

# Joe Kent: Iran War, Israeli Influence & Creating ISIS

Joe Kent is the former Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, who resigned in March 2026 due to the war against Iran. Kent discusses the mistake of attacking Iran, the intrusive influence of Israel over U.S. foreign policy, ignoring that Iran is a rational actor, the pro-war bias in Washington, the U.S. contribution to creating ISIS, the curse of the forever wars, and the hubris following the military intervention in Venezuela. Please like, subscribe & share! Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: [https://x.com/Glenn\\_Diesen](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/gdiesen](http://buymeacoffee.com/gdiesen) Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

## #Glenn

Welcome back to the program. We're joined today by Joe Kent, the former director of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center. Thank you very much for taking the time to come on the program. You recently resigned as counterterrorism director over the war against Iran, and I thought a good place to start would be why you think that war was a mistake.

## #Joe Kent

As I said in my resignation letter, I believe Iran posed no imminent threat to us — meaning Iran was not on the verge of attacking. Since President Trump came back into office, we've watched — and anyone with internet access can verify this — the Iranians follow a very calculated escalation ladder. They stopped their proxies from attacking us, unlike during the Biden administration. When Trump returned to office, they sat at the negotiating table with us right up until the 12-day war and Operation Midnight Hammer. Once Operation Midnight Hammer was complete — and, mind you, during the 12-day war — they didn't attack us at all.

Once we attacked them and hit their nuclear sites, they responded by firing about the same number of missiles as we dropped bombs, at a very empty quadrant of a base in Qatar. Then they immediately got back to the negotiating table with the international community. The only imminent threat, as Secretary Rubio said, was from the Israelis. The Israelis attacked Iran, and we knew that during this phase of the war the Iranians would see it as an existential threat to their regime — that the goal was regime change — and so they responded by retaliating against Israel. But again, this whole series of events wouldn't have happened if the Israelis hadn't attacked. So there was no imminent threat.

And I'm also against us getting involved in yet another regime-change war in the Middle East. I'm not a fan of the regime in Iran — I understand they're a terrorist threat, especially from my portfolio and my perspective as the director of the National Counterterrorism Center. However, using a regime-change tactic that failed in Iraq, failed in Afghanistan, Syria, and Libya — that, to me, was just a recipe for disaster. But it was exactly what the Israelis wanted. Watching the Israelis really force the hand of my government was something I was not going to be a part of. And then I have friends in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and other places. I really did not want to see any more young Americans lose their lives in a needless war in the Middle East. I just personally could not be a part of that any longer.

## **#Glenn**

How do you explain this Israeli influence? Because it's often pointed out that while Israeli and U.S. interests overlap, they're not exactly the same. In fact, over time—at least over the past few years—their interests seem to be diverging more and more. So why does Israel have such a strong influence over decision-making in Washington right now?

## **#Joe Kent**

Honestly, I think it's a combination of things. The Israelis are very effective at what they do. They're a small country, so they use a very sophisticated, layered approach to influencing the American government. Their grip on Congress, I think, is well documented. They have very active political action committees that use Americans who support Israel to provide a lot of money to different political candidates, and that gets them a certain degree of access. We also have a very close relationship with the Israelis in terms of intelligence sharing.

It's because the Middle East is a very challenging place to operate, and the Israelis have a very competent intelligence service. But because we rely on them for so much of our intelligence, I personally believe we've gotten a little too close to them. Since we don't fully understand a lot of what's going on in the Middle East, we tend to take what they say almost as the only opinion that counts when it comes to intelligence collection. But if you've worked in the region for quite a while, like I have, you realize that the Israelis use their intelligence to influence us as well as to inform us. And they're usually pushing for a very different objective.

In this administration, for example, the Israelis did a very effective job of eliminating the potential for a negotiation between President Trump and the Iranians. Now, President Trump had always said that his policy was that Iran cannot have a nuclear weapon. The Iranians, in their own way, agreed with that. The supreme leader, the former supreme leader, before he was killed, had a fatwa, or religious decree, that prevented Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. So Iran basically agreed, "We don't want a nuclear weapon." But Iran wanted the ability to enrich uranium — the ability to produce a nuclear weapon should they choose to.

They basically didn't want to go the route of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and say, "Hey, we give up everything," which would have made them vulnerable to a regime-change war. And they didn't want to go the route of Saddam Hussein, saying, "Hey, we're going to develop one," or pretending they might have had one. So their approach was pretty pragmatic. The Israelis recognized this as a threat to their goal of regime change because they saw, "Hey, Trump's going to get to the negotiating table with these guys. He's going to get a deal," since President Trump prides himself on being a dealmaker. So what they sought to do was use their multilayered influence network to move the red line from "no nuclear weapon" to "no enrichment." No American official said "no enrichment" in this administration.

In the previous administration, Secretary Pompeo had said Iran can't enrich. But he was really the only one who said that. When we came back in, in January of '25, the Israelis used their official engagements, and they also used their folks in the media — pro-Israel sympathizers in the media and in the think tank sphere — to say, over and over again, essentially, "The American policy is no enrichment," or "Enrichment equals a bomb," as in, if you can enrich any uranium, then you're going to have a nuclear bomb. And they did this through repetition. They'd put it on the news, and the same night they'd be in the White House lobbying for these things, or over at one of the intelligence agencies lobbying for them.

And so they were able to influence U.S. policy and basically convince President Trump that his new policy was "no enrichment." And now we found ourselves in this quagmire where we bomb the Iranian nuclear facilities, we take away their ability to enrich, but then the Israelis come right back—like you heard Mark Levin do on TV the other night—and say, "Well, there's still some uranium there, and we have to go in and actually... it's not enough to bomb it. We have to go physically get it," which means we have to put boots on the ground, we have to control ground. Again, it gets us stuck in this quagmire. And so that right there is really what I call the pro-Israel—or really just the ecosystem that they've developed throughout multiple levels of our government.

## **#Glenn**

My impression from Iran was that if it were simply a matter of having more transparency around the civilian nuclear program—meaning they wouldn't develop a weapon—a deal could be made. Their frustration often came from linking the nuclear issue to things like supporting regional allies or imposing certain limitations on ballistic missiles or drones, and so on. Do you see this as an Israeli effort to link the nuclear issue to a lot of other issues, essentially making it impossible to reach a deal in order to push for war?

## **#Joe Kent**

Yes, the Israelis were very good at moving the red line. When President Trump scoped the negotiations very narrowly to "no nuclear weapons," even within the enrichment sphere there was still some flexibility before and after the 12-day war. I mean, Stephen Whitkoff is a very good

negotiator as well, and he and the Iranians were in very real talks about what level of enrichment would be allowed and how it would be monitored. So this was really just trade space—the typical back-and-forth that happens in any healthy negotiation. Then the Israelis would come in and say, “Oh, but actually, it’s not just the enrichment. It’s not just the nukes. It’s the ballistic missiles. Don’t you realize these ballistic missiles can reach your bases?”

Well, I mean, most of our bases were on Iran’s borders—that was kind of a no-brainer. And then they would say, “Well, it’s not just those ballistic missiles; it’s their medium- and long-range ballistic missiles.” And then it’s their proxies, their support for regional actors. But again, those are issues. I’ve spent a lot of my career actually fighting Iranian proxies. But Iran showed that they could get those proxies under control, and they did that when Trump came back into office. They didn’t respect the Biden administration—they had attacked our troops in Iraq and Syria, you know, around 200 times since October 7th. But then when Trump came back into office—because in the first Trump administration he had killed Qasem Soleimani—

They said, “OK, this is not someone to play with. Let’s get the proxies under control.” And they showed that they were able to do that. So again, we were in a healthy trade space for negotiation. This idea you hear frequently from American officials—that Iran is just made up of these psychopathic jihadis, like they’re members of ISIS or something, and that we can’t negotiate with them—I just don’t think any data supports that whatsoever. They showed that they would observe the escalatory ladder. And again, look, I’m not a fan of the regime in Iran. I’m not a fan of the IRGC. I wish the Iranian people would get rid of them. Unfortunately, we’ve set that goal back. I mean, there were protesters on the streets in January, protesting against the economic conditions in Iran.

And I think that actually has more of a chance of getting rid of that regime than anything an external actor is going to do. But instead, we came in, and by trying to remove the regime forcefully, I think we only strengthened it. And this was always our prediction, because I think this speaks to human nature, but also to the culture of the region and the culture of the Shias. So we worked really against our own stated purpose for being over there. And now we’re in this cycle of, like, are we trying to get the uranium? What’s our actual strategic goal? Whereas the Israelis keep moving the ball forward, because their goal really is just to either get rid of the regime completely or have the regime in a chaotic, warlike state where they can’t launch attacks against Israel.

## **#Glenn**

You said before that intelligence services kind of do two things. One, they can inform, but they can also sell a policy. When it comes to portraying the Iranian government as being completely irrational—like, you know, the “crazy mullahs” who just want to get a nuclear weapon to blow up the world—is this something that’s sold to the public to build support? Or do you see some of these ideas actually being shared by decision-makers? For example, in Washington, do they buy into the idea that Iran is as irrational as one might think from listening to the speeches? Because I thought what you mentioned at the beginning was quite important: the Iranians are going carefully up the

escalation ladder, preparing to go up and down. A lot of this indicates the rational calculations of a state, as opposed to, say, a Shiite version of the Taliban.

## **#Joe Kent**

Unfortunately, most senior decision-makers, unless they have a background in the Middle East, have to deal with such a large portfolio that they don't have time to study these issues deeply. A lot of times, they won't have time to do a deep dive with an analyst who's covered these topics for decades. That expertise is available to them—some take the opportunity—but many just don't have the time. And again, this is where the Israelis play a weak hand very well. They use their access to senior officials, usually through political channels but also through official government engagements.

They'll come in and do an end run around the intelligence process. If Mossad or another Israeli intelligence organization wants to give the CIA—or one of our intelligence agencies—some information, it actually has to go through a pretty rigorous process. It's not perfect; some things get through that just aren't true. But there is still a process, and there's a bit of skepticism applied to it. The Israelis know this—they know the game. So their senior officials will come and engage directly with our senior officials, and they usually won't talk intelligence.

They'll usually say something like, you know, they're within two weeks of getting a bomb. And, you know, you don't want to be the one responsible for these crazy ayatollahs—because “ayatollahs” just sounds crazy, right? You don't want the ayatollah to get a bomb, because then that's going to be on you. And then it'll be repeated that night in the media—on conservative media, usually in this case under the Trump administration. But we've seen it happen under previous administrations too, on Democratic media as well. So they use this echo chamber very effectively. And it's also how they do an end run around the intelligence process.

And again, the Israelis—just because so many of them are dual American citizens, and they literally sound like people I've been in the room with. I've met Israelis who went to school in Miami, in Ohio, and in Washington State, where I'm from. So it can actually be very disorienting. One of our weaknesses as Americans, when it comes to the Israelis, is that we get too comfortable with them. They do a really good job of not feeling foreign—especially in a region like the Middle East, where everything feels very, very foreign. They use that familiarity to their advantage, and it's something we really have to keep our guard up about.

## **#Glenn**

One of the reasons I was very optimistic about Trump's re-election was that he was pushing hard to end the proxy war in Ukraine. He was going to end the forever wars, which, of course, a lot of Americans have also become exhausted with. And I kept thinking about something Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson told me when he was in talks with Obama during his time in the White House. He said there was this strong bias for war in Washington—that's what Obama told Colonel Wilkerson. And I

was wondering, how do you make sense of that? Why did Trump go down the route of a war with Iran, do you think? Because he seemed very genuine in his earlier desire not to get engaged in any of these forever wars. In fact, I think he was the first president in decades to go through his whole first administration without starting a new war. So why do you think he shifted on this issue?

## **#Joe Kent**

Yes, that's a great question. I would agree with the premise that Washington is, in general, just for the wars. There's obviously the military-industrial complex aspect of it. I mean, Washington, D.C. is basically built on defense contractors. So you're going to get very little pushback when you want to start a new war, arm a new proxy group, or get engaged in a new proxy operation. That's just the default bipartisan factory setting, if you will, of Washington, D.C. In this case, I do think that President Trump—again, the Israelis, the way they influenced him—and also, I think they played to his psyche in a way. They said, "Look, you've already done historic things with your military. You were able to go in and take out the leader in Venezuela."

You know, that was a flawless operation. It was historic. Protesters were already on the streets here in January. All you have to do is a couple of strikes, and this whole thing's going to be easy—it's going to fall. And then you're going to be historic. I think they pointed that out to him, and this was echoed by the pro-Israeli lobby, but also by a lot of the more neoconservative, neoliberal types who said, "Look, Iran's been a pain to every president. They've been a threat to every administration for the last forty-seven years. You're the only one who's strong enough. This is your place in history." So I think they played to his psyche very effectively, unfortunately. And I think a lot of Trump's instincts—and this is the man that I know—I think a lot of his instincts said, "Don't take the trap."

It never works out. But it was overridden, I think, by the persistence of the Israeli lobby and their surrogates in the media, and by the access they have within the government. I still think—and I hope, and this is why I'm trying to do as much media as I can—that he has time to wake up and see that this is not going to be an easy thing. The Iranians right now can essentially win by not losing. They're affecting world energy prices because of their control over the Strait of Hormuz. I think Trump is good at seeing the big picture, so I truly hope and pray that he can shake off all the people who led him down this path and make a very Trumpian move—come to a quick peace, if that's even possible at this point.

## **#Glenn**

I guess what's interesting with Iran, though, is that there doesn't seem to be much escalation dominance over it. In other words, it's not possible to keep escalating until Iran has to back down. It seems they can go pretty much all the way up this escalation ladder. I mean, they have a lot of regional targets—they can shut down the Red Sea if they want, they can hit the desalination plants of the Gulf states, which would basically make all the expats leave. They can destroy the financial sector there, shut down energy operations. So it looks like they can keep climbing at least a few

more steps on this escalation ladder. So how do you assess the Iranians' strategy now—what do you think they'll do next if there is further escalation?

## **#Joe Kent**

I think the Iranians studied the wars of the last two decades, to their east and to their west, and they saw that you can essentially win by not losing. So for them, it's about keeping enough of their leadership alive—and they obviously have a lot of depth in that leadership. I think it's actually been strengthened because of the strikes we've carried out. There's a lot of support right now for the regime, whereas just a couple of months ago there probably was less. But they've also done a very impressive job of manufacturing and dispersing their ballistic missiles and drone capabilities.

I mean, anybody who can look at a map of the Strait of Hormuz can see it's a pretty narrow section there. If they can, every now and then, get a drone in, or a ballistic missile, or some mines, then they mess with world energy—and they know it. I think the way they're using the Chinese and other world powers, saying, "Hey, you guys can get your oil through. We're not going to trade in the dollar, but you're welcome to use the Strait of Hormuz," is very shrewd of them. And they also know politically that this isn't going to be a popular war anymore as it drags on.

So I think they've found kind of their steady state right now, where they realize they can keep striking targets in the Middle East. They can make this very uncomfortable for the GCC countries, which, for now, we sort of have the support of—but I think that erodes more and more. We're already seeing a lot of fractures in our relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is key for us to be able to project power against Iran as well. So again, right now, I personally don't see many downsides for the Iranians to continue this war. I think they realize that with very minimal effort, they can keep it going far longer than we can.

## **#Glenn**

That's an interesting framing. If they just hold on, they can win. That's one of the lessons from many wars, going from, I guess, Vietnam to the Iraq War. The U.S. would always win on the battlefield, but in the end, if one side can't stick it out, then that's not necessarily how ultimate success is measured. Given that the Iranian objectives seem to be organized around removing threats from the region—that would be U.S. bases—it looks like the Strait of Hormuz would be key to this. I mean, they can tax the Gulf states for reparation.

They can pressure them to remove U.S. bases from their soil. They can also, as you said, push countries to sell their oil in currencies other than the dollar. A lot of this seems aimed at disentangling the United States from the region. Do you think that's possible? I mean, can the U.S. leave—or, I guess, declare victory and go home—as long as the Strait of Hormuz isn't under U.S. control? Because it doesn't seem like it's possible to bring it under U.S. control either. I might be wrong, of course.

## **#Joe Kent**

Oh, I think we're in a conundrum right now, because the idea that we're going to forcefully open the Strait of Hormuz—militarily—well, could we do it? I mean, we'd probably need to build a coalition to do it. I think we can always muster enough hardware and military might to do something temporarily. But as we just talked about, even if we temporarily open the Strait of Hormuz, eventually the Iranians would find their footing again, use insurgent tactics, and make the Strait less secure, which would end up disrupting international energy shipping again. So I don't think we can do it in the long term. Could we do it really quickly and have it not last? I'm sure we could. But I think a lot of this, at the end of the day, is going to come down to a cost-benefit analysis for us.

What's it going to cost us—not just in dollars and military hardware, but also in political capital—to take a swing at militarily opening the Strait of Hormuz? And if it doesn't last or fails, what political costs do we pay then? Or do we just end up at the negotiating table with the Iranians? For me, the formula has always been that President Trump wants some kind of sustainable deal that doesn't require committing a lot more military resources or burning more political capital. And I think he could get a deal like that. However, if he doesn't restrain the Israelis, they'll keep doing what they've been doing for the last couple of weeks. Basically, every time you see President Trump publicly say he wants some form of de-escalation to facilitate negotiations, they respond in their own way.

You'd see the Israelis, basically within hours, come in and literally bomb the targets the president had just said not to bomb. He said, "We're not going to hit energy infrastructure anymore." The Israelis would come right in and hit energy infrastructure to keep the war going, because they're terrified that President Trump will get a negotiation and push the Israelis to the side. Right. I think that for there to be any potential for a deal that reopens the straits—one that keeps us and our Gulf allies maintaining our relationships and returning to something even close to what we had before—we have to restrain the Israelis first. Otherwise, we're just going to find ourselves in this repeated cycle.

## **#Glenn**

Yeah, because many analysts I've spoken to don't seem sure whether it's the Israelis who are forcing America's hand, like you described, or if there's some elaborate good-cop, bad-cop game going on. But it does seem like it's the Israelis who are pushing this through.

## **#Joe Kent**

In my opinion, yes. I mean, from my vantage point, it's because we've always had a very limited goal in Iran. Most people in this administration, at least publicly, would acknowledge that the idea of regime change has just never worked before. Nobody wants to try to defend it; nobody even wants to bring it up. But the Israelis really, really wanted it. And now that we're headed down this regime change path, it very much appears the Israelis are in the driver's seat.

I mean, again, back at the very beginning of the war, the secretary of state—and even the president himself—came out and said, “Well, we had to strike Iran because the Israelis were going to,” basically showing everyone that we really couldn’t restrain the Israelis. Which is absolutely absurd, because we’re paying for their defense. We’re giving them the ability to go on the offense. We’re helping them defend their own homeland. So again, this lack of balance in our relationship, and the amount of influence they have over our government—they’re making very big decisions that we’re paying for, both in terms of the actual cost, but also in lives. We’ve lost 13 American service members here, and the Israelis haven’t lost any fighting in this war that’s being pursued for their objectives.

## **#Glenn**

Well, if Trump were to call you today—you mentioned that he wants some form of de-escalation to reach a deal—what could an agreement actually look like? Because so far, it seems as if the United States and Iran are miles apart. What could a possible deal be? Would it involve finding some kind of common security architecture for the region? Or how could the core security interests of Iran, as well as those of the United States, be harmonized? Or is it just not possible to have an all-encompassing political deal that would de-escalate things and get us out of this conflict?

## **#Joe Kent**

Yeah, I think the first step to getting the conflict to stop, and to get the Strait of Hormuz open, is us showing the Iranians—and really the Gulf, the GCC countries too—that we will restrain the Israelis, that we’ll cut off a significant amount of their military aid to prevent them from going on the offense. I think we have to be very firm, and probably publicly firm, with the Israelis and say, “You will not go on the offense anymore. We will help you with your defense if you’re attacked, but we are done supporting any offensive operations you carry out.”

And if you don't listen to us, then we're going to cut off all military aid—which Israel knows it needs for its very survival. So I think until we show that we're actually going to do that, the Iranians aren't going to take us very seriously. And I think the GCC countries won't take us seriously either. Once we do that, I think it's very possible to incentivize the Iranians to basically come back out from the cold and say, look, you have a ton of oil you can't sell right now, a ton of natural gas. The world needs that. Let's open the straits, lift sanctions on your energy resources, and get the oil and commerce flowing once again.

Let's get your economy rebuilt. We're never going to be able to give them reparations as they're demanding right now, but I think sanctions relief and restraining the Israelis would get them to the table and potentially even, I think, turn the corner. I don't want to be overly optimistic, but I think we could turn the corner in the region, where everyone can at least agree that these wars we've been fighting—basically nonstop since before, even before 9/11, but, you know, for the last 20 to 40

years, depending on how you want to do the math—they just haven't been productive for anybody. And for us to work out our differences at the negotiating table, as opposed to through these endless wars.

## **#Glenn**

I'm glad you brought up these endless wars, because we've already had so much bad experience—twenty years in Afghanistan to replace the Taliban with the Taliban. The very costly war, both in terms of blood and treasure, in Iraq, which essentially ended up turning a key balancer to Iran into something more Iran-aligned. Then Libya, which became a mess; Syria, where we now have a jihadist essentially ruling the country. What would you say are your key takeaways, or the lessons from these wars? Because we never seem to learn them. Besides having an exit strategy, how do you assess the common threads among these wars?

## **#Joe Kent**

Regime change doesn't work. I mean, we're not going to be able to come from 7,000 miles away, into a completely different culture, and through the barrel of a gun take out the leader and then be greeted as liberators by the people. I don't know how many times we need to relive this. Just last night, Mark Levin—who I'd like to discount, but the president listens to him—was desperately tweeting for us to arm the Iranian opposition so we could create chaos in Iran and topple the leaders. It's the same formula over and over again. So I frankly think that anyone who advocates for any kind of regime change in the Middle East should be expelled from any kind of foreign policy circles, just because it's had such disastrous consequences.

And then I think we have to be very, very judicious about what our actual needs are from most of these countries, and really tailor our policies based on that. In general, what we need from most countries in the Middle East is for them not to harbor terrorists. We need them to cooperate with us on counterterrorism operations and intelligence—which most of the countries in the region do, because most of the terrorist organizations also threaten them. Unless we screw things up so badly that we end up installing, literally, the former leader of al-Qaeda in Syria, it's a different story—but it kind of is what it is. We need CT cooperation from them. And then we also just need the oil and commerce to be able to flow. And that's very, very limited.

When you limit your objectives to very realistic things that our country and most countries in the West actually need, it makes it fairly easy. But if we start saying we need things like democratic law and order, and we need women's rights and gay rights and all these different things, and we need to go wag our fingers at them about their morals, and we want to fund different proxy groups against governments we don't like—that's when things get very, very complicated. We just find ourselves in this never-ending cycle of involvement in a region that, quite frankly, I think is important. I'm not saying it's not important, but I don't think it's as important as other things taking place in the world. So again, we've got to know what we actually need from the region.

## **#Glenn**

Yeah, that's always a problem with funding or supporting a political opposition. It's usually the most violent actors who rise to the top in any regime change, war, or revolution. If you go back to World War I, the Germans, seeking to support an opposition in Russia to take the Russians out of the war, ended up shipping in Lenin and contributing greatly to the Bolshevik Revolution—which then, yeah, gave them the Soviet Union to deal with for the next few decades. And it seems to be the same case in most of these proxy wars.

I mean, in '99, when we fought against Yugoslavia, we backed the KLA—the Kosovo Liberation Army—which, well, at least the Republicans in the United States at that time recognized as consisting of some very unsavory figures. They were engaged in a lot of different forms of crime, but also, you know, different opposition groups throughout the Middle East. But you brought up the example—you said we helped to install an al-Qaeda leader in Syria. I guess that was not the ideal outcome. How do you see the United States contributing to training or arming, or basically putting, uh, Giuliani—sorry—at least putting him in the position of the presidency where he is now?

## **#Joe Kent**

Yeah, I mean, really, the story of what took place in Syria never would have happened if we hadn't gone into Iraq in the first place. The Iraq War led to this, in terms of forming ISIS and al-Qaeda in the region. But when we went into Iraq, we messed things up so badly that we installed this very pro-Iranian, pro-Shia government—I mean, Iraq's a Shia-majority country. Saddam kind of kept a lid on that and, as you said, was a counterbalance to Iran. We took out Saddam and unfortunately partnered with a lot of Iranian proxies, essentially, who had actually fought against the Iraqis in the Iran-Iraq War, and we put them in power. By the end of the Iraq War, as we were getting ready to leave in 2011, you had a lot of the Gulf states and the Israelis especially saying, "Wait a sec, this is no good."

Now we have a Shia crescent that basically goes all the way from Tehran into Damascus. Baghdad is a massive staging ground for them. The Israelis had always been at odds with Assad because Assad was supporting Hezbollah, supporting Hamas, and helping Iran do so. So we had this Shia crescent, and again, we had to go and basically put out a brush fire that we started. Syria is kind of the opposite of Iraq—you had an Alawi Assad, who was a sort of Shia variant, but the majority of the country was Sunni. So when we went to either start or help spread, depending on how you look at it, the Arab Spring and the popular uprising—well, the Arab Spring started in Tunisia.

There were some organic protests that took place in Syria—there certainly were. And a lot of that was, I think, relatively secular, relatively cosmopolitan Syrians protesting against the Assad regime. But then we came in and armed a lot of the more radical Sunnis. There was the Free Syrian Army—again, some secular, some defectors from the military—but the most effective fighters we found

were some of the hardline Sunnis who quickly allied with al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda in Iraq had died down. A lot of them, including Sharaa himself and Baghdadi, the first leader of ISIS, were in prison in Iraq. They were released, and once we left, they made their way to Syria.

And we ended up supporting a lot of these proxy groups with the idea that they were going to help us against Assad. We even saw in Hillary Clinton's leaked emails that she said al-Qaeda is on our side in Syria. So we were supporting al-Qaeda, which eventually morphed into ISIS. And then again, we had to go back in and put out the brush fire that we started. ISIS became so powerful, but they had a slightly different ideology. They said, "You know what, actually, we don't care that much about Assad—we care about the global jihad." So they started conducting attacks in the West, in Europe, trying to inspire attacks in America. And then we had to go back into Iraq and back into Syria to take out ISIS. Meanwhile, Jolani is a pretty smart guy.

He broke off from ISIS. He wanted to stay focused on his home country, Syria. He was chosen by Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda at the time—because we had just killed bin Laden—to run al-Nusra, which was the branch of al-Qaeda inside Syria. Eventually, he realized that was a toxic brand in itself, and it had literally put a target on his head. So he changed the name to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which was very Syria-focused. They got a lot of support from the Turks. We knew the Turks were supporting them, but we needed the Turks for operations against ISIS—again, the brush fire that we had started. And from there, HTS got a lot of support from the Turks, and we kind of ignored them for quite some time.

But we still had this goal of getting rid of Assad because, again, Assad was a threat to the Israelis—he was supporting Hamas and Hezbollah. So we allowed the Turks, we supported the Turks, in supporting HTS. And then eventually they were able to overthrow the Assad regime. Again, this is where President Trump's initial, I think, gut instincts were correct. In December, after he had been elected but before he was inaugurated, and the Assad regime fell, President Trump said, "Hey, Syria's a mess. It's always been a mess, and it's none of our business, frankly," which I think was the right approach. Unfortunately, the Turks were able to basically rebrand Jolani as al-Shara and make it seem like we could turn Syria into this great cosmopolitan place on the Mediterranean.

And to be fair, the HTS government has done a lot of bad things, and they've had members of al-Qaeda infiltrate their ranks. They're very sympathetic to al-Qaeda members. They've taken in foreign fighters. However, there does seem to be at least some element of Shara's government that is trying to stabilize Syria. So the verdict's still out on how this is going to work. I personally don't trust Shara. I don't trust his government. But that's where we're at with Syria. Again, the only reason we have to put so much effort into this is because we tried this regime-change war. We were led down this path by the Israelis. Iraq got us in there in the first place. And it's kind of one of those things—when we know this full history, how are we even going down this route in another country in the Middle East?

**#Glenn**

I think at one point I read some reports that, within Syria, the U.S. government—or the Pentagon—was supporting one faction that was fighting against another faction backed by the CIA. I don't remember all the details because it got too convoluted, but it looks like we got stuck in a very overcomplicated game. How do you see Syria developing now, though? Because a lot of the anti-Assad coalition was essentially based on just being anti-Assad. In other words, once Assad was removed, we suddenly had Turkey, Israel, and the different groups now under Jolani in Syria. And of course, the United States has its own interests.

Do you see any chance that all these different actors could harmonize their interests to stabilize Syria for some kind of common good? Or do you think Syria will unravel into, say, Israeli-backed or occupied territory versus Turkish-occupied or supported factions? How do you see this? Because we just saw, I think about a week ago, the first border attack—some Iraqi militias launching ground missiles into Syria—which is an interesting development in itself, of course.

## **#Joe Kent**

Yeah, there are a couple of different things that I think could take place in Syria. Unfortunately, I'm not optimistic about the future for Syria. There's going to be a major clash, and I think the first flashpoint will be between the Turks and the Israelis. Although the Israelis definitely wanted Assad gone because of his support for Hamas and Hezbollah, they're very worried about Jolani and HTS, and how close they are with the Turks—having them right on their border. You can never really anticipate what kind of blowback you're going to get. Hezbollah was severely degraded after October 7th by Israeli operations, but also a lot of people in Lebanon have grown wary of Hezbollah dragging them into conflicts.

However, once Jolani took back over and a Sunni al-Qaeda government was essentially installed on their border, they remembered that just a decade ago, when ISIS was trying to penetrate their borders, it was Hezbollah that fought them off. So this actually gave Hezbollah a lot of political momentum to regain support from the people. The Israelis, though, are wary of Jolani. They support the Druze to the south, and they have relationships with some of the Alawites. So they're at odds with what the Turks want, and they also view the Turks as an existential, regional threat to them as well. I think the Israeli and Turkish interests are going to come to a head in Syria. This puts Jolani in a very precarious position because he doesn't want to anger either side. He likes to have good relations with the Israelis and, obviously, with the Turks.

But then a third wildcard factor is that what basically swept Jolani and HTS to power was a very radical element of the Sunni population, many of whom had been affiliated with ISIS for quite some time. Now that ISIS is mostly defeated, a lot of them are willing to say they're not members of ISIS anymore, or that they're part of a new group. But they're still very hardline, and they want Jolani to take a tough stance against Israel. They also want him to support a more traditional Sunni, selfless type of government. So if Jolani cracks down and becomes a good counterterrorism partner for us, it's going to put him at odds with the base of support that brought him to power in the first place.

So he has to play this dangerous game right now, where he can't crack down too hard on the terrorists who are a threat to him. Otherwise, they'll consume him. At the same time, he's under a lot of pressure from us and from the West to carry out counterterrorism operations because we're very concerned—especially since the two main refugee camps, Al-Hol and Al-Roj, have basically been emptied out. We're talking about people who've been under detention for about a decade. These are families, these are kids who've been radicalized in that environment, and there are also thousands of ISIS detainees. We got about 5,000 of the worst ISIS detainees out of Syria and into Iraq so they can be tried in the Iraqi justice system. But there are still another 25,000 to 30,000 ISIS, at least, sympathizers who've now been reintroduced into the Syrian population.

And al-Shara Jolani, his government—they lack the capability to track all these people, to make sure that they're actually, you know, reintegrating into society. So they're kind of out there. There's, just below the surface, the architecture, essentially, of what was the Islamic Caliphate that he has to deal with. And if he cracks down too hard on it, he could be consumed by it. If he doesn't crack down hard enough, he's going to lose support from the West. And meanwhile—not that I'm sympathetic to Jolani—but to the north and to the south, he has his two competing masters, Turkey and Israel. So that place could erupt very, very quickly, given all the pressure in the region.

## **#Glenn**

I've often heard comments that the different ISIS fighters don't tend to target Israel much, nor does Jolani. But I did an interview recently with Ted Postol—he's a nuclear scientist at MIT who focuses a lot on nuclear weapons and their delivery systems. He was making the point that if Israel now feels trapped and the war is being lost against Iran, they might reach for a nuclear weapon. He said that would be a tragic mistake, because while Iran is not a nuclear weapons state, it could be considered a threshold state, or at least have enough know-how and material to put together a bomb—though that's not something they would likely do.

He predicted that their strategy would be not to cross that line unless they were attacked with a nuclear weapon. But then, in a relatively short time, they'd be able to assemble something and launch back at Israel. Again, it's all assumptions—we don't know everything about the Iranians. But to what extent do you think this is a real possibility, that we could be moving in that direction—not just toward nuclear war, but even a nuclear exchange?

## **#Joe Kent**

There's going to be immense pressure from the hardliners in Iran—whoever ends up ruling the country—whether it's the Ayatollah's son, who we already assess as being a bit more hardline than his father. And I'm sure watching his father get killed didn't moderate him at all. I think a lot of the

hardliners who were pressuring the old Ayatollah to move toward a nuclear weapon are going to feel vindicated, because the former Ayatollah, before we killed him, said, "Hey, this is a good spot for us to be in. We don't want to develop a nuclear weapon."

We want to have the capability, but no nuclear weapon. That gives us the maximum negotiating leverage. And for a while, he was right. But unfortunately, we basically destroyed—literally killed—that school of thought. So now all the hardliners, and I warn people, these hardliners are not to be messed with. I mean, these are the guys who were students of Qasem Soleimani, who fought us in Iraq, who fought us in Syria, who funded and trained Hezbollah. Over the years, these are very serious people. They're now saying, "Look, we told you so. You cannot negotiate with the Americans. You cannot negotiate with the Israelis."

The only way out of this, basically, is the North Korea solution. I mean, I think all of them right now are pointing to North Korea and saying, "You know who's not getting invaded right now? North Korea." And so I think this is, again, why we have to de-escalate this as soon as possible and get them to the negotiating table. Because I kind of—this has become a self-fulfilling prophecy at some point. We basically just yelled "nuclear" enough—nuclear weapons, WMD, enrichment—that now it's kind of just going to happen. Because, again, the brush fire we created is now becoming this new crisis.

So I would be shocked, honestly, if—just logically—the Iranians aren't aggressively pursuing a nuclear weapon. Now, again, they can enrich, and I'm not a nuclear expert; I'm a counterterrorism guy. But the ability for them to enrich and then build a bomb, like a really simple one—they could probably do that. In terms of a delivery system, they're good at ballistics, etc., but I just think that's a much longer timeline than the pro-Israeli lobby would have you believe. They'll make it sound like, you know, by the end of the week they could be putting nuclear warheads on ballistic missiles that can reach America. And that's just simply not the case.

## **#Glenn**

I also made the point that we should probably hope the Iranians have a lot of drones and ballistic missiles—simply because if they don't have a conventional deterrent, they'll be more inclined to pursue the ultimate deterrent, which is, of course, nuclear weapons. So this idea that a country shouldn't feel safe and also lacks a conventional deterrent is a recipe for disaster, especially if there's a possibility of a nuclear weapon down the road. I did just want to ask you, finally, about the wider great-power dynamic here—the way you see it—because this isn't just, again, the war against Iran; it's set the whole region on fire.

It does impact other great powers, whether it's China or Russia. For example, under the Trump administration, I know for a fact there was a lot of enthusiasm—more than before—that it might be possible to improve bilateral relations. After the Cold War and the post-Cold War period, we'd had about a century of poor relations, and the idea was that the Russians might be able to dramatically

improve ties with the U.S., since they don't really have that many conflicting interests besides NATO. But of course, the war in Iran has also affected the way they think. And you could say the same for China. I was just wondering, how do you see the wider great-power dynamic being influenced by this war?

## **#Joe Kent**

Honestly, I think China's probably the biggest winner in all of this. I mean, we've had to move a lot of our combat power out of the Pacific. So if China decided to do something against Taiwan, they could—or at least they're much closer to being able to do that successfully than they were a couple of months ago, because we're very distracted right now in CENTCOM, like we have been for the last couple of decades. But also, the fact is that a lot of countries are now settling their petrodollar transactions outside the dollar—they're using the yuan. And the Iranians have even, I think, publicly said they're going to accept a toll, essentially, for the Strait of Hormuz.

They're going to settle oil transactions in yuan. I mean, that's a direct threat to the petrodollar, which is a direct threat to the dollar as the reserve currency. So, in terms of playing a very long strategic game, this is all playing right into China's hands—and this is how China fights. I think if we care about great-power competition, and we should, we need to be very wary of what China is doing globally right now. This was a catastrophic mistake because it played directly into their hands. The Russia dynamic, I think, is very interesting.

I think we're giving Russia an opportunity, essentially, to do to us what we did to them in Ukraine. And President Trump even said this when a reporter asked him, "Hey, are the Russians giving any kind of intelligence or support to the Iranians?" Trump said something like, "Well, if they are, they'd probably just say that's what we did to them." In Ukraine—but also in terms of how we were trying to squeeze Russia. I don't agree with that approach; I don't think it really worked. We were trying to squeeze Russia by sanctioning all of their oil, gas, and natural resources.

But then, when we affected the Straits of Hormuz and cut off—or at least restricted—20 percent of the world's oil flow, that oil coming out of Russia was suddenly back on the market. And so we weren't able to affect Russian oil that way, in the way we were trying to. But then the Ukrainians went and started hitting Russian infrastructure targets as well, which again has created more scarcity on the market and had a dramatic impact on prices at the pump throughout Europe. We're starting to feel it here in America too, and we're going to see the second- and third-order effects in terms of fertilizer production and manufacturing components as well. So, in terms of playing the true great game and great-power competition, getting involved in the quicksand of the Middle East, I think, is the quickest way to allow Russia and China to maneuver effectively against us.

## **#Glenn**

Do you see, in terms of the forever wars you talked about, the Ukraine war in the same context? Because in Ukraine, we did something similar—we started backing somewhat radical forces. I'm thinking about the Right Sector and all these different groups. Over time, we don't seem to have much control over it anymore. At least I get the impression from Trump that he would like to see concessions from Zelensky to put an end to this war, but he hasn't been able to get that from him. How do you see this? How do you explain Trump not being able to end the war he had hoped to end? I would assume it was a genuine intent to stop the Ukraine war, or at least America's participation in it, fairly quickly. But now we're a year into this administration.

## **#Joe Kent**

Yeah. With Ukraine, I think by the time Trump came into office, Russia was already winning. And the Russians just have a very different outlook on what winning looks like compared to us in the West. I mean, the Russians are completely comfortable with losing thousands and grinding it out, you know, meter by meter, literally, until they retake what they see as their territory. And we were never prepared for that.

We, as Americans, I don't think we were ever prepared to be engaged in a fight like that again. I think we thought it was going to be easy. We thought we were going to support the Ukrainians who valiantly wanted to fight for their own country. I mean, I think it's admirable what the Ukrainians have done—they wanted to fight for their own country. But I think we allowed ourselves to believe that that narrative would beat geography, and you just can't beat geography. Geography wins every single time. So Trump, I think, really started out with a bad hand dealt to him. But coming in and not quickly cutting off the Ukrainians and saying we're not going to support the war anymore—that showed the Russians that we weren't 100% committed to ending it. In that case, I think the Russians, especially Putin, who's been in the game for as long as he has and has even publicly said that dealing with American presidents doesn't really matter to him because they come and go.

And really, it's, you know, the guys in the dark suits who are in charge. I think we just didn't acknowledge all those factors. So if we want to be able to bring about peace there, I think we should be telling the Ukrainians the same thing we're telling the Israelis: hey, guys, you're done going on the offense, we work toward peace. And then, in terms of proliferation, I'm sure there are a lot of people in Ukraine saying, "We never should have given up our nuclear weapons." The way we've aggressively gone after Iran is going to show every country in the world that you need to have nuclear weapons and should never, ever give them up.

## **#Glenn**

Last question: how do you see the Iran war ending up now? I mean, I know you don't have a crystal ball—there are a lot of actors with competing interests, and a lot of things that can go wrong or that we just don't know the intent behind. But based on where you're sitting now, watching the direction

this is going, do you think we'll keep climbing the escalation ladder? Or how do you see this coming to an end? Because I see, you know, Trump wants to put an end to it, but he seems to be pulling in different directions. On one hand, he's warning, "We're going to burn everything in Iran to the ground if they don't stop this war." On the other hand, he's saying, "Listen, the Strait of Hormuz—this is up to the Europeans and the regional actors to resolve. We might just go home." So how do you see it? If you had to make a prediction—and I'm not going to hold you to it, since there are too many unknown variables—where do you think this might be going?

## **#Joe Kent**

Yeah, like you said, a lot of variables. Look, unless we restrain the Israelis, we're just going to end up back in this cycle. Now, the cycle could play out in rapid succession, or it could take a little bit longer. Trump's going to make some kind of announcement tonight, and like you said, that could be him saying, "Hey, you guys over at the Strait of Hormuz, we're done," or it could be, "We're going to continue the war, we're going to up it." It could be a misdirection play—I don't know. But unless we restrain the Israelis, we're going to end up getting committed to something that reopens the Strait of Hormuz, you know, cobbling together an alliance.

And the Israelis might let that play out for a little bit, but then they're going to come right back and demand more regime change, or they're going to take actions inside Iran that provoke a response, which makes us respond again and fall back into this cycle. I fear that if we put boots on the ground, not only are we going to lose more American lives, but when we do, the emotional response from the American people will be, "Hey, we've already lost lives here. We can't just leave. We have to finish the mission—finish the mission." You hear the Secretary of War constantly say that: just finish the mission. And again, what is the mission?

Is it regime change? Do we dominate all of Iran? How do you even do that? But if we start losing people on the battlefield, it's going to be a recipe for us getting sucked into this war for quite some time. Now, if we go in and we pull off a spectacular, you know, commando-style raid and take out the uranium, I think that's what Trump is at least hearing as a possible course of action, because Levin is talking about it. And even if we did that successfully, I just think it would be like a midnight hammer again. Then in six months, the Israelis are going to come back to us or take action that gets us pulled back in.

So for me, I don't see this thing ending, and I think there are going to be ramifications. The Iranians, I think, right now believe they're winning, and unless they get some concessions from us in terms of sanctions relief or at least being treated like a normal country in the region, I think they're going to keep somewhat of a stranglehold on the Strait of Hormuz. That way, even if President Trump says, "We're leaving, we're done, you guys figure it out," they can still mess up world energy costs, which we'll have to deal with regardless of how militarily involved we are. So again, man, unless we restrain Israel, I just don't see us having a way out of this, regardless of what we say or what we do.

## **#Glenn**

Well, I want to thank you for taking the time, and I share your concerns about whenever war becomes emotional. This is a problem, I think, with a lot of political leadership across the political West—leadership that often communicates in emotional slogans: “their leader is bad,” “either we bomb him or you empower him.” That kind of rhetoric never takes us anywhere good. It always comes, I guess, in the absence of strategy. So yeah, I was saddened to see you leave your position. We need more common-sense people. But I can, of course, understand where your objection came from. So thank you again for taking the time.

## **#Joe Kent**

Thank you very much. Great chatting with you.