past May, it's 50 percent who support peace with Israel. Now, if you take out the Shia, where the percentage is probably 8 percent that support peace because, you know, they have to stick together and stick with Hezbollah, then the number goes up to 65 percent of Lebanese who support peace with Israel. I mean, that's higher than – I don't know – the Democratic Party. I mean, that's a joke. But it's just, you know...

SCHENKER: It's higher than other countries that already have peace agreements with Israel.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Yes, exactly, than many countries in the world. So, if we can deal with the – if we can deal with the Shia in a way, just to say this is not going after you, I think, like, in terms of people to people, I think the gauge will also move on the Shia.

But we have to keep on pressing. And, unfortunately, when you get something that says, yeah, we're going with the Hezbollah-style ceasefire, I think this kills it and this pushes you back.

ORTAGUS: But I think also, Joe – I mean, you make a really good point about how much the narrative has changed, that you can – you know, two years ago, you would not be sitting at a coffee shop or at a restaurant in Lebanon, having an open debate amongst Lebanese citizens about peace with Israel. I don't think you would even be uttering the word "Israel."

And as much as me as a former American official at the time that I stood up and boldly went after Hezbollah, I didn't have skin in the game, right? It's people like Hussain and Hanin, our friend, who can't go back to Lebanon, like Antoun, who are here, like Maria, who got sentenced.

It's Lebanese with skin in the game who are willing to break the taboos, who are willing to go on podcasts, who are willing to fund media to change the narrative. And it was not an accident any of this happened. It's because a lot of our friends in this room decided, even if it means I'm not going back to Lebanon anytime soon, the best thing for Lebanon is peace with Israel.

And even through the personal threats that many of our friends and many people in this room get, they have been willing to boldly stand up and speak out for peace between Israel and Lebanon.

And I think the bolder you are, the more loud you are, the more it gives confidence to the average Lebanese citizen that they can – that they can start to say, you know, in the coffee shops, when we're getting our hair done as women, or when we're at dinner with friends, that we're able to say, no, this is something actually that would be good for our country.

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So, I think that we have to commend Hussain and others who have boldly spoken out on this, through much personal sacrifice. I don't have personal sacrifice when I speak out against Hezbollah, other than their silly little threats to me, which do not scare me. But a lot of other people have real skin in the game and are breaking the taboos. And I'm really proud to be their friend and associated with them.

SCHENKER: Well, I'll second that. I've just been told it's time to wrap up. Do you have any last words, Hussain? You should buy the book, and if you haven't, or get it for free outside – it's really a good reading and, you know, a profile in courage.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Well, my last word is thank you, everyone, for the support. It takes a village to write a book. My wife, in the audience, for her support. Morgan, for supporting on this and writing the foreword, and so everyone.

(APPLAUSE)

FDD, of course, first and foremost. Thank you. Thank you, everyone, for being here today.

SCHENKER: Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

END