

Joe Kent: Israel, Syria & Saudi Lose Ground & U.S. Must Exit the Region

Joe Kent is the former Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, who resigned in March 2026 due to the war against Iran. Kent the Saudi-Yemen conflict, instability in Syria, Israel being overextended, and why the US must eventually leave the region. Please like, subscribe & share! Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennndiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glenndiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Buy Diesen merchandise: <https://diesen-shop.fourthwall.com/en-nok> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

#Glenn

Welcome back, everyone. We are joined today by Joe Kent, the former director of the National Counterterrorism Center, who resigned in 2026 over the war against Iran. And, well, thank you for coming back. I'm thinking it was probably not a bad time to resign, as some fateful mistake has been made, indeed, not just with Iran, but setting the entire region on fire. So I guess I have a bit of an overarching question today, because we see now that the Iran war is, well, not just spreading, but it's destabilizing the region: Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Saudi Arabia. We see renewed conflicts in Israel, Gaza, and, well, I'm not sure where to start. Perhaps with Saudi Arabia and Yemen, because we now see that the Saudis, they have attacked Yemen. There are Houthis in Yemen. The Houthis are responding. So where is this headed? And if it can't be won on the battlefield by the Saudis, will they pursue peace?

#Joe Kent

I was hoping that the Saudis were not going to escalate and that they were going to kind of get back to what I think is the only feasible solution. And that is that the Saudis begin to cut deals with the Houthis. But also, I mean, we say the Houthis or we say Ansar Allah. It's really a confederation of northern tribes. And they're not necessarily a monolith, although I think because of their success on the battlefield, because of the way the war in Iran has gone, I do think they're pretty galvanized right now to stick together. However, in Yemen, everything is, you know, tribes and deals being cut with tribes.

So I was hoping that MBS would kind of lean into that aspect and just kind of reach out to the Houthis, reach out to some of these different tribes that are essential to the Houthis' success, especially in the southern areas where the Houthis have recently made—I mean, they have popular

support down there, and that is far outside the lands that they historically inhabit and have a lot of influence over. So I've always felt that there's a deal to cut there. I spent some time in Yemen both before the revolution, when Ali Abdullah Saleh was in charge, and then after. And Saleh managed Yemen for quite some time because he was constantly cutting deals.

He was constantly doing a form of what we would consider to be bribes, but really it was just patronage, hostage exchanges, and just deals that most Westerners don't really understand. I think that that's going to be the ultimate solution here, although MBS, I think, is under a lot of pressure because he fears that some of his rivals internally could take advantage of the chaos and the strife and make a move against him. So now he's kind of following our lead of just continuing to double down and search for a military solution in a place where there really isn't any available military solution yet.

Most people look at Yemen and they see just another country in the southern Arabian Peninsula and assume it's a barren, flat desert. It's not. The Houthis, Ansar Allah, they're from a very hard-to-reach mountainous location. And that's why we were unsuccessful against them. It's one of the main reasons we were unsuccessful against them in 2025, and why really no foreigner has been able to come into Yemen and conquer it. It's very—it's more similar to Afghanistan than it is to, you know, Saudi Arabia, the deserts of Saudi Arabia, or even Iraq to a certain extent.

So I don't know why MBS is—I mean, I kind of understand why he's doing it—but I don't know why he's trying to do this, this Western model of, "I can just hammer my enemy and hopefully they'll bend to my will, and I won't pursue any other options." So if he doesn't stop that, I do think he's going to rally more people around Ansar Allah, more of these tribal elements around Ansar Allah. They are going to assert more control over the Bab al-Mandib. We're pretty fortunate right now that so far the Houthis, from what I can tell, they're only going after and restricting the flow of oil and shipping out of the Bab al-Mandib to the Saudis and to the Israelis.

We still have a tentative, you know, truce ceasefire with them, and so do a lot of other countries and shipping entities. But if Ansar Allah comes under pressure, they really could squeeze—or if they, you know, go with the Iranians, and the Iranians, I'm sure, are telling them, "Hey, you know, we really need your help here. We could use some help in restricting the flow of oil to the global market." Whether or not Ansar Allah decides to do that, that's going to be critical for us, because if we get the dual squeeze from both the Bab al-Mandib and the Straits of Hormuz, if we think prices are bad now, it will get much worse going into the election season and going into the winter.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, when you see MBS acting, you get a bit of the same feel from Hegseth. He keeps making the point that all the message we have to send is that we will be unrelenting, we're going to do maximum pressure, we'll use overwhelming force, and then they will submit somehow. But it doesn't work, and as we see, it only destabilizes further and removes some diplomatic options. So it's

unclear to what extent the Saudis are able to defeat the Houthis. I mean, at best, they might slow them down, it appears. But if there is no military solution, as you say, and they reach the conclusion that they have to cut some deals, what exactly would those deals look like? Because it looks like the main demands from the Houthis, or Ansar Allah, would be, you know, end the blockade. That would strengthen them significantly, though. And so they would have to essentially accept almost a new Arabian Peninsula if they would cut such deals.

#Joe Kent

I think that we should pressure the Saudis, and even if the Saudis aren't going to play ball with this, that we should go directly to Ansar Allah and just say, look, you guys basically control what used to be northern Yemen. Because before the '90s, or the late '80s, Yemen was two countries, north and south. Really, on the map, it was basically east and west. The Houthis essentially control what used to be northern Yemen. It's where they're from. It's where Ali Abdullah Saleh was from. And we should just recognize Ansar Allah as the government there. We should recognize that the capital is Sana'a. We should lift the blockade. We should lift the sanctions and just basically have the rest of the world follow us. It's the same thing that we did with al-Sharaa. And look, with al-Sharaa, it was a major decision for us.

Al-Sharaa was a member of al-Qaeda in Iraq. He was a member of ISIS. He was a member of al-Qaeda in Syria. He had fought and killed potentially American troops. His organization definitely killed American troops, debatable if he did or not. And al-Qaeda is an organization that exists to attack Americans, especially to come to the homeland and attack us. If we can get there with Sharaa and cut a deal like that in Syria with Sharaa, then there's no reason why we can't make a similar deal with Ansar Allah. Ansar Allah has—yeah, they've shot at American ships. They've shot at American aircraft, but only when we're in the Red Sea, only when we're in Yemen, only when we're in the Bab al-Mandab. There's no Houthis, there's no Ansar Allah guys getting on airliners trying to come to America or to the West to attack us here.

So if we can cut a deal with al-Sharaa, we can cut a deal with Ansar Allah. And if we do that, then we will be taking away some of the leverage from the Iranians. Now, whether or not we can get that deal right now and we can get it quickly—that's debatable, because we and the Saudis have put Yemen through a lot of pain. And the way that we have comported ourselves by supporting the Israeli genocide in Gaza, the way that we've comported ourselves by going to war with Iran, killing the supreme leader, the tragedy of the strikes in Yemen that killed the girls at the little girls' school. The Houthis and Ansar Allah, they do feel like they are a co-equal member of the axis of resistance. They're not a proxy of Iran anymore. They've come out from that, and now they are a co-equal member of the resistance.

So we need to make them a counteroffer. If we don't make them a counteroffer and we continue to let the Saudis hammer them, and then maybe we get convinced at some point to try to go in militarily against them, or even if we just try and stay out of it, Ansar Allah is going to be

incentivized to continue to escalate and to exert control over the Bab al-Mandab. So if we don't get pragmatic right now and pursue our own interests, we're going to be, I think, in a lot of trouble. And if we do that, I don't think MBS and the Saudis will have—they really won't have any other option but to kind of follow our lead. They can complain about it quietly, but in the long run, I think that that will work out better for us, but also better for the entire region.

#Glenn

Well, as you said, the Houthis have been attacked now for so many years. It's been more than a decade, and they're not going away. They're controlling the capital. They control the territories where most of the population lives. And as we've seen over the past week, they keep expanding the territory quite rapidly, actually. But what is it that they would want, I guess? What of their demands could be denied, and what of their demands could be accommodated, the way you see it?

#Joe Kent

I think, like Iran and like a lot of these groups, they're going to have their public-facing maximalist demands where they shout, "Death to America, death to Israel," and the war in Gaza, et cetera. But when you get down to brass tacks and you really talk with them, I believe that they want to control the lands that they have always historically inhabited. I think that they want to be the recognized government in Sana'a. Again, I think that Ali Abdullah Saleh was the only guy who could hold the entire country together. Yemen, I think, basically looks like a north and south Yemen, essentially an east and west, but the old model of north and south.

And the Houthis are the dominant force. Ansar Allah is the dominant force in western/northern Yemen. And so if we recognize them as such and say, okay, we will deal with you guys based on how you conduct yourselves as a country. We'll treat you like a real country. We'll lift the sanctions. We'll lift the blockade. We'll do business with you. We can start giving you guys some relief to get Yemen back on its feet. It was already an impoverished country when I was there before the revolution. And ever since the war, for the last decade, that the Saudis and us have been waging on them, things have only gotten worse.

I think if we give them that opportunity, I think we will find that we can do business with Ansar Allah. And I don't think that will be a big deal for America. And again, I actually think in the long run, that hurts Iran more than it hurts us. Now, what happens to, you know, the eastern portion of the country, basically from Aden and south? I mean, honestly, that area, other than the port of Aden, and then you've got another port out there, Mukalla, which really isn't that important. But you could have a different government that's out there. I think that all kind of remains to be seen. The Emiratis have been there. The Saudis have been there—or actually, Mukalla is the name of the port.

But neither one of those are as significant as controlling that choke point of the Bab al-Mandab. So we have to keep the main thing the main thing. Our main thing right now is making sure that energy

can flow. So I think if we just say, hey, Ansar Allah, we will do business with you. We'll recognize you as the government. Basically follow the model that we used with Sharaa to kind of reintroduce them to the world, and provided that they use good behavior and they're comporting themselves in a responsible way, we reward that by just simply recognizing them and doing business with them. Again, I just think that in the long run helps us and hurts Iran.

#Glenn

Well, again, this sounds like a great idea, but if it's not pursued, if there's no peace coming soon, where do you see this escalating? Because how long can the Saudis hold on here? You see some problems with their military, but more importantly, their energy and economic infrastructure. We see the energy infrastructure being attacked, destroyed, which is going to take a long time to fix, probably. We see the shipping routes then through the Red Sea shut down. They can't get through the Strait of Hormuz either, so... I mean, I'm not sure what the Houthis might do. I'm not sure if they would even contemplate crossing the border into Saudi Arabia, or if that's a step too far. But where might this go? Because, again, the Saudis surely must be running out of money at some point.

#Joe Kent

I mean, this just goes to more chaos and more strife. I mean, if the Saudis continue to militarily pressure Ansar Allah and the Houthis, Ansar Allah is going to have to basically show that, number one, those strikes that the Saudis are going to do against them, they don't affect them. And as a matter of fact, there's going to be a counterpunch, because Ansar Allah, they understand that the Saudis can't do any of what they're doing to them without our support. So they're going to basically say, hey, if you're going to support the Saudis, at some point in time the Saudis are going to hit us in a way that's going to make us respond, not necessarily just to the Saudis, but also to the Americans.

And right now, Ansar Allah, whether we like it or not, they have more leverage over us than we do over them. Basically, to hurt Ansar Allah right now, we can give the Saudis more things to bomb Ansar Allah with. Ansar Allah, if they want to hurt us, they could shut down the Bab al-Mandab, or they could seriously restrict that. They could start occasionally launching ballistic missiles and drones towards Sinai, like they've done before, to kind of hit the double whammy of the Red Sea-Bab al-Mandab corridor, which would restrict more oil flow. And so we already have enough problems.

I mean, I just drove—I'm in Northern Virginia—and I just drove and went and got gas, and gas is well over \$4, and diesel is like, I think, \$6.50 right now. So we've already got enough domestic pressure. Ansar Allah knows if they apply more pressure on Bab al-Mandab, then they can escalate with us that way. As to what happens in Saudi, I do think we have to be wary, and I'm not an expert on the Saudi royal family. However, MBS kind of did a hostile takeover of the Saudi royal family, and a lot of those guys are living kind of under house arrest, his rivals.

And there are Shia strongholds that are right across the border in Yemen, those northern provinces there. They're not as inhabited, but the Houthis, if they wanted to, they probably could mount some kind of an incursion into Saudi. Now, I don't think that incursion on its own would necessarily hurt the Saudi royal family, but it would give a lot of ammunition to MBS's rivals to say, "Hey, look, our country is now getting invaded because of MBS." And so, if you want to talk about then putting him in jeopardy, that's a whole other level of chaos. And of course, the Houthis, in coordination probably with some of the Iraqi militias, they've proven they can hit that east-west pipeline.

I mean, the Bab al-Mandab, the port in Yanbu, that east-west pipeline, that was supposed to be our pressure relief valve from everything happening in the Straits of Hormuz. And with pretty sophisticated coordination, the Houthis, or Ansar Allah, and the Iraqi resistance groups basically showed us that that pipeline really doesn't mean anything. So again, our adversaries, unfortunately, right now they have more leverage over us. And so this is a point where we need to triage, be realistic, and say, like, okay, can we cut a deal with these guys? Like, what's the worst-case scenario if Ansar Allah runs, you know, Sanaa, and they basically are, you know, able to close down the Bab al-Mandab? But if we do business with them, they'll open up Bab al-Mandab. Like, is that really that bad of an outcome for America? So if we don't get realistic.

There's going to be a ton of unintended consequences, like we've already seen. Like, we should know. We already kind of saw this movie play out in the Straits of Hormuz with Iran, where we struck Iran, we killed the Supreme Leader, then a bunch of, like, pretty predictable things happened, but we act surprised about it, and we've been trying to mitigate that damage. We went from, like, trying to topple the Iranian regime to, you know, making sure they don't have a nuclear weapon, all the way to, like, can we just please get the Straits of Hormuz open back up again that were open before we started the war? So we're already in, like, complete damage mitigation mode in the Straits of Hormuz. If we don't act now and cut a deal with Ansar Allah, we're going to find ourselves in that exact same predicament, but with even more economic pressure because of what's going to take place in the Bab al-Mandab.

#Glenn

I think what makes a lot of this difficult is because not just the U.S., but the political West altogether is in relative decline from the former hegemonic, or collective hegemonic, position. And it's difficult to accept, I think, the difference between what we want to achieve and what we can achieve. Because, you know, ideally, you know, we would have A, B, C. But I think this idea now of setting priorities and where we have to cut deals is something we haven't done much the past 35-plus years. So I guess there has to be a steep learning curve. Anyways, I remember Scott Bessent, it's not that long ago, he was making the point that soon the Strait of Hormuz will be insignificant because there will be enough pipelines going around it. But as the Saudi East-West pipeline showed, it's stationary. They know where it is, not just the Iranians, but the Houthis as well. So it's not that easy unless you want to dig the whole thing down in the ground. Sorry.

#Joe Kent

I was going to say that's a great point about us just not being used to having to triage and say, like, there's a difference between what we want and what we can actually get. I have found that we are almost incapable of doing that. It's like almost heresy to say that in American national security circles, because if you say that, you are recognizing that our power isn't all-being and we can't just will things into existence through sheer military might. I fought too long in the War on Terror to still believe that. But when you say that to people, like, they have a hard time coming to grips, and it's just, it's so outside the norm. It's almost like, you know, don't you love your country?

Don't you think American exceptionalism exists? I'm like, well, yeah, I do, but I'm also a realist. And I know if we don't start making some hard choices right now and being able to actually prioritize and conduct some triage, we're going to be in a world of hurt. But for the life of me, like, we still cannot do this. We have a really hard time going out and just saying, hey, we're going to cut some deals. You know, Trump used to be really good at at least articulating this, you know, even in 2024, and even how he conducted himself a little bit in his first administration when he cut a deal, the Doha Accords, with the Taliban.

I mean, everyone kind of recognized that, like, we didn't want to cut a deal with the Taliban, but we had been there for 20 years. It wasn't going anywhere. And Trump just said, fine, come in. I'm going to cut a deal. I'm going to get the Qataris to help us. We're going to come up with a way that we can just get out of Afghanistan. But unfortunately, you know, we've talked about this before. Different forces have really captured the way that he thinks in this administration. And we are existing almost right now entirely on this cartoonish idea that America can do whatever it wants to the world, and the world will bend at our will.

#Glenn

It's a similar problem in Europe, though. That is, the Europeans have ignored Russian security interests for 35 years, and now that there's a conflict and there's no pathway to victory, the European leaders are still insisting that any deal entails, you know, NATO still has to expand, Russia has to pull out and pay reparations, and if you push against this, going, "Well, that's never going to happen," then you don't care enough about our values. So that's...

#Joe Kent

Vladimir Putin. Yeah. Yeah.

#Glenn

Yeah. So the willingness to compromise and recognize the world as it is, the new realities, there's not much appetite. I did want to pivot a bit, though, to Syria, because there's another part which is

hardly stable at all. It has its own dynamic, of course, independent of what's happening in Iran and Yemen and all. But still, the instability will affect it as well. And we see Syria becoming very unstable and fragile. We see all the protests. And ironically, the main thing seemingly keeping the whole thing together appears to be al-Sharaa, the former al-Qaeda leader, who now rules Syria. Wow. I guess there's a lot of things happening, so I don't want to be too specific. So what exactly is happening here?

#Joe Kent

I think you laid it out nicely there. I mean, this is like one of those unintended consequences. I don't think, when we were looking at everything that was taking place in Iran, Straits of Hormuz, Ansar Allah, I don't think anyone anticipated that, you know, fuel shortages in northern Syria, in Idlib, where Shara really has his base of power, that protests there would break out and they would spread. And this is something that could threaten, you know, the Shara administration. And right now, as much as, like, I don't really like Shara's past, and I had some issues of how we went about recognizing him, Shara has been generally moving in the right direction. He's integrated the Kurds.

You know, he has been able to exert some degree of control. He doesn't have full control over all the elements that brought him to power that now make up the Syrian security forces, so we should keep that in mind. And he is caught between the Turks, he's caught between the Israelis, and for a while the Israelis have been making a lot of noise about, you know, going after the Turks and Turkish aggression. They've been doing incursions into Syria, so there is already, you know, smoldering ashes, whatever analogy you want to use, in Syria—a lot of underlying tensions. And Shara right now, I think just because of who he is, he's been able to hold that together. I am concerned that the Israelis or some other element who might be more hardline than Shara will exploit this chaos to take a swing at getting Shara out of power, either through assassination or some other means.

And then once that happens, all chaos is going to break loose because all these different elements, former ISIS members, former al-Qaeda members, they're all right now kind of under the banner of the Syrian government. But the second that Shara is gone, I am pretty confident that there wouldn't be—the number two guy wouldn't just step up and keep the calm. I think the country would basically go into a very chaotic situation right there, which, if you look at what Israel tends to prefer, it is a chaotic situation because then they can just basically mow the grass.

They can burn through leaders until they find one that they like. The second that guy crosses them, they can whack him too. And then you've basically got the Turks and the Israelis fighting over it. I think ISIS, because of the amount of former ISIS members that are still in Syria that were recently freed from the internally displaced camps and the prisons when the Kurds were integrated, I think ISIS would come back in some manifestation. I think you'd see the black flags coming back up again.

You'd see territory being taken over, and that would suck America back in because then the Israelis would go to us and they would say, "ISIS is back. You guys got to come help us, you know, fight these guys." We would have a major issue again there with the Turks as well. So all that is to say, this has been a major unintended consequence. We should be putting a lot of effort on right now restraining the Israelis, keeping the Israelis out of Syria, because the more the Israelis go in and they poke the bear, the people who brought Shara to power are going to say, "Hey, wait a sec. Like, I get it, Shara, you got to cut some deals here and you got to kind of put on a new face. But we didn't have our revolution under the banner of, you know, Sunni jihad so that we could get pushed around by the Israelis." So that is something that we could do to stabilize, is we could keep the Israelis out of Syria and make sure they don't play spoiler, just to give Shara and to give Syria an actual chance at finally having some degree of peace.

#Glenn

I was going to say, in an ideal world, perhaps the United States and Iran could come together and get ISIS out of Syria. I mean, there's some common interest there, even though many are—what?

#Joe Kent

We did it once before. I mean, people forget this, but when we had to go take out ISIS, our ground troops were predominantly Kurds, but the bigger fighting force was the Shia militias, the PMF in Iraq, who were doing cross-border operations into Syria. When I was in Iraq in 2016 as a Special Forces advisor, I was working with the Peshmerga. But just right down the trench line from us, literally, were the Shia Popular Mobilization Forces, and their advisors were Iranian Quds Force. And we were providing the air cover for that against ISIS. So, you know, people forget that us and Iran actually have worked together before, even just, you know, de facto, in order to take out something as evil as ISIS. It's interesting.

We still have a lot of, I think, good allies in the region who were there for that. Bafal Talabani, who is the president of, like, the Sulaymaniyah area of Kurdistan, of the Kurdistan Regional Government, he's currently over in Tehran right now. And Bafal's forces, and the PUK and the KDP, were key to us being able to fight against ISIS. And so now he's over there talking to the Iranians. And, you know, I've known Bafal. I've known a lot of the Iraqi Kurds for quite some time, and they're caught between a rock and a hard place as well. So I'm hoping that Bafal's diplomacy over there is able to bring some stability to the region as well.

#Glenn

I take your point on all these domestic instabilities, but as you mentioned, the Turks and the Israelis could also clash over Syria. And of course, this is fueled by the wider tensions now, where you see Israel referring to Turkey as an enemy, possibly a greater enemy than Iran. But how do you see—do

you see a likelihood of this actually resulting in open conflict? And just to expand on that question, we see some activities on the Iraqi side of the border with Syria. Do you think there's still a possibility of the Iraqis intervening into Syria, or is it the possible armed conflict between Turkey and Israel that would keep you up at night?

#Joe Kent

All of the above. Initially, I would be worried that the Israelis, especially the Likud government, decide that they don't really like Shara anymore. And they say, okay, we're going to fund, arm, and equip the Druze militias, the Alawite militias, or some rival element within Shara's ranks to kill Shara, or just overtly kill Shara themselves. Because the Israelis really don't have much influence—there's not much that actually restrains their behavior. So I would be worried about Shara getting killed in some way, shape, or form, and then chaos ensuing from there. The Turks then, I think, would feel like they need to do a more muscular response, especially if it looks like there's going to be some kind of an Arab Spring-like revolution. I think the Turks would come in and intervene.

And I think that then the Israelis would then take some action. And again, that's the whole chaotic situation that we laid out. I think you're right to look at what's taking place on the Iraqi-Syrian border down there in Abu Kamal. There were, I think, some strikes and some incursions and some back and forth where there were ISIS elements that were operating inside of Syria or right there on that border. And they took shots or got into some sort of a fight with Syrian security forces. And the Iraqis, I think, have moved a lot of the Popular Mobilization Forces, those Shia militias that are now part of the administrative defense. They're technically not militias anymore, but the PMF, they've moved those units around to the border because the Iraqis are very concerned about the instability.

They already are pretty wary of Shara because of his past as well. So it wouldn't surprise me if the Iraqis got decent intelligence that there was some element of ISIS or some other extremist group, that they would go in and take preventative action, because they know that Shara's reach—because he's all the way in Damascus—that hinterland out there, that Sunni hinterland on their border, the Deir ez-Zor province, the Euphrates River Valley that butts up to Anbar, they know that Shara, even on his best day, probably can't get his forces out there to react. So you could then see some PMF going in after some of these elements. That wouldn't surprise me at all, but then that would escalate tensions as well.

#Glenn

I'm wondering if that's something that the Israelis would welcome, though, because they seem to favor a more fragmented Syria as opposed to one with centralized power. But again, they have a variety of interests. But again, the big elephant in the room is always Israel, of course, because they have their disputes with Syria. Well, you can put Lebanon, Turkey, all of them in that same category.

But how stable is the situation for Israel itself? Because they're still, you know, they're not out of Gaza. They're quite overextended. And what exactly would be their priorities here? Because they seem to have too many projects at the same time here.

#Joe Kent

Yeah, it's hard to apply, like, a rational thought process, really, because they are at war with all of their neighbors. They're at war within their own borders. I mean, it's pretty obvious that at least the Likud Party, but probably even broader than that, the Israelis get a lot of power off of staying continually at war. And that's definitely been Netanyahu's model for retaining power. And he seems to want to ride that into the elections going into October, that he is the strongest, you know, defender of the state of Israel, and all these wars of expansion that he's doing, those are existential to Israel's very survival. That's certainly his narrative.

So, yeah, we're constantly seeing, you know, more strikes, more fighting in Gaza, out into the West Bank. Those settlers now are going after and trying to seize more territory because the settlers are part of, as far as I know, they're basically part of the Likud coalition. And so they're testing the limits of how much Bibi will continue to kind of turn a blind eye towards them in order to retain that electoral power going into the election. Israel right now, nothing that they're doing, in my view, solidifies their long-term survival. Most of it seems to be against their long-term survival, or at least them receiving more support from us in the long run.

But they do appear to have this go-for-broke, while they have our support, while they have Trump in the White House, while they know they can basically get away with whatever they want. They do seem to be inclined to just take more and more aggressive actions, and again, without much thought towards the long term. So I'll be interested to see how the Israeli elections shake out in October, and if there is a change, and if that change actually results in a real difference in how the Israelis conduct themselves. But I think regardless of who wins in 2028, we're going to see a major difference in how America deals with Israel.

We might even see it as early as the elections in 2026, when the new House and Senate come in in 2027, how much support Israel can get, because I think this is going to become very, very controversial. You know, you've got the Likud school of thought, which is get whatever you can right now. I'm hoping that there's some more level heads in Israel who might be saying, like, hey, before we lose all of our friends in the world, we might want to dial a lot of this back and actually do what we were talking about, what America should be doing, and prioritize what their true national security interests are beyond, you know, what do we want to accomplish? What do we think we can accomplish?

#Glenn

Well, you argue that Israeli domestic politics is obviously influencing its foreign policy, all its wars. But one of the, well, let's call it explosive news, well, not that new now, would be the report that was in Haaretz, the Israeli paper, in which it had this report on the United Arab Emirates warning Netanyahu about the October 7th attacks on Israel by Hamas. And all the reports suggest that Netanyahu—not suggest, it's very obvious openly—that Netanyahu had ignored these warnings. How disruptive is this to the Israeli political system now?

#Joe Kent

I mean, I would think because of how horrific the attacks of October 7th were that most Israelis would be enraged. However, Netanyahu and the Likud government have done a pretty proficient job of keeping the country in a constant state of crisis and war, which you'd have a hard time convincing me those two things aren't interlinked. I mean, it was a long time before we were able to ask questions about 9/11 because the narrative was, we don't have time to even think about that. We have to go to war. We have to go get al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. We have to go to war with Iraq. It's a global war on terror against the axis of evil.

And, you know, it's actually been several decades. It's been decades—two decades, basically—since a lot of people started saying, like, "Hey, wait a sec, what do you mean there were people trading stocks ahead of 9/11? Like, what's going on here? Why is there still so much of the report that's redacted?" More of that is now becoming mainstream because our government did such a proficient job of keeping us in a state of chaos. And it looks like the exact same thing in Israel, because right when the attacks happened, I wasn't in government at the time, but I had, you know, in the military and the CIA, I had worked with the Israelis. And I was scratching my head.

I was like, I don't know how anything gets launched from the Gaza Strip and the Israelis didn't pick up on it, especially a major attack. When I saw the hang gliders, I was like, you've got to be kidding me. There's no way they missed this. I get it. Things get dropped. Dots get connected. That happens in the intelligence world. But this was just so brazen that I think it left a lot of people scratching their heads. And now this report finally comes out, you know, obviously in the lead-up to an election. But if I were an Israeli right now, I would be demanding answers from my government on, like, what did they know? And when did they know it? But again, this is Netanyahu.

He is the master at keeping the chaos narrative going because they're constantly doing strikes against Lebanon. They're doing incursions into Syria. You've got the West Bank and Gaza still on fire. They're still encouraging us to stay deeply involved in Iran. So, I mean, I don't know Israeli domestic politics, obviously, as well as I know American domestic politics. But I really hope that this is an issue in Israel right now, because every Israeli who's had to live through this, especially those who lost family members on October 7th, they should be demanding that their government comes clean and tells them absolutely everything right now.

#Glenn

I'm wondering, though, how long can the Israelis keep this going, though? Because all of these wars, they've overextended themselves in a big way, which also puts a huge drain on their economy. We've seen a lot of people have left Israel as well, many of them more productive people. Overall, Israel is losing friends, making enemies. The image they had before of being not all-powerful, but they had... yeah, they had the Iron Dome, which would protect them from anything. The U.S. alliance was, you know, made of steel almost.

And now you see public opinion going a bit against—not a little bit, it's falling apart in the United States in terms of how they view Israel. We've seen some comments by Vance, where J.D. Vance openly states that American policy can't be subordinated to Israeli interests. I mean, this is kind of huge. All of this coming together, and you also have a society which is, I assume, growing tired of war, but there's no real way out. Do you see any possibility that the whole thing just begins to unravel at some point?

#Joe Kent

I think honestly, as soon as there's a new presidential election here in America, it's going to be really hard for the Israelis to receive the same amount of support they've received from us. And our support really is quintessential to the way that Israel is able to conduct themselves. I mean, look, I think Israel would be able to defend itself on its own, but they wouldn't be able to be engaged in a constant state of war against all of their neighbors. They would have to cut a lot more deals with the Palestinians in Gaza and in the West Bank. So as soon as America says, like, we're done providing a blank check for you guys, we're going to cut off the military aid.

I am worried, though, about, you know, the National Defense Authorization Act that basically has us intertwining our most sensitive capabilities with the Israelis. So the Israelis are way more forward-leaning. They understand the political winds are changing. And so you've heard this narrative in the last year where the Israelis are saying, and even a lot of their surrogates here in America, like Mike Huckabee, are saying, like, okay, so we're going to not give Israel as much aid anymore. We might even cut off all the aid, but we're going to move from aid to partnership. And so now we're basically ingraining it in our laws that we have to share intelligence and we have to share a sense of technological capabilities online.

So the Israelis are forward-leaning, and they know that the end of the blank check is coming very soon. They are taking precautions. But I think if we have the spine to take away some of those provisions in that law that prevent us basically from being joined at the hip with the Israelis, and the Israelis are truly on their own and they have to behave as other nations in that region, then I think we'd see a much more restrained Israel. Because just the facts are the facts. It's a small country.

They really shouldn't be able to go in there and push around all of their neighbors. The only reason they can do that is because we give them so much, and we're the ones that are standing behind them, underwriting all the risks and disasters that they start in the region.

#Glenn

Seems like a common theme of all these conflicts in the region now, which includes the United States, is that the region's going through this transition. Everyone essentially has to start to think about cutting deals. Yet we're not seeing it, though, yet. We're just seeing doubling down, escalating a bit more, seeing if we can really break the other side by just mounting a bit more pressure or just get a better deal out of them. But, yeah, it doesn't seem to be forthcoming anywhere. But what actually is happening in Gaza now, though? It kind of disappeared out of the news after this, well, Trump had this deal. But, of course, the conflict isn't over by any means.

#Joe Kent

With Iran? With Iran? No, with Gaza. Gaza, I'm sorry. Okay, yeah, Gaza. I think the deal was a nice headline. And maybe if we would have stayed focused on the deal and not started this war in Iran, we could have helped see it through. But I don't believe the deal really meant much because pretty much every day we're seeing the Israelis take actions inside Gaza, which is—it's amazing to me that there's still literally more people to kill and buildings to knock over in Gaza. But the Israelis have found a way to do it, unfortunately. Yeah. So Gaza continues to be, you know, almost a vector and a rallying cry, not just for those in Gaza, not just for the Palestinians, but beyond that, which may be the reason why the Israelis are doing it, just to keep the tensions in the region high.

But, you know, it's unfortunate that we launched—this is one of the many reasons it's unfortunate we launched the Iran war—because we probably could have taken a more proactive role in guaranteeing some degree of peace there. But that seems to be never-ending, and it seems to be spreading to the West Bank, because I do think the Israelis, at least the Likud party, they want to annex the vast majority of the West Bank and kick the majority of the Palestinians out of there. They see a model. They saw what happened in Gaza, and I think they want to do, if they can find a reason, I think they would do the same thing in the West Bank. Well.

#Glenn

How about, again, I guess the overall, the largest one here, the U.S.-Iran. Do you see it moving any closer to any settlement? I heard Trump make this point that after the elections in the U.S., he would have to make a decision: either go all in and, well, demolish Iran, or, well, to use your word, cut the deal. But there's still some, you know, quite a few weeks left for the midterms. So where's this heading?

#Joe Kent

Everything that Trump and the administration say assumes that the Iranians will remain static and just react to us. And recently, especially in the last couple of months, the Iranians have shown us that they're not going to do that, that they will start a round of conflict if they see a reason to do so. So you'll hear, you know, Scott Bessent come out and say, like, "We're going to do economic D-Day on the Iranians." The Iranians respond by getting more aggressive and taking out more tankers. That starts the next cycle of escalation.

Trump keeps going and saying, well, after the midterms, I'm either going to wipe them off the face of the earth or they'll be begging me for a deal. He says things like that. I mean, the Iranians are smart. They know when our elections are. But Trump is basically just saying that his intent is to get this conflict out of the news. Kind of hard to do, though, because the Iranians have applied pressure to the Straits of Hormuz, and gas prices are shooting up. But Trump wants it to go away. He wants it to go away for the midterms. But then he said, like, okay, after the midterms, I'm going to do something.

That assumes the Iranians are going to wait to be hit. They're going to wait to see what we're going to do. I think the Iranians, based on the way that we've conducted ourselves in previous negotiations, basically starting negotiations on several occasions and then sneak-attacking the Iranians, killing the supreme leader, I don't think even the moderates in Iran who would like to get us a deal, I don't think that they have any interest in giving us a deal, at least President Trump. And they've even said as much. There's been Iranian officials who've said, like, "We're not going to give Trump a deal. We're just going to kind of wait this whole thing out."

So I think we're playing a very dangerous game where we are saying, "Hey, we're going to go do something horrible to Iran," but we expect the Iranians not to react and to hit us first. The Iranians have already shown us recently that they're more than capable of shooting at our ships. I mean, they got relatively close.

We don't know how close, because the reports vary, but they got pretty close with one of their ballistic missiles to, you know, our ships. And if a ballistic missile hits one of these ships, it's going to be a mass casualty event. Like, we can disperse our forces that are on bases; you can't disperse our forces on ships. So the Iranians have shown us they can do that. They could make it worse too. They could start hitting the ship-to-ship transfers that are critical for the escort corridor that we're bringing tankers out on. So the Iranians still have a lot of cards left to play in terms of escalation. We don't want to admit it, but we don't really have a— So I believe that the Iranians might, my best guess is that sometime in late September, which we're approaching, or in October, the Iranians are going to do something pretty drastic in order to hurt Trump as much as they can, you know, going into the election, or maybe even right after the election, if they don't really care about the results, you know, who wins the House or the Senate.

Just hit him after that in that kind of lame-duck period. That's another potential as well. But us thinking that we can continue to use sanctions and punish and hurt Iran, and that they're not going

to respond to us, and for us to think that there's not more cards they have to play—I mean, right now our bases in the region have been destroyed, pretty much destroyed. It's debatable if we're ever going to go back to them. I hope we don't, because it's a waste of money and too much risk. But we can't even get our ships into port in the region. We have to take our ships and send them to Thailand or Diego Garcia for them to be able to get resupply. Even the workarounds that we're doing right now with the tanker escorts and all that, in the long run, it costs us more than it costs Iran to just slowly chip away at escalation.

But I don't think the Iranians are going to sit around and wait, because the leaders that are in charge now in Iran, if there are major strikes by us that take out energy infrastructure or kill a lot of Iranian civilians, those leaders that are in power in Iran right now, they've got to worry about their own people coming after them because the hardliners are emboldened. The hardliners right now are saying, "We told you guys for years, you can't negotiate with the Americans. They're going to do whatever the Israelis say, and look at where we're at now. They killed the supreme leader. They started this war. We were caught off guard," et cetera. So I just don't think we're accurately understanding the Iranian calculus, and that they have a lot of agency and they have a lot of options.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, no, that's what I heard as well from some Iranian voices, would be this: that the key priority should be to deny, essentially, escalation dominance to the United States, this ability to decide when war, when the fighting begins, when it should stop. And indeed, if the calculation by Trump is to keep things calm until the elections and then go hard thereafter, I mean, then wouldn't the calculation by the Iranians be to deny him this calm during the election and humiliate him before? I mean, it just seems, yeah, like you said, we would take their ability to act independently out of the calculation.

Yeah. Again, I would draw comparisons to Europe, and we see European leaders talking about war with Russia. They're setting dates, 2028, 2029, and, "Let's arm ourselves because we're not ready." And meanwhile, they're hoping that the Russians will just sit there and wait until the Europeans are ready to arm themselves so they can attack. I mean, at some point, you know, the Russians would have to make their own calculation whether or not they would want to wait for this. But do you see, though, with Iran's ability to put economic pressure on the United States, also the Gulf states?

At some point, the U.S. is starting to get more and more economic problems. The Gulf states will have to start selling the U.S. bonds. It's not just the economic situation changing, but also the diplomatic one. We saw that the Gulf states were supposed to meet in Oman, all of them except Bahrain, but then the Saudis pulled out or postponed it at the last minute. I'm not sure if it was under pressure from the U.S., but if they make all these diplomatic deals without the United States, won't it put the U.S. in a very awkward position? I mean, how long? It doesn't seem like necessarily time would be on the side of the United States here.

#Joe Kent

Well, I mean, I think pretty quickly we're—I mean, I think we're already there. We're approaching, you know, a phase where all of our Gulf partners and the people who've historically been our partners are going to look around and say, like, well, actually, those security guarantees that were supposed to protect me, they ended up being a liability because I had American bases here in my backyard. And that, you know, earned us Iranian ballistic missiles and drones. And now our economies are in shambles. So actually, being friends with the Americans, not that good of a deal.

Now, I don't think they're going to pull the rug out from us overnight. And I think they're going to tell us to our face. They still want to do business with us because they still want to do business with us. But we're going to start seeing them making their own security arrangements. That's what it looked like was taking place in Oman. You had potentially a conference of like, hey, let's just be real here. We all live in the region. Let's figure out a way to continue to be able to live amongst each other and trade and not destroy our own economies. But then we came in and we exerted some pressure, I think. I don't know.

But I think we exerted some pressure on the Saudis to get them to pull out of that because we still, for some reason—again, this kind of goes back to this American fantasy land—we still want to insert ourselves as if, like, we're the people that are calling the shots in the region, which, you know, for the life of me, I don't even understand. Even if that was the case, like, how that's a good deal for America. It just commits us, you know, to nations in a region that's so far away from us and so far removed to us having to be involved in every single squabble and every single dispute and every single detail of everything that transpires there. It ends up costing us more in the long run. I don't see why we're not embracing this.

Old school Trump, to me, would have embraced this and just been like, yeah, all these arrangements were done by other presidents who were dumber than me. And I'm going to cut a new deal, and we're getting our guys out. We're going to focus on home. But he's not doing that. We're inserting ourselves back in there. But the real world, these Gulf countries are going to start, I think, moving towards their own security cooperation. That's sort of what we saw with the Mecca arrangement. But obviously, that Mecca agreement between Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the Turks, like, okay, probably not really worth the paper it was written on. But, you know, it's the first iteration, and we'll see where things go from there.

The Gulf states, like the Emiratis, the Qataris, Bahrain, the Kuwaitis, the Iraqis, they're all going to end up having to make some kind of an arrangement with the Iranians. And that's probably going to get them some strongly worded memos and posts on social media from us Americans. But I think they realize that the whole region is changing. And again, if we try and cling onto it, I think we're going to end up suffering more in the long run. We should be worried about the flow of oil coming out of the Straits of Hormuz and making sure the petrodollar stays alive. But unfortunately, we're not thinking that strategically.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, I guess all that goes back to my original point that the longer this goes on, more things can go wrong. As you said, the Kuwaitis might sign a deal with the Iranians as well. But if they postpone this too much, I mean, I'm wondering if the Iranians might greenlight the Iraqis for intervening in Kuwait and absorbing it. Again, it seems outlandish, perhaps—outlandish, sorry—but it's not unthinkable anymore as the whole thing begins to unravel. And even the Iranian spokesperson made this point, that Islamic countries destroying each other as they are now, only Israel benefits.

You can kind of see how this could be a convincing selling point in that region to Israel, I guess, reorganize the entire security structure. But no, yes, I did want to ask, before I forget: the Saudis, they asked Trump for help to hit Yemen. You mentioned before that, you know, America already done that, didn't work. But what do you think are the wider consequences? Do the Saudis see this as a massive betrayal then, or will it not really impact? They kind of see the difficulties the U.S. is in, or does it impact the security architecture of the region?

#Joe Kent

I think it's definitely going to impact the security architecture. I think MBS, um, he is still hoping that we'll come bail him out because he's kind of got no other options, uh, in his own mind. Um, so he's hoping that we can come in with, like, some silver bullet. But if I was there, I'd just be like, "Hey, man, you saw us fight the Houthis in 2025. If we had some, like, critical targeting data we could give you that would make the whole thing crumble, we would have used it ourselves. Like, it doesn't—we can sell the Saudis more bombs. We can give them more aircraft refueling. We can give them more targeting, et cetera."

But we already kind of threw the kitchen sink at them when that was our only focus. We weren't at war with Iran at the time, and we still weren't able to basically seal the deal. So I don't really know. I feel like MBS is probably just kind of flailing here. And then when we can't come give him a silver bullet, I do think he's going to feel betrayed. I mean, the Saudis did send a delegation to the Supreme Leader's funeral, and so I think that the Saudis are going to say, like, "Hey, at some point, we are going to cut deals with Ansar Allah, and at some point, we're going to have to work something out with the Houthis."

And again, I think we're not going to be happy about that. I think then we're going to feel like we're betrayed. But I think as soon as we get the understanding and we can fully internalize that this whole region is going to have to exist long after America gets frustrated and inevitably leaves, which we kind of always do, so we should let them kind of work out their own arrangements, and then we should just really prioritize what matters for us. But again, we just seem incapable of doing that. And I hope we can do that before more disaster and more strife takes place.

#Glenn

Just a last question. Actually, I hate this question, but do you have any predictions here? It's not a great question because we don't have a crystal ball. And especially in West Asia now, there's too many variables. There's too many actors, too many competing interests. But kind of seeing the direction of how the power is shifting, where do you see this headed? What is the likely outcome from this? I mean, we can kind of rule out, you know, full victory for Washington, you know, going back to the 1990s, essentially. So where is this headed if we're not going back to the old status quo?

#Joe Kent

I think it's hard to say in the immediate term what's going to happen. Like, is there going to be a drastic escalation? Is there going to be boots on the ground, something else? That I don't know. I think it's all possible. I think what people should keep in mind is that some of the outlandish things, like you said, the example you gave, like, would we see Iraqi PMF marching into Kuwait? Six, eight months ago, people would have been like, "What are you talking about? That's absurd." However, like, this is what war is, and this war is so chaotic. There's so many ramifications.

The riots that we're seeing in Syria right now threatening al-Sharaa, that could lead to a war between the Israelis and the Turks, the resurgence of ISIS. All of these different unintended consequences are what happens when we get into big strategic wars like this without really thinking everything through. So I do think there's going to be lots of unintended consequences that people didn't see coming. I think in the long run, though, Iran is going to emerge or reemerge, however you want to look at it, as at least a regional power. I do think a lot of these different states in the region, Ansar Allah is going to come into its own.

We're not going to be able to fully dismantle the Iraqi PMF and the other militias that we view as being under the control of Iran. And so I do think that there's going to be a new power in the region that's going to be the Iranians. We're eventually going to recognize that. I don't think this administration is going to. I think this war is going to get passed on to the next administration. I think it will still be going, and we are going to end up cutting a deal at some point in time with the Iranians. I would argue that the sooner that we can cut that deal, the better off we're going to be, the less blood and treasure we'll be in between it. But at some point, we will end up cutting a deal with them.

And at the end of the day, I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing. But I think that's where we're going to end up eventually. I also, unfortunately, think we have a way of doing self-fulfilling prophecies. Trump says he got into this to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. Well, at some point in the not-so-distant future, the Iranians are going to get a nuclear weapon because they tried to be a breakout state and they ended up getting their Supreme Leader killed. Massive

consequences. And so now I think the next person, this current government in Iran, is going to have to make sure that that doesn't happen again. And the only way for them to do that is to push us out of the region and then to get a nuclear weapon.

Because right now, the smartest man in the world is Kim Jong-un in North Korea because he's not getting any strife from us. As a matter of fact, he's getting complimented by us. So we said that we were going to prevent them from getting a nuclear weapon. In the long run, they're going to get one. I don't think that that means Iran is going to, like, you know, hand over the nuclear weapon to terrorists and there's going to be some doomsday scenario. I think that they'll end up just being a country that has a nuclear weapon, and we deal with that. So that's kind of like my long-term prediction. In the short run, I just think there could be a lot more strife and chaos in a much wider war if we don't start thinking much more pragmatically.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, North Korea, they're actually doing great. Well, their economy is doing quite well. They made some very powerful friends. No one's messing with them. Their army is getting real battlefield training. I mean, it's... Yeah, well, that we're going to have to save for another day. But on the Iranian nuclear weapon, though, how far away would they be, though? Because, you know, it looks like they have a lot of the material and the know-how, again, if they're a threshold state, to just develop these nuclear weapons. But if they do so, wouldn't, I guess, the leading concern be that their neighbors would then also acquire weapons? And they're seeking to cement, I guess, more of a strategic partnership with the Chinese and the Russians. This could be a massive disruption to all of this, though.

#Joe Kent

If there's a way that China and Russia can prevent the Iranians, like convince them with soft power not to get a nuclear weapon, then that's fantastic. Unfortunately, what American hard power against Iran and the rest of the region has shown the world is that if you don't have a nuclear weapon, at some point in time America is gonna not like what you do, and we're gonna come, like, regime-change you. I mean, like Gaddafi gave up basically all of his nuclear materials and said, "I don't want what happened to Saddam to happen to me." And what happened to Gaddafi? You know, Saddam hinted around and, like, was coy about whether or not he had a nuclear weapon. Look what happened to Iraq.

The Iranians tried to kind of thread the needle and say, "We don't have a nuclear weapon, but we could get one." So that's our stance. And they use that to hedge and to prevent an invasion. Well, that didn't keep them safe. So at some point, I do think that the folks in Iran for a long time have been saying, "Hey, we could build one of these, or two, or 10." They're going to kind of win the argument based on our behavior. The former supreme leader that we killed, he had that fatwa that was in place since 2003, 2004 that was holding, that prevented them from actually developing a

nuclear weapon. And so the Iranians have the capability. It's been degraded. Like, we took out their nuclear sites. But they're smart people.

They have natural resources. There's no reason why they wouldn't be able to put one together if they truly made the decision to do so. So I think that's just kind of an inevitability at this point. I'm not saying it's a good thing, but it's based on our actions and how we behave. Not just Iran, but there's other countries throughout the world that have to be thinking the exact same thing right now. They're having the same conversation that we just had. They're like, well, look what happened to Iran and look at North Korea right now. Our own stated goal of trying to prevent rogue nations from getting nuclear weapons—all the actions we took worked directly against our stated objective, which is just crazy when you think about it.

#Glenn

I remember I used to tell my students a decade ago that the message being put out to the world was, well, exactly what you said. If you are a country that doesn't acquire nuclear weapons, you give up your program, be it Iraq or Libya, you're destroyed. Those countries who develop it in secrecy and then come out at the other end, be it Pakistan or North Korea, then you're safe. And sending this signal to Iran in such a powerful way, yeah, this is probably something we will regret. Yeah. But, as I said, a lot of things can happen now. Tomorrow, if MBS is toppled or Syria collapses, U.S. decides to put boots on the ground in Yemen, or the Iraqis march into Syria or Kuwait, it seems like anything can happen. It's just, the longer this war goes on, the more the unpredictability. You would hope we wouldn't have to wait for the midterms in the United States to begin to cut deals. So anyways, thank you so much for taking time, as always.

#Joe Kent

Certainly. Anytime. Thank you.