

Scott Ritter: US Footprint Shrinking in Middle East

The interview argues that Iran tied attendance at talks in Islamabad to a guaranteed Lebanon ceasefire, showing how fragile the situation remains. It claims Washington must restrain Israel or the war will continue, while pressure around the Strait of Hormuz is reshaping regional power. The discussion suggests military options are failing, pushing the US toward diplomacy with Iran, Russia, and China. It also predicts a reduced US military footprint in the Middle East, rising Iranian influence, and a broader shift away from sanctions and confrontation.

#Nima

Breaking news here: we've just learned from the Wall Street Journal that Iran has informed the mediators it will only attend the meetings in Islamabad, Pakistan, if a ceasefire is guaranteed for Lebanon. I think the situation with Lebanon is getting serious. What do you make of it, and how do you see things right now? Because it's crucial, it's fragile. We know the ceasefire is still in its initial hours. How do you see things developing as time goes by, and how do you view the management on both sides?

#Scott

No, as I said, the United States is going to have to step up and bring Israel to heel, or else there is no ceasefire. And Donald Trump has no choice. He's not playing games here—he doesn't have any cards to play. Donald Trump has to bring Israel to heel, or else this war continues. And now, you know, Iran will have an even higher moral ground to say, "We wanted peace, but Israel was committing genocide against the Lebanese, and we said that had to be part of it." The United States refuses to cooperate—squeeze the Strait of Hormuz.

Yes, it's getting serious, but I honestly believe the United States isn't going to sacrifice Donald Trump's political legacy because of Israel's ambitions in Lebanon. Again, you can't declare yourself a victor unless you defeat the enemy. Israel is trying to pretend it has all the cards in Lebanon. They're losing. They're not winning. You know, they're resorting again to what they always do—punishing the people of Lebanon collectively. That can't be allowed to stand. So I think the United States is going to intervene and say, no, this is part of the ceasefire as well.

#Nima

I think, Scott, when you talk about the United States sitting down with Iran and with China, I'd argue Russia should be part of that as well. There has to be some sort of big agenda on Donald

Trump's part to move in that direction. Do you see that happening? Because, after all, the security of the Middle East right now is mostly based on Iran's decisions regarding Israel. I think that reality is well understood by the Trump administration. How do you see that playing out for the region, and for the cooperation between the two countries—Iran and the United States?

#Scott

I mean, first of all, the long-term objective, of course, is normalization of relations. That would be the goal. I don't see that happening overnight. I don't see embassies opening on each other's soil at this point in time. You know, through BRICS, through China, through Russia, meetings can take place where Iranian and American representatives are in the same room. Maybe they can meet on the side and begin a dialogue, begin a discussion. But trust has to be built. The ceasefire has to hold. Peace has to take root. That has to happen first. Then the Iranians have to see the benefit of it. It's all just words until the money starts coming in and Iran begins to deliver on its promises to its people. So, I don't know—uh, is the internet okay?

#Nima

Yeah, I'm here, Scott. The internet's back now. Yeah.

#Scott

So, you know,

Peace isn't going to break out instantly between the United States and Iran. But Iran is going to have to see the benefits of this proposal, and that has to happen pretty quickly. And Trump has to survive politically. I mean, again, Trump's not going to commit suicide on behalf of anybody. So I do think you're going to see both sides committed to making this work. They'll come up with—look, Trump's dealing with a whole new world here. Prior to this, we thought we could hold the Strait of Malacca, which means we thought we could control the South China Sea shipping lanes. We can control nothing. The new reality is we control nothing—absolutely nothing. You know, we couldn't even get the Strait of Hormuz. How do we think we're going to stop China from shutting down the South China Sea in any big crisis?

This changes everything. You know, Trump has to understand that Pete Hegseth can't deliver on any of his promises—none of them. Which means, you know, you go to the National Security Strategy document of November 2025, where we're talking about military overmatch with China. That's our approach in the Pacific. That's done. There's no such thing as military overmatch. What we need to hope for is that we stop militarizing these conflicts. We have to start dealing with the Chinese economically and diplomatically. And I think you're going to see this as the new Donald Trump. And the same thing with Russia. You know, we desperately need that. And it's not like, okay, the Strait of Hormuz is open and therefore we're going to—Russia again.

The damage that's been done is going to last many months, maybe years. And we need Russian energy on the market. Plus, the world is just tired of American sanctions. I'm tired of it too. So I think Trump has to enter into a whole new world of relationships, and these relationships will be part of the security guarantees that Iran has. Once you demilitarize the American mechanism of interfacing with the world, that changes everything. And I think one of the important aspects of the Iranian victory here is that it puts Trump on notice that this military machine Pete Hegseth has been promoting doesn't provide any solutions—it only creates problems. That doesn't mean America gives up on its military, but maybe it means we start putting more effort into diplomacy.

#Nima

I think that's related to the American bases in the Middle East. How do you see the Trump administration's policy on those bases? Are they going to pull back? Because that's part of the deal Iran is asking for. And honestly, I don't see, so far, what the use of these bases has been in this war. You know, for such a long time the United States has used these bases as a security guarantee for those countries, but it didn't work out after all.

#Scott

The bases were about projecting American military power into the region so we could control the oil, control the energy, contain Iran—initially to contain Iraq, and then to defeat ISIS and all that. I think you're going to see a lot of victory being declared. The United States is going to say we have the ISIS problem under control, we can turn Iraq over to the Iraqis, and we can get out of Iraq. We just don't want to admit that we were driven out of Iraq. You know, what's the purpose of Al Udeid Air Base? There's no reason to have an Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, even if the Qataris were willing to let us back in—which apparently they're not. There's no purpose for it.

We don't need it. So we can say peace is broken up. This peace deal with Iran—I know people, I just wish I could go back in time and look at the comments where people said stupid things. Donald Trump is going to spin this as one of the greatest peacemaking accomplishments of his career. Because he has to spin it this way, this war broke all existing paradigms. Prior to this war, you couldn't even begin to think about peace. Because Israel, Iran—they were always, you know, we couldn't resolve the Lebanon thing, we couldn't do this, we couldn't do that. And America had to be there. But we don't want to be there. We're not the world's policemen.

So we needed this war to break the paradigm, to redefine relations in the Gulf. And now that we've done that, we'll be there economically. We'll lead economically. But we don't need to have our military there. There's peace, so there's no need for the American peacemaker. And our boys and girls are coming home—Donald Trump, Nobel Peace Prize, "I'm the greatest man that ever walked the face of the earth." This is the kind of stuff we're going to be sold. And in some ways, I mean, let'

s be honest, this war is an illegal war of aggression. But if the end result of this is peace—if Iran is selling oil and energy without sanctions, Israel is no longer threatening Iran on a daily basis, and Lebanon is living in peace—

Maybe the Palestinian state. If all of this comes from that, let Donald Trump sell it any way he wants to. Look, he's going to be out of power in two years anyway. He's not hanging around forever. But you know, we don't always have to look for the bad in things. I'm not saying that Donald Trump is good—I'm not. I don't support what he's doing. I'm just saying that because of Iran, because of the sacrifice of the Iranian people, the sacrifice of the Lebanese people, the sacrifice of Hezbollah, the sacrifice of the Palestinian people, we're in a situation today where the United States—militarism—is no longer welcome in the Middle East. And the United States will leave.

And that's the reality. Will we leave totally? I don't know. I think it'll be phased. But I don't think we're coming back to Qatar. I think the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain is history. There's not going to be a Fifth Fleet—maybe a Coast Guard detachment that helps rescue drowned sailors in the Strait of Hormuz, together with the Iranian Navy, the Americans and Iranians working together in peace and harmony. Who knows? But you know, we're not going to need the military buildup in Kuwait. We can bring all those people home. The same thing with Abu Dhabi—we don't need the bases we have there.

Um, Saudi Arabia—we might retain some sort of residual logistics capability, but, you know, eventually that will be withdrawn too. This is one of the greatest victories the Iranians could ever hope for. It's just important that, at this juncture, we don't oversell it as a victory. Just let it happen. Sometimes the best thing to do is just let it happen. And let Trump just—who cares how he spins it? Do the Iranians care about American domestic politics? Let Donald Trump play stupid domestic American political games. As long as the troops leave, who cares how he spins it? Who cares?

#Nima

Scott, how do you see Dubai? How do you see the UAE in that scenario you just mentioned?

#Scott

Depends on how they want to play this. You know, they're out of whack because—

Iran is retaining control of the Strait of Hormuz, and that puts them in a delicate situation. You know, they're going to talk about a pipeline and all that, but the bottom line is it means Iran is the dominant player in the region, and Oman becomes the critical partner, not the UAE. The UAE blew this. They could have been the critical partner. They could have been a partner for peace, but they weren't—they were a partner for war. You know, the other thing this does is it's going to, I think, deepen the divide between the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia as well. So they're in trouble. I think they're in a lot of trouble.

#Scott

Yeah. Yeah.

#Nima

They had this division, Scott. They had this division in Yemen—Saudi Arabia and the UAE. I think that's happening right now as well. I don't think the UAE is surviving this.

#Scott

Throughout the region—they had it in Sudan, they have it in the Red Sea. The United Arab Emirates is trying to go in and grab ports to compete with Saudi influence. I think the UAE has lost that status, and they're going to have to focus on survival now—literally, survival. How to keep investments coming in, how to keep financial centers interested in Dubai. Look, Iran and BRICS—again, I can't predict the future—but maybe Iran builds a new capital, and maybe that capital becomes a financial hub for the Eurasian Economic Union in Central Asia. And, you know, maybe Iran starts attracting the kind of foreign investments that Dubai had been seeking to attract, because Iran is a better player for that.

And I just see that Iran is going to be competing with the United Arab Emirates on a lot of fronts, and they'll have far more influence. The UAE blew it. You know, they tried to call themselves the Sparta of the Middle East. They became a very militaristic nation, trying to challenge Saudi Arabia for preeminence. And it's collapsing around them. How far the collapse will go, I don't know. But I honestly think the ruling family has to start thinking about its own survival—that this thing could spin out of control to the point where people turn on them and they find themselves fleeing. And they're not going to be fleeing to Riyadh. So where are they going to go? That's a good question. Maybe the Iranians will take them in. Who knows?

#Nima

Scott, I think the policies of Israel should basically depend on Israel's current capabilities—in terms of defending itself, its interceptors, its radars. We know that Iran basically destroyed most of these radars inside Israel, not outside. I'm not talking about the GCC countries. So... do they really want to stay in this fight, to continue this war? Because look at this photo we've seen—one of the interceptors Israel is using for David's Sling—and it shows the missile was produced in 2026. And, you know, that's the reality. I think one of the main reasons Donald Trump doesn't see a military solution to what's going on, if he literally believes that...

#Scott

Israel's in trouble. I mean, that interceptor you showed—I think it was a David's Sling interceptor—but it had been adapted for use in an Arrow system because they're out of Arrow missiles. So they don't have... Israel's in trouble. They're in deep trouble. They have a very strong military. I mean, they still have the ability to launch airstrikes, not only against Lebanon but against Iran. You know, they've proven that capability. But that's all they have. You know, economically, they've collapsed. There's no economy for them right now. How do they—no one's talking about reconstruction, the reconstruction costs.

Where's that money going to come from? Is the American taxpayer going to pay for that? No. Are the Chinese going to come in and pay for that? No. So who's going to pay for it? Israel's in deep, deep trouble right now. And there's a huge political fight—Netanyahu versus the opposition. I think Israel is going to have to downsize and become a more responsible player, focused on preserving what they have instead of trying to create something they don't have, such as a greater Israel.

#Nima

I think the question right now is whether the United States is going to negotiate in good faith, or if they're going to make some sort of Minsk II-type agreement—if you remember, that was between Russia, Germany, and France during the conflict in Ukraine. Is there anything to be understood about that? Do you see this administration as capable of understanding what's at stake for them, and the history behind these kinds of fake negotiations? Because I don't see that happening. I don't see it helping or advancing anything in the Middle East, or helping the situation there.

#Scott

Sadly, you're right about that. But sometimes you get a convergence of things. This administration is about preserving this administration, plain and simple. And now it's in their interest to have stability in the Middle East—not fake stability, because they have to understand that if you play stupid games, this thing could unravel in the summer, and that's it. That's the end of Trump. If this thing unravels in the summer, if war breaks out all over again, it's Donald Trump's legacy—it's finished. So they'll have to bring in people who are experts.

The people who promoted this war aren't going to be the ones promoting peace. They'll have to bring in people who understand Iran and see things in a more comprehensive way. There's some potential here. Again, I'm probably going to make your audience mad, but I don't care because—um—the board of peace is a joke. We know it's a joke. We know it's a Donald Trump ego game. But sometimes jokes can be useful. Look at the composition of the board of peace, look at the people who did the buy-in—they're all regional actors, and they were originally brought in to manufacture some sort of solution for Gaza.

But these are the same actors who would have to play a role in the Persian Gulf—the same actors. Um, there's potential here. And again, Donald Trump has created something; his ego is on the line. But if he can take the Board of Peace and actually listen to the people involved—not the Kushners and not the Americans, who are just political actors—but the players from the Gulf Arab states, who now have to be committed to this peace because it's in their best interest to have a peace agreement, then you can use this Board of Peace to engage in a larger dynamic of peace and stability. And that would be to Donald Trump's benefit.

See, now you have Donald Trump doing something that's to his political benefit—and also something that actually has to take into account the history, the cultures, the realities. And not by having a Jared Kushner or a Steve Witkoff as your filter, but by having the actual players—the heads of state, the prime ministers, the people who were standing with him on that platform when he declared the Board of Peace. Now get them to come together and buy into this. There's potential here. It doesn't mean it's going to happen. It doesn't mean Donald Trump has the skill set necessary to pull this off. But there's still potential for something good to happen here.

#Nima

How do you see Iraq? Iraq was something different, Scott. Before this war happened, we were talking about Hezbollah in Lebanon, we were talking about the Yemenis—but nobody was talking about the resistance in Iraq. That was the new factor in this war. And how do you see Iraq as time goes by? We know that these NATO countries withdrew their troops from Iraq. Right now, Iraq is a totally different sort of phenomenon, in my opinion. How do you see that?

#Scott

You can't sustain Iraq without the overall infrastructure—the military installations that were in the region. Al Udeid Air Base served as the command and control hub for projecting air power over Iraq. Kuwait was the logistics base that sustained it. We're losing all of this. There's no reason for us to be in Iraq; it was a legacy mission. We're getting out of Iraq. I think that's what's going to happen—it's unsustainable. And we have to accept the fact that Iran is going to have significant political influence in the future of Iraq. Iran's smart enough to know they don't want to alienate the Sunni.

You know, solving the Kurdish issue is a chance to work together. But, you know, the Kurds once again destroyed themselves by siding with the United States. I think you're going to see Iraq purge itself of American influence. But the other thing you have to remember is that there's a lot of foreign investment in Iraqi oil, and Iraq doesn't want to lose that. So I think you're going to see a much more stable Iraq. I don't think ISIS is going to rise again, and I just see the United States leaving Iraq. There's no reason for us to be there—and we'll leave Syria as well.

#Nima

I'd say if J.D. Vance tries to deal with Iran, and then with Ukraine, he'd definitely have a chance of winning in 2028, Scott.

#Scott

Again, you remember I went to Russia, and what I talked about before going there—the grand deal, the grand bargain with Russia. I think this is happening. I think it's happening as we speak. And this, again—you know, all the Trump haters out there say, "Scott, you're defending Donald Trump." No, I'm not. I'm just talking real, guys—reality. Donald Trump could work with the right people. It's in Russia's interest to have stability, to bring an end to that conflict. Russia doesn't want this war to go on forever. Donald Trump needs this war to wind down this summer. He needs to be able to say, "I brought peace to Ukraine."

I brought peace to the Middle East. That's the only way he gets out of this. And I see that happening—I see it happening in spades. So let's see what happens. It doesn't mean I'm thrilled about Donald Trump, and I'm not promoting him. I despise the man. But I also believe peace is better than war. And I don't want to bring down Donald Trump at the expense of millions of people in the Middle East and in Europe who are suffering because of these endless wars. If part of making Donald Trump feel he's in a better position come November means peace breaks out in the Middle East and in Ukraine, I'm all for it.

#Nima

Before wrapping up, Scott, I think the issue of NATO is important right now. How do you see it? We have the war in Ukraine, we have the war in the Middle East, as we discussed—what do these two wars mean for the future of NATO?

#Scott

We can whistle taps all day—it's over. NATO's finished. It's gone. Goodbye. Adios. There's no mission for NATO; it doesn't have one. It exists to do nothing. Russia is not a threat—they can talk about it, but Europe now has to look at its own survival: economic survival, energy survival. And so it's going to have to turn to Russian energy. They can't—America is going to walk away. NATO failed the litmus test, you know, straight up, failed it. And there's resentment right now. Look, Trump needs to blame people. I think Pete Hegseth is history. I don't think he survives the summer.

I think some other people may go as well. And I think NATO gets thrown under the bus. We whistled, and our dog didn't show up—so we're not going to keep feeding the dog. It's over for NATO. There's no reason for it to exist. What's interesting is that the demise of NATO now has Europe talking about a European—well, you know, the role of the EU—that the EU should now take

over some sort of military alliance. And the Russians are like, "Well, you just made it pretty easy for us," because Russia in the past had said, "It's NATO expansion we oppose, but we don't oppose you joining the EU." Now Russia is able to say, "We don't support you joining the EU either."

For instance, with Ukraine—Ukraine was saying, "Well, we're going to join the EU," even though the EU said, "No, you're not." But now Russia is going to say, "No, you're not." This just simplifies what a peace deal will eventually look like with Ukraine, which is complete and total abdication to Russia's demands. There will be some spin, but what's the peace deal that's going to happen in the Middle East? A complete and total abdication to Iranian demands, with some modifications, some adaptations—but Iran gets what it wants. Russia is going to get what it wants, and Europe is going to be, you know, where it should be when you pick the wrong side. There are consequences for actions.