**Raghida Dergham:** Good morning Washington DC where we have David Hale, ambassador David Hale he's a former undersecretary of State for Political Affairs until recently, until April 30th, but he is now a distinguished diplomatic fellow on detail from the State Department, that means he's borrowed from the State Department at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, so we welcome you from Washington Ambassador Hale. We also have to say good morning to also from Washington to Norm, to Norm Roule, he's joining us from the DC area, is it from the DC area you're joining us Norm?

**Norman Roule:** Yes, McLain.

**Raghida Dergham:** McLain there we are. Hello, McClain good morning McClain and good afternoon to Moscow where I have Ambassador Andrei Baklanov with us and as you can see you cannot miss that because the Kremlin's right behind you. Good early evening to Lebanon, to Beirut, where Michel Moawad is my fellow Lebanese, as David is my fellow American. So I look forward to this 35th e-Policy Circle of the Beirut Institute Summit in Abu Dhabi as usual it is geopolitical conversations on current affairs, hopefully sometimes we hope to go into what does make stability last and where will stability be made and by whom but sometimes the events of the day overtake the conversation. We have one hour as usual with 4 minutes as usual for each of the distinguished speakers to be concluded by one minute each and I will start with David Hale. Please 4 minutes to you.

**David Hale:** Thank you Raghida. It's great to see Andrei and Michel and Norman. I wanna emphasize I'm not speaking for the Biden administration or the State department. Although I am on detail, I am not speaking for them, I am just speaking from my own experience.

**Raghida Dergham:** Noted.

**David Hale:** You asked me to touch upon the Vienna talks, as well as the situation in Gaza and in Israel. I'm happy to do that I gotta start. Obviously the situation between Hamas and Israel is really one of deep concern. I think there is a great deal of focus right now on a ceasefire. I saw reports this morning citing Israeli sources on that so obviously there's an effort to get the rocket fire to stop. Israel of course will retain all the right to defend itself but you know I was struck by publicity put out by the Iranians and by the Palestinians when IRGC commander caught Ismael Hannia. And we all know the connections between Iran and Hamas. And we have to raise questions now and we can discuss it further, what do we say about Iranian intentions for the region. It seems to me that this is a really heartless exploitation of tension in Jerusalem in order to escalate wildly. We've seen this pattern before. There will be a ceasefire but when and under what conditions is obviously unclear. But I think it underscores the danger that Iran poses and will pose if it had a nuclear weapon and therefore I think it is all the more imperative that we explore in Vienna what's possible. It's a polarizing issue in our country whether to re-enter the JCPOA or not, there are hard choices, there are pros and cons, and they're fiercely debated. I think it's important to understand that I don't think this is going to be rapid resolution of the negotiations and I don't expect any change in policy toward the region when it comes to the US or Iran. In my remaining time I just wanna make two more points more broadly. One is to remember that the US is a global power with global interests and global obligations. And that will inform some of my comments within the course of the next hour. The second point is you've identified some themes that are the crises at the moment and warrant discussion. We're all facing global transnational threats when you talk about stability you have to look at the inadequate tools we have to protect ourselves related to health, to the pandemic, exploitation of technology which has pros and cons, obviously there's threats there and with climate. The Biden administration has embraced multilateralism in dealing with that and I think all of us will be affected throughout the Middle East as well. Back to you Raghida.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you very much David Hale. I have many many questions as follow-up to your very interesting points but I think I'll go now to our next speaker Ambassador Andrei Baklanov please 4 minutes to you.

**Andrei Baklanov:** Before I come to my, the main point I just want to say that yesterday we extended officially once more our proposals for the Palestinians and we've invited them to come to Moscow premises to negotiate. Today we've been waiting for the [audio unclear] It seems to me that the both sides are not going to negotiate, they're going to beat each other. This is a sad phenomena, a sad development. My main point is something else. I really think that if the parties concerned go on [audio unclear] these military activities or either stop negotiating on the principles we will never come to a certain degree of success so instead of principles we propose to do something else to make them sit together, I mean the Palestinians and others parties concerned and to speak some very interesting for them all in substance. Today in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs they will officially publish our proposal to restore the development of the multilateral dimension of the Middle East process, to restore the negotiations starting from the multilateral group on water resources. Yesterday we came up with the multilateral consultations on track 2 with the Palestinians, Israelis, and some other representatives of other countries so all of them are backing these proposals although of course we are mostly interested in what's going on in Palestine but these ups and downs with the Palestinian-Israeli rivalry were before and will be for the days to come. So we propose to do something else, to refurbish the development of [audio unclear] and to restore these multilateral activities and start with the multilateral group on water. We also extended the proposals to multilateral group [audio unclear] to convene in Moscow in November, a big international rally on these water problems of the Middle East. This is in a nutshell, there are many aspects to this proposal, but I'm just giving you in a nutshell what were're getting [audio unclear] in Moscow.

**Raghida Dergham:** That's rather intriguing thank you very much Andrei Baklanov. Intriguing Andrei Baklanov because you're speaking of water which is a very important element in the living hopefully peacefully although it doesn't look like it's happening these days. So the timing of course is coincidental but that you are focusing, and the multilateral approach on water, is an intriguing point we will discuss later during the general discussion. I will now go to Michel Moawad. You have 4 minutes to tell us about this fascinating country called Lebanon where things are easy and easily understood. 4 minutes to you, please.

**Michel Moawad:** Well thank you Raghida and hello to Norman, Andrei and David. I just said, I mean, we're living in a very complex country but actually it embodies what is the complexity of the Middle East. Because all these complexities are part of the Lebanese complexity. So when we're talking about stability in a very complex country and region, we should really look at what are the main causes of instability. And for me there are 3 main causes, lots of causes, but 3 main sources of instability, first, the unresolved Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the tragic events we've been living in the past few days you know, may remind us that as long as we don't have a strategic solution based on a 2-state solution where, you know, like the Arab initiative in 2002 stated it, this Palestinian-Israeli issue is not only a cause of instability in the region in Palestine or Israel, but is a regional cause of instability. The second was definitely a cause of instability is Iran and its policy of disseminating the revolution, which is creating a model that we're seeing in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and other places in the world where you have failed states, strong transregional transborder militias and permeable borders to arms, smuggling and anything else which is creating instability all over the region. And of course the third source of instability would be Sunni Jihadism that we saw developing like we saw with Daesh. So there are two errors not to make with dealing with those three. The first one is really not to play in this balance between those three issues, not to play the balance between the three of them. Because actually while they seem antinomic at first they are feeding each other. And playing one against the other like we're seeing using the Shiite militias against Sunni jihadism, or what we're seeing today in Gaza and in Israel. Practically those logics of instability, forces of instability, are feeding each other. The other error for me not to do is to make a very big difference between appeasement and sustainable stability. And here I might say that for instance the logic of appeasement towards Iran only dealing through the nuclear JCPOA without taking into account the expansionist policies of Iran and destabilization of the region may remind me of what Chamberlain did with Adolf Hitler at the Munich accords in 1938 when we came back and said, you know, appeasement, appeasement, appeasement but while recognizing Hitler the right to go to Czechoslovakia we only got a Second World War quicker than it would have happened. Of course to finish on Lebanon very quickly I think Lebanon is paying the price of these 3 sources. We have paid and continue to pay the price of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as you know it has done a civil war in Lebanon, we just now were talking a few minutes ago or a few hours ago we had again "Palestinian" rockets from Lebanon to Israel while paying the price of the Iranian expansionist and we're paying the price of what happened in Syria with Daesh, with one million refugees. So although the fact that the Lebanese collapse is not only due to those factors, and there is an internal factor, inefficient governance, corruption [audio unclear] and elsewhere, approaching the Lebanese problem only through the symptoms and not through the causes, only through reforms, technical financial reforms and not the causes, will only delay the collapse and not prevent it, and that's why while it's our responsibility as an opposition to confront the internal and external causes, we cannot do it without our regional, international partners and to finish I understand that there's a fatigue over Lebanon, I understand but I think that whatever the cost of dealing with Lebanon complex today it would be much more costly to deal with complete collapsed Lebanon. Thank you.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you very much, we will discuss Lebanon. I have several questions for you, for David Hale, in particular on Lebanon but I need to go to Norm Roule right now for his 4 minutes please.

**Norman Roule:** Good afternoon and it's good to see you and all the others today who have played such a large role in international discourse in recent years. I'd like to begin briefly with just a comment on the Vienna talks it's my view that Iran remains committed to achieving a nuclear deal but the urgency of that deal is not foremost in its mind. A longer set of negotiations will benefit Iran as it seeks to wear down international objections while at the same time it builds up a list of nuclear violations it can then leverage against sunset clause extensions and other demands. I believe there will be a nuclear deal at some point. The second point I would make is was mentioned by [Moawad] I believe that it is fair to say that within the region and maybe of the Republican and maybe even some Democratic senators of Congress, there is a sense that the United States as well as the European Union and the international community have yet to develop a plan to push back on Iran's grey zone and regional activities following a deal. Or had to address the reality that any nuclear deal will allow Iran to increase the amount of resources that go to Hamas, the Palestine Islamic Jihad, and other elements. Regarding the broader issue of today I think I'd like to step out a little and say that within the regional developments are all being impacted by a set of macro issues. Foremost of which is the general weakening of international collective security, the less relevance of the UN security council, the regional structures such as OPEC, the Arab League and even the GCC as individuals undertake individual actions. We're also watching the passing of a series of iconic leaders that were married to regional policies in the last year, that would include Algeria, Bahrain, Dubai, Egypt, Kowait, Oman and Tunisia have all seen leaders leave and are likely coming a few years a change in leadership in Iran, Iraq, with Ayatollah Sistani, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and even Lebanon perhaps. This is accompanying a change in demographics with a very youthful population that is younger, less tied to old issues, and very educated, unemployed, and more interested in solutions and less in partisan issues. There is also far less money in the region. And growing competition for foreign direct investment, as well as for tourist dollars. The international community and the region has yet to develop a plan to confront Iran on its grey zone activities in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and we're watching, I think, a potentially catastrophic expansion of this to the Eastern Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Arabian Ocean. And finally there is international fatigue with the lack of ability of the region to develop its own political solutions, the many broken states. There are some themes of success in the region and I think this is good news. The successful economic drivers of the region all appear to be tied to states that focus on social change, countries with strong state structure, especially the military that can push back against the creation of militias, and places where Iranian militias influence is weakest. We also have a rising generation of new leaders who I think have yet to figure out how to work with each other and we're gonna watch that dynamic in the coming years. Anti-corruption efforts are now appearing throughout the region, beginning of course with the Ritz episode in Saudi Arabia, we've seen Kowait, Qatar, issues Jordan, where countercorruption, simply driven by economic issues, there's a lot less money, is becoming an important and I think positive element. But economic success and political stability in the region seem to require a very specific mix of embracing new technology, social change, interfaith dialogue, distancing from sectarianism, ousting of traditions that have dominated politics. And absent these changes we really don't get a possibility of new success. I think I'll pause there.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you very much. I thought you were gonna tell us and maybe you will later on give us more information that you have about what's going on with the Saudi-Iranian conversations and the Saudi-Syrian conversation if in fact it took place and what does it mean. Please do remember to talk about that in the discussion. I want to start with something that David Hale said and was echoed differently by Michel Moawad and I'll engage you on this very point. Now we're talking about the rocket fire that's taking place right now across the borders from Lebanon. I noticed that there was a distinction made to say, were these Palestinian or were these Hezbollah's rockets? So what does it mean either way? David Hale - whoever has the phone please put it on silent Ambassador Andrei? Please do you mind to silence your phone if you don't mind? David Hale you spoke about the publicity about the Iranians and Hamas and about publicizing their relationship, so you gave us a little bit of a threatening message to Iran's intentions in the region, you underscored the dangers that Iran is posing by that. Do you think Iran is directly involved in what Hamas is doing now in its military engagements with Israel, do you think it is supplying them with rockets, why do you think about Iranians and Hamas in one sentence and warning about the dangers of that, David Hale?

**David Hale:** Thank you Raghida. Well I brought it up because I think it's, it raises a lot of questions. I don't have a lot of answers to demonstrate just what's happening. We all know that Hamas has benefited from assistance from the Iranians for quite a long while there's no secret about that, weapon supplies, money, training, all flow to Hamas, so that's a fact. And for the Iranians to so publicly demonstrate that relationship with a phone call, and associated with that is a message that has to be understood on some level as the indication that Iran remains committed to these proxies. There it's in Gaza, or Hezbollah as we know in Lebanon, or elsewhere in the region.

**Raghida Dergham:** Yes but just to follow up the Biden administration doesn't seem to take that very seriously, you have just left - I know you do not speak for the Biden administration as you emphasize. But explain why does this not matter to the Biden administration? Is it because the priority and only priority right now is the JCPOA and restoring relations with Iran no matter what the cost even if it means that the relationship between the US and Israel is no longer priority number 1? Is there a shift, strategic shift, at this point, in that relationship?

**David Hale:** No, between the US and Israel no, I would not say. What I would say is the administration, again my reading of it, is that these kinds of problems, tragic as they are, and they need to be resolved as quickly as possible, and I agree with what Michel has said about underlying causes, putting that aside, we can't ignore the fact that there is an Iranian dimension to this. And this administration’s point of view is that, take how much worse it would be if Iran had a nuclear weapon. We know what their motivations are, in terms of causing chaos and trying to destruct Israel, the Gulf states, and the US. What if they had a nuclear weapon? How much worse would this be?

**Raghida Dergham:** David Hale, never mind the what if. Stay with me on this because it's not about what if, it is what is. And that is what Michel Moawad was talking about earlier when he used the word appeasement being preoccupied with the nuclear while the expansionist policies are taking place, and what's happening is happening. It's not about the what if but about the what is happening. Can you address that David Hale before I go to the others?

**David Hale:** I would not use the word appeasement. We have a sharp difference of opinion in our own country about this very point. But we have a policy that I was part of in which we wanted to put this administration wants to get back into compliance with the JCPOA with different reasons stated, but also maintain pressure on Iran because of its objectionable behavior and its various arenas that we have touched on. Now we know that the previous administration had a different approach, they withdrew from the JCPOA, and they had a maximum pressure strategy. We didn't have sufficient time to prove the case as to which approach works. So we'll just have to give this time and serious effort to see if we can achieve all that this administration wants to achieve.

**Raghida Dergham:** I wanna come back to the nuclear talks later. Because there are many details that we wanna get into. But speaking of polarizing issues and polarization within the US Norm Roule what, give me the distinction, what do you read would the Biden administration do should these rockets come from Lebanon, should it be Hezbollah vs the Palestinians? Is there any differentiation? Are you afraid that the Lebanon front might be opened up under the circumstances and under what consequences?

**Norman Roule:** My understanding is that the four rockets that have been reportedly fired from Lebanon into Israel have not yet been determined to be from Lebanese Hezbollah. So this remains a hypothetical. This said, the US is currently looking at broader issues than the Middle East, that's no secret, pandemic, climate change, our own social issues, dealing with China, restoring multilateralism, and the desire to pull away from some of the investment of politics in time in the Middle East is well known. But the Middle East has a tendency to pull you back.

**Raghida Dergham:** Yes Yes but the question is

**Norman Roule:** If this is Lebanese Hezbollah you will see the administration being pulled back in, but there are limited tools available. Diplomacy doesn't have a lot of impact with Hamas, it won't have much impact with Lebanese Hezbollah.

**Raghida Dergham:** So you think that the Biden administration will be pulled in diplomatically or will be pulled in as a party because then it is a larger, God forbid, larger war with more fronts.

**Norman Roule:** It's unlikely to be in pulled more broadly. And I think the Iranian aspect has to be underscored as well. It's not in Iran's interest for there to be a Lebanese conflict at present and indeed Iran would prefer I think that the nuclear issue take its course, it maintains its rhetoric of leading the resistance, the phone call I think is entirely expected but then it obtains funds from the nuclear deal and then empowers Hamas, Hezbollah, [audio unclear] and other Palestinian groups it's creating very similar to Kataeb Hezbollah with money, training and resources for the next campaign.

**Raghida Dergham:** Andrei Baklanov, tell me does Russia think that this round between the Palestinians and the Israelis, does it make Israel a loser strategically because it has not won the war in Gaza it still is receiving rockets and missiles, it opened up a front within Israel which is the Palestinians are instigating and activated with anger? Does Moscow read this as a victory for Hamas and its backers, whether it's Iran or Turkey or for that Russia is also a backup of Hamas, can you address that Andrei Baklanov?

**Andrei Baklanov:** Actually I'm very very suspicious of both leaderships the Palestinian leadership and the Israeli leadership and we suspect that they are playing some clandestine play. They are saying something and they have something else in their mind. Due to information that we have they are not planning to come to the terms with each other, they lost a lot of opportunity [audio unclear] to negotiate. Now as I told you they are not going to negotiate once more. It seems to me that Israelis well they are happy with Hamas because Hamas policy is giving opportunity for the radicals to feel strong in Israel society. So well actually it might be that they will push them back but in the real terms they are interested in having a split between the Palestinians and they are interested in having these radicals because it gives the opportunity for the military in Israel to feel that they are unnecessary.

**Raghida Dergham:** Are you saying Andrei Baklanov that you think this has translated into a strategic win for Israel by cementing the divisions amongst Palestinians and...

**Andrei Baklanov:** Yes they are interested in this play, in giving the opportunity to the radicals to say they work to make Israel [audio unclear]. There is a big issue with the play, not with the policy but a big political play

**Raghida Dergham:** Can Israel afford to just have a ceasefire now with at least an apparent win for Hamas? Or will it be forced, God forbid again, to play to what's happening? To use Hamas's missiles as an excuse to have mass expulsions of Palestinians from inside of Israel? Which is a very worrisome potential that has been shoved under the table in several circles? I go to you again on that one and then will go to Michel Moawad.

**Andrei Baklanov:** You know I was sitting together with the Israeli representative of Secret Service when we were organizing Palestinian [audio unclear] It seems to me that Palestinians know each inch, you know, centimeter of the territory of Palestine. So it's very strange to me that there is such a big activity of Palestinians [audio unclear] etc. Why Israel are giving this opportunity for the radical Palestinians to feel so free on their territory? There is something, there is a very subtle Israeli play. They knew these threats. Now they're saying they didn't know. They knew everything but did not prevent.

**Raghida Dergham:** Fascinating Michel Moawad listen to what Andrei Baklanov is saying that the Israelis are emboldening the radicals for a purpose they have in the back of their minds. Tell me your thoughts about what you just heard and then I'll get specific questions to you on the rockets from the Lebanese borders.

**Michel Moawad:** Yes I started by saying that it's also that the logics of the radicals is feeding each other. In a way or another taking the Palestinian cause into an Iranian game plays the game of the Israeli radicals. That's why I think that in a tactical game the three radicalisms feed each other. The Sunni radicals or the Sunni jihadism, the Iranian expansionism and the Irsraeli expansionism. Whatever the tactics at the end of the day no one will erase Israel from the map and no one will erase Iran from the map. All this is a tactical game. All this will create more and more instability so the big winner of all this is strategic instability in the region.

**Raghida Dergham:** What about the missiles from across the Lebanese borders in the Israeli border were Palestinian? Do you think this will be contained and Lebanon will be fine?

**Michel Moawad:** Well the game were they Palestinian missiles or Hezbollah missiles, it changes the tactical game.

**Raghida Dergham:** Well tell me about the changes, tell me about that.

**Michel Moawad:** Wellbecause if it's a Hezbollah-owned missile, because you know even if it's Palestinian it can be one way or another a Palestinian proxy, fired by Palestinian refugees in Lebanon which we all know exist and are well organized. But of course if Hezbollah were to acknowledge or take propriety of the missile it would probably change the game for how Israel would react. And I think they would not do this.

**Raghida Dergham:** Why do you think they would not do this? Is this a decision from Tehran?

**Michel Moawad:** I was going to say Raghida in all cases the decision center of all this and how it's tactically managed is in Tehran. So for me as a Lebanese I'm just a spectator on what's happening hoping that Tehran will not take a decision that will destroy Lebanon. That's why we are requesting a more serious implementation of 1701.

**Raghida Dergham:** David Hale your last actually let me ask you this before about your last trip to Lebanon. You're reading right now the fact that Hezbollah is not and has not taking any propriety of anything going across the border while Hamas is engaged in an actual war with Israel. What does that tell you? What is the message?

**David Hale:** Well I don't really know what the Iranian tactical thinking may or may not be. I agree with Michel that it does not seem logical, logically in anyone's interest, to reignite the Lebanese-Israeli border. So I think the lessons of the recent past may be causing that. I think it's a different series of calculations when it comes to Gaza and Hamas. There are factors of internal politics inside the Palestinian community that may be a factor, frankly what I said at the beginning that is just really a cynical exploitation of tensions in Jerusalem to reestablish somehow the Iranians and their proxies can cause pain. We're talking about underlying causes we have to address the fact that Gaza is a perpetual source of danger for anyone interested in stability.

**Raghida Dergham:** What you're saying on one hand in effect if I heard you right is that what the Iranians and Hezbollah are saying in support of Hamas is rhetorical as long as they're not engaging practically through a border open to them either from Syria or Lebanon. Right? is that what you're saying David Hale?

**David Hale:** No I wouldn't draw that conclusion at this stage. Not knowing exactly what's going on between Hamas and Iran. What I would say is that we need to focus on what we can do. One is working on, you know, bringing an end to this spiral, looking at the underlying causes which include the tunnels and the insecure environment in Gaza, the armaments, and the political problems while we also engage Iran to see if we can return to the JCPOA so that threat out there of a potentially nuclear-armed Iran is dealt with.

**Raghida Dergham:** So let me go back to your last trip here in Lebanon, David Hale. I'll let you correct some of the statements in case they are wrong. But it was published and said that one of the things you discussed is the demarcation, between Lebanon and Israel, maritime demarcation. And things moved a little bit forward since you left. What from your point of view caused the move forward? Is it that you allegedly said to former Minister Gebran Bassil, if he cooperates, he will be rewarded by lifting some sanctions? Is that correct?

**David Hale:** I'm in an unusual position in that I really can't reveal confidences of the diplomatic activity that I and other were conducting even though I am no longer speaking for the administration. I will say that we were very pleased to see a readiness to go an extra step and resume the contact in Naqoura, end of discussion I think this is something very promising for everyone involved and it's in Lebanon's interest. No one is asking Lebanon to do anything but see what negotiations can produce. I did make clear to our friends and others in Lebanon that their actions have consequences and the US has an array of tools to respond to those actions having warm relations, which is what we really want with all the elements in Lebanon, or if necessary the sanctions that you mentioned.

**Raghida Dergham:** But is easing of the sanctions that have already been imposed such as the ones on Gebran Bassil is this part of a discussion that took place in order to facilitate for him and his party and his connections, to facilitate the demarcation, maritime demarcation that you really came to push for?

**David Hale:** No I didn't go to Lebanon to talk about the demarcation issue. Unfortunately my trip seems to have provoked a lot of activity related to it so I had to address it. I said it directly I didn't link anything that the US would do to the demarcation process. But more broadly I did talk about those who contribute to the stability and the repair of Lebanon, the elements that have the warm embrace of the US, and those political factions [audio unclear] consequences in terms of the relationship.

**Raghida Dergham:** For those who are under sanctions, if they prove that they have moved in a different direction, is the US ready to lift some of these sanctions or all of them, should it decide that yes this person has moved in the right direction?

**David Hale:** Raghida I understand your curiosity but I wanna leave it where I left it. So thank you.

**Raghida Dergham:** So let me take it one more step since you don't want to, and it's on everybody's mind. It's alleged again that you have been against sanctions as a tool. You were part of an administration that believed in sanctions but personally you didn't believe in sanctions as a tool. Is that correct or will history will have you as someone who opposes sanctions no matter what? Can you just clarify?

**David Hale:** I think it's a case by case batter. But I did evolve my thinking from when I was confirmed in 2018 until I left office 2 weeks ago. My attitude towards sanctions became more and more skeptical. I think they're highly effective when they're very targeted and when [audio unclear] diplomacy just before the deadline for imposing a sanction to see if we can get an income that we want. But what I would like to see is a better use of sanctions, a rigorous analysis when sanctions are in place. [audio unclear]

Are you hearing me now?

**Raghida Dergham:** Yes

**David Hale:** I was just saying that sometimes behavior crosses our values and therefore we have to take a stance and sanctions can be part of that. Other times what we see is [audio unclear] more rigorous process of analysis to see what works and what doesn't work [audio unclear] .

**Raghida Dergham:** I'm gonna have to let you rest a little bit because I'm having a hard time with your connection. I'm gonna go to Andrei Baklanov and to Norm Roule, what do you hear about the alleged or confirmed by either one of you Saudi-Syrian talks that are aiming at opening a new page in the relationship. Andrei Baklanov, you were the ambassador of Russia to Saudi Arabia, what do you know about that possibility and about the conversations taking place between Saudi Arabia and Iran that have been confirmed officially?

**Andrei Baklanov:** Well actually you know I think that my Saudi friends have made a very big mistake in 2011 when they thought that the days of Assad were very near to come to the end. Some other officials also thought about the same possibility that Assad would very soon go away. But he didn't. So there was a strategic mistake by Saudi and they paid very big coin for the, for the Syrians. When there was attack against Bagdad against the regime in Kuwait the Saudis were very much afraid at that period of time as I remember there was Damascus declaration. And Damascus bet Saudi Arabia. So it was expected they would pay the same coin. But they did not. It it was a mistake I think for Saudi and due to our knowledge they are not ready to return back to the old good terms with Assad still they are hesitating where there is a necessity to do some beginning to better the relation. But it's not at the point to it's possible to make some drastic changes.

**Raghida Dergham:** I want to ask Norm Roule about this particular angle only. Saudi Arabia and Syria. Because I want to get back to you Andrei Baklanov to speak about the Saudi-Iranian talks.

**Andrei Baklanov:** I would like to add something about Iran because we have another end goal. . [audio unclear]

**Raghida Dergham:** Sure go ahead.

**Norman Roule:** My understanding is that there have been no discussions between the Saudis and the Syrians as described in I believe the British press, they refuted this. More so within the Gulf in general there is a general recognition that some sort of engagement with Syria would be useful or potentially useful in pushing back against Iran. At the same time Bashar Al Assad, and I've spoken to multiple regional leadership recently, he's a war criminal who dropped chemical weapons and barrel bombs on Arabs, and that's very difficult for Arab leaders to forget, but they've got to deal with the reality of how do you handle Syria? My one comment I would also push is that they don't really have a plant yet that I can tell as to what would this mean in their ability to push back against Iran in Syria itself. So I see some engagement with Syria distancing themselves from Bashar Al Assad who has a very distasteful and rightfully odious reputation in the Gulf as the world's leading war criminal in office.

**Raghida Dergham:** Let me go back to Andrei Baklanov to speak about the conversations taking place between Saudis and Iranians. I think it's more on the security level. You wanted to say something about that.

**Andrei Baklanov:** That's really very big exaggeration over the Iranian polls. I was on many occasions in Iran . [audio unclear] You know there is a special place where Ayatollah . [audio unclear] their activities. I think we share some of the suspicions of the Iranian policies. But what are colleagues in the Gulf countries especially the US think about Iran it's a very big exaggeration. I mean that the Iranians due to my knowledge, to what I have seen in Iran, to what I understood after many meetings with representatives of Iran. [audio unclear] I understand that mainly their interest now is lifting sanctions, not to be dominant in the region like the Americans say. [audio unclear] They meet a propotcal signed by the countries concernes on nuclear capacities and they were [audio unclear] breaches of this protocol United States decided to go away. What we're expecting for that? Now they're trying to exploit each opportunity including this [audio unclear] with radical elements in the Arab world. They have had several rounds of talks. The best were at the beginning of 2003-2004. Even they draft protocol for the [audio unclear] They're retaining the opportunity for making for context but no more than this I think they cannot be on very good terms now.

**Raghida Dergham:** Norm Roule please can you address that? Rather quickly because I wanted to move on, about the Iranian. Do you agree with what Andrei Baklanov said, that is it just the beginning and there are going to be several rounds of talks between the Saudis and the Iranians, Norm Roule?

**Norman Roule:** Saudi-Iranian talks show little likelihood of success. The Saudis approached the Iranians stating that they have no problem with a normal Iranian relationship with their neighbors but not a Quds force presence throughout the region which Iran has conducted to the region to include in Syria years before the JCPOA. The Iranians have declined and they have stated to the Saudis both in these talks and in previous messages sent to include allegedly through Lebanon several years ago that this is a new reality that the Saudis must accept. The Saudis will not accept this reality. I do not expect the talks to be positive but they will encourage Europe and the US to reduce some pressure on the Saudis for their willingness to engage.

**Raghida Dergham:** Michel Moawad, you noticed David Hale spoke about the Vienna talks of course but he's hoping they will conclude positively. I heard him say it's not going to be rapid, if I heard him correctly as far as the conclusion of the negotiations. First of all is this your conclusion as far as the assessment and whether there is an agreement before the elections in Iran or not? How do you see it reflecting in Lebanon? So it is 2 questions to you Michel Moawad.

**Michel Moawad:** Well Raghida I share this assessment with David Hale. I do not think that there will be anything before the Iranian elections. This is due to internal Iranian balance of powers and I think that the leakage of the voice of minister of foreign affairs Zarif is part of the game that is showing that at the end of the day I do not believe. So it will take time. That is on the one hand. What's the effect on Lebanon? Again I have said it I will repeat it and I'm totally convinced I think that the Quds force and the Iranian expansionist policy is an integral part of the Iranian regime and it's not 2 different things. And again the leaked voice of Minister Zarif when he was saying that we were negotiating to get more power to the Quds force at the time of the Obama JCPOA is very telling. I think that just negotiating nuclear, and of course I'm not saying Iran should become nuclear, I'm just saying that negotiating the nuclear part of the deal with Iran and giving them money on the basis of the JCPOA will only enhance and embolden Iran to put more money in the Quds force that will be more destabilizing in the region and of course when I'm saying in the region Lebanon is the epicenter of Iran's militia model because the strongest model being Hezbollah in all the region and actually I definitely think that after the killing of General Suleymani I think that the role of Hezbollah within that strategy and of Hassan Nasrallah within this strategy is getting stronger and bigger as being actually the de facto Quds force CEO in the region.

**Raghida Dergham:** David Hale, what's wrong with the logic that's put forward by Michel Moawad? That is the majority of at least a majority or at least a serious portion of people here who say why can't we get it in the US that yes we care that Iran does not become nuclear but that no we don't agree with you that we need to bear the brunt until you satisfy Iran's conditions including agreeing to the 2-step approach that you will do the nuclear first and that you will then go to the regional behavior and to the missiles? What's wrong with the logic that Michel Moawad put forward?

**David Hale:** I thinkit's based on a misreading of history. Before anyone thought

about JCPOA Iran's behavior in the region was deplorable and a threat. Under JCPOA, it continued that way. After we withdrew from JCPOA and went on with the maximum pressure strategy it continued that way. To be deplorable and a threat. And it continues now as we're in negotiations over JCPOA. So I don't really draw a link between what happens in the region and what happens at the table in Vienna or the status of an agreement. It doesn't seem to change their behavior either way and they seem to have the resources they need to enable their proxies either way. We need to have strategies to address both.

**Raghida Dergham:** But by lifting sanctions and that's Michel Moawad's point you are enabled and emboldened by the lifting of sanctions to use that money and create trouble in countries where paramilitary forces operate and report back to Tehran.

**David Hale:** Where I disagree is that they had the resources they needed to enable these proxies even when they were under maximum sanctions as they are today. Nothing has changed.

**Raghida Dergham:** So how do you take away this ability? Now that it is creating trouble. How do you as a superpower the USA knowing that this is what's happening how do you go about addressing that and I'm gonna let you answer this question and include in it your one minute conclusion because I need to give each one of you one minute and then I'm gonna have to say goodbye before electricity goes off.

**David Hale:** Ok. Well I will just say we have to use all the tools we have and to eliminate if we can the potential for Iran to have a nuclear weapon will be a very important component of this. But we can't give up our strategies throughout the region with our allies and partners to push back against Iranian behavior, instability, destabilizing behavior. So I don't see a contradiction between them. I do think though that we'll have to be very smart about what we do and understand very well the underlying causes. Several people addressed this. So this not just about the US and Iran, it's also about the underlying conflicts that it's seeking to exploit and we need strategies to help ameliorate those. And I think that's my one-minute end, Raghida.

**Raghida Dergham:** Yes but are we gonna have a ceasefire you think? Is this Palestinian-Israeli conflict going to be wrapped up in a ceasefire? What's your bet now?

**David Hale:** I honestly think it could go either way, I don't know. We're certainly hopeful that we'll see more calm and quiet.

**Raghida Dergham:** Stay with me don't go but I'm gonna go to you Michel Moawad, one minute to you and then maybe not Michel Moawad stay with me. Andrei Baklanov would you conclude? Most important thing you want to say, your message?

**Andrei Baklanov:**  [audio unclear] Let's better control Iran with agreements, with dealing with them, it's better than pushing in the corner and making them alone and exploit all kinds of opportunities including clandestine, paramilitary activities. So it's better to come to the terms again with Iran than antagonizing them in the region.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you very much Andrei Baklanov stay with me also and then to Norm Roule. Control do not corner says Andrei Baklanov. What says Norm Roule?

**Norman Roule:** The international community has exquisite understanding of Iran's behavior and activities and tools throughout the region. It would be incorrect to say that any nuclear deal with Iran, engagement with Iran will have any impact on these activities. Iran is determined to maintain a Quds force and proxy presence throughout the region and this is generally supported by Moscow, it is not generally opposed by the European Union and the US administration has not made this a priority, which will sacrifice the nuclear deal. Until there is a change in the international political dynamic and greater emphasis and collective security it is unlikely that you will see a change in multiple regional issues to include the Lebanese situation. Thank you.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you very much. Do you think that Biden by the way Norm Roule is under pressure right now to choose between Iran and Israel?

**Norman Roule:** No. He chose Israel. He took a stand with Israel which is appropriate.

**Raghida Dergham:** Michel Moawad last word to you. Are you worried with the future of this country that is going into the hole deeper and deeper? Tell me what you want us to think about and you have a new foreign minister apparently after the old one made a big faux pas. Last word to you Michel Moawad

**Michel Moawad:** I am deeply worried. I am worried as an Arab, I am worried as a citizen of this region, I am worried as a Lebanese. I am feeling that Lebanon is slipping away, and we're a few weeks or months away from total collapse. You know. It would be very difficult to get back for all the reasons I have said. I just want to add that all these strategic threats we talked about, the Israel-Palestine conflict, Iran, radical jihadism, all these cannot be approached tactically. While I understand that countries talk between each other to solve tactical issues, we need to have a consistent strategy and I think that with Iran I agree that with Iran I agree with what David said at the beginning, that we did not give the maximum pressure policy enough time to see if it's working or not while the JCPOA giving back Iran money under president Obama strengthened and boldened Iran to give them more money for their Quds force activities.

**Raghida Dergham:** And you think this is happening again under the Biden administration?

**Michel Moawad:** I do fear this.