Joe Kent: Post-Midterm Desperation - Could Israel Escalate to a Nuclear Strike on Iran?

Joe Kent is the former Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, who resigned in March 2026 due to the war against Iran. Please like, subscribe & share! Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: https://glenndiesen.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 00:00 Kent says voters have rejected the Iran war 03:02 Could Israel draw the U.S. back into the conflict? 09:33 Iran's retaliation risk and the limits of escalation 14:03 Military capacity, blockade costs, and the nuclear danger 20:19 How Gulf infrastructure could widen the war 25:26 A shifting Middle East and the future of U.S. security guarantees 32:32 Could Washington and Tehran cooperate against jihadists? 37:24 Kent's account of U.S. policy and unintended consequences 42:33 Why Kent calls Iran pragmatic and negotiable 45:10 Trump's remaining opportunity to end the war

#Glenn

Welcome back, everyone. We are joined today by Joe Kent, the former director of the National Counterterrorism Center, who actually resigned back in March of this year in opposition to the war against Iran. Thank you for coming on. I guess many Americans shared your sentiments, it seems. The midterms became a bit of a bloodbath for the Republicans. And again, it seemed like a referendum on Trump and the Iran war. But it seems safe to say that the Iran war was, I guess, the main factor in how people voted, as it also affects the economy, which seems to have destroyed the Trump presidency. I was just wondering, how do you see what has happened? I mean, the Trump administration effectively sank because it repeated the same policies that the Make America Great Again movement was created to oppose. If we take a step back, what are the takeaways from these midterms?

#Joe Kent

I mean, I think the debate over whether or not the war with Iran is unpopular with the people who voted for President Trump just two years ago is over. The people spoke loud and clear. It's crazy to think that just two years ago, President Trump won the popular vote. It was a huge election. It was a big victory. It was, you know, I'd say, a mandate against the Biden administration. It really

solidified the Make America Great Again philosophy of putting our country first—really solidified that. And now here we are, just two years later, after President Trump got us into, you know, a war that many of us advised him against. And you know what? We shouldn't be surprised.

I mean, obviously, the numbers that we're seeing right now in the House of Representatives—how many seats the Democrats have picked up—and the Democrats flipping the Senate, you know, not by one or two or three seats, but solidly flipping the Senate, that's a bit surprising. But the results shouldn't surprise us. I mean, President Trump ran on a very specific set of issues. And for the most part, you know, he did a 180 on all of them and then, you know, told his most ardent supporters they weren't allowed to question that. So I think right now the most productive thing that President Trump can do is just realize the debate's over. Like, the American people have rejected the war.

He's got a little bit over two years left. He's going to be the president regardless of what the Democrats do. He should work on getting us out of this war first and foremost. That can start today. He still has a lot of agency. He still has a lot of power to get us out of the war and then spend the next two years trying to put the American people first, basically starting with bringing down the cost of living. That's going to be huge. But I just think this election last night settles the debate. The American people have rejected these wars. We want to be out of this war in Iran. Everyone knows it was a war of choice, and they want the president to get out of it.

#Glenn

Yeah, it didn't even seem like a vote for the Democrats. It seemed like a protest vote against the Republicans over this war. But again, the election is over, but the new government won't step in for another two months. That's a big vacuum. What do you think Trump, as well as Israel, will do? How will they spend the next two months?

#Joe Kent

Well, Trump's kind of a wild card, so I'll answer the Israel portion first. Look, Benjamin Netanyahu may be kind of on the outs, but that's debatable. I know he's having a hard time forming a coalition. But if you look at Netanyahu's political history, any time we think that Bibi's out, he finds a way to kind of make a comeback. But the Israelis, especially Netanyahu—and I think Eisenkot is in this camp—view right now as the time to deal Iran such a heavy blow that they can't come back at Israel. And they know they need us to do that.

So Israel's number one goal right now—and I believe this is true regardless of who's in charge in Israel—is to get us sucked into this war in a way that the Democrats can't change in January. I'm skeptical the Democrats will even try to change it because I think, fundamentally, Democrats like Chuck Schumer and Hakeem Jeffries don't really necessarily disagree with Trump waging this war.

They're going to use this as political fodder. But the Israelis right now want to get us back into a kinetic phase of the war. They want us back, you know, either dropping significant amounts of bombs on Iran or, you know, trying to carry out a ground incursion.

They need us sucked into this thing because, militarily, they can't take on the Iranians and take on all their neighbors like they're doing. So that's Israel's goal. They're going to pressure the administration accordingly to try and get Trump to do this. They're going to come to Trump—and it's already started. You're seeing this right now with very vocal, you know, pro-Israel voices inside America saying, "Okay, well, President Trump, now you don't need to worry about the midterms anymore. You don't need to worry about what the people think anymore. You can't run anymore, so you might as well finish the job. This is going to be your legacy." That's the full-court press. Now, Trump, in this administration, has shown that he kind of doesn't really care what his base thinks.

But President Trump's superpower used to be that he was very in touch with American voters. He could open up Twitter and Facebook and understand what people felt. And then he was good at simply articulating that back to them. It's what got him into the White House in 2016. So I am really hoping that President Trump, based on last night's results, goes back and listens to his finely tuned instincts that say this war is unpopular. And he makes a big, bold move to get us out of the war, because he can do it. He has just painted himself into this corner where he wants a military solution. He wants a diplomatic solution. He can't get either. So he just remains in this frustrated state where the war continues. I still think he has it in him to kind of pull back.

Now, today we saw the vice president release a pretty lengthy statement where he said, “We know the Iran war cost us this election. So did our relationship with Israel.” You know, Trump didn't come out and really attack that. He said he saw it, et cetera, but he didn't express that he hated that statement, or at least he hasn't yet as of us recording this. So I do think the president is kind of feeling things out. So we have an opportunity where he could turn. It's not as if he's turned things around, but he could start mitigating a lot of the damage that he's done to our country, but also to the Republican Party and to his legacy.

#Glenn

When you said that the Israelis might try to pull the U.S. deeper into this war before the Democrats come in, it reminded me a bit of what Obama did in 2016. That is, he put all these sanctions on the Russians to make matters worse before Trump came in. Or Biden allowing long-range strikes against Russia in 2024, which would also make it harder for Trump. But this is essentially a similar tactic. How do you think they would do it? Would they encourage Trump to strike Iran, or would they just ask Trump to give the Israelis the green light to do it while the United States keeps some distance from the whole thing?

#Joe Kent

I think both. I mean, the Israelis are really good at running multiple approaches at once and seeing which one actually sticks. They're persistent, and they have a lot of access. So my guess is they're going to try both. They're going to try to go through basically the front door and say, you know, "Don't worry about the politics now. Just hammer them." He's going to be told, you know, "Hey, what the great men in history do is unpopular at the time. But later on, history judges that they did the right thing." He's going to be told all that nonsense. If he doesn't take that bait, that is where I think the Israelis are going to know the right time to approach him. Because right now, if the president goes to our Pentagon and says, "What military options do I have?"

They're going to say, "Not much. You know, we can bomb the same stuff over and over again. Or you can do something drastic, like use a nuclear weapon." I know Tucker Carlson took a lot of heat when he said this is being discussed at the Pentagon. But when you look at how few options the president actually has militarily, you do arrive at that nuclear option pretty quickly, just using common sense, without having access to classified information or having sources. But this is where I think the Israelis would kind of thread the gap. They would come in and say, "Okay, politically, we know you guys can't drop a nuclear weapon. But we can."

And plus, just yesterday, President Trump came out and distanced himself from the Israelis. He said, "Well, we're going to cut off aid to the Israelis. They don't need it anymore." And the Israelis did this whole thing of acting surprised. So right now, there's been this political distance created between us and Israel, where there is that option. And if it isn't a nuclear weapon, I do think this is where the Israelis come in and say, "Well, we'll just bomb, you know, civilian infrastructure. We'll hit the power plants. We'll hit the bridges. We'll hit the desalination stations. And that will put more pressure on the regime. And you guys can say, 'Well, we didn't really do it.'" But to the Iranians, I think it's all the same.

The Iranians are going to say, "Well, we're getting attacked again. Now we're going to hit the Americans." And then we might take some casualties. Then the president's not going to pull us out. And that's kind of what the Israelis want right now. But I think the Israelis are really good at keeping an ear to the ground on where the American body politic is. And they kind of know the approach to take with the president to make it appear like they have a solution to his political dilemma. That's why I've been advocating from day one: restrain the Israelis and just pull out. If he doesn't do that, we're just creating a lot of different options for the Israelis to exploit to achieve their goal, which is getting us sucked back into this thing.

#Glenn

Yeah, because, well, with this decision by Trump to end direct aid to Israel, I heard that, you know, they will find other ways of delivering this aid through different sorts of cooperation. But is this mostly, as you said, political theater? Surely Trump must know the Iranian position, which is that if there is an attack by either the United States or Israel, they will consider it a joint attack. So no matter which one of them strikes, they will hit back against both. This is kind of the position they've

taken. Also, from what I heard, they're not going to do what Japan did. That is, if they're nuked, they're not going to simply capitulate. They will fight on. But to what extent is Trump informed about this likely course of action on the part of the Iranians? Because this seems kind of vital in terms of how unlikely he is to succeed.

#Joe Kent

By now, he should know that he's not getting the full picture from his advisors. I know that information exists in the intelligence community, and it's just common sense. And the Iranians themselves have said this. This isn't some secret. The Iranians have said, "We're not going to just retaliate proportionally. If you're coming for us, we're coming for you." And we know the Iranians still have a lot of capabilities and probably some tricks up their sleeves.

Unfortunately, what we've seen up until now is that every time we come up with what we think is going to be a solution, we assume in our heads that the Iranians will just remain static and kind of just take it on the chin. And then we can apply whatever technique we want to use and maybe try something different, and the Iranians won't actually react. We've consistently underestimated how the Iranians will react since we kicked the war off in February. So again, I would hope that, between the electoral loss last night and everything that took place between February and now, the president would realize, "Hey, the Mike Tyson rule applies: everybody's got a plan until they get punched in the face."

But also, the Iranians aren't going to just take this sitting down, which, again, I hope leads him to say, "I just need to leave and get out of this situation." But up until now, he has really seemed to believe that he can just do and say things and the Iranians won't react. And at some point, our luck runs out. I've seen a lot of the more pro-war people here in the U.S. shift their rhetoric a little bit in the last 24 hours. They're not as bellicose about going and attacking Iran, but they are saying, "Leave our blockade on." And I think even if we leave the blockade on, eventually, probably pretty quickly, the Iranians are going to say, "Well, we're not just going to let you sit here and strangle us to death."

I mean, just today, before we even got on here, the Treasury Secretary was putting out more sanctions against Iran, as if another sanctions package is going to take down the Iranians. But at the same time, they just expect the Iranians to take even more pain and not react. And that's why the situation is incredibly dangerous. So I don't know. I hope the president has some clarity here.

#Glenn

Well, yeah, I heard that the Iranians are a bit fed up with this position they're in, where they're in this new forever war, this low-intensity war. It's not peace, and it's not all-out war, but, you know, they've been put in the middle, and they don't want to be here. And so I've heard that if there's another round of war, not only would they match the escalation, but they also wouldn't want to go

back to where we are now, this middle ground. That is, they would just continue to attack bases until the fighting is over, or just continue the war.

And, you know, it kind of makes some sense, I guess, because all of these things, like the blockade, aren't outright war. So I can understand where this is coming from. But what are the options then for the United States? If it can't hit the pause button, if it turns out that the Iranians also have a vote on when the war ends, what are the U.S. capabilities here? How long can it continue to fight such a high-intensity war? Because when you hear the stories about a three-day intensive strike, I'm assuming it's not out of generosity. There are also limits on how long the U.S. can sustain this.

#Joe Kent

Well, I hope we don't find out. We have a lot of capabilities. We can move more capabilities into the region, but that gives the Iranians more targets. And this is the scenario the Israelis want, where we're going tit for tat and we're sucked into the war. But I think you're right that there are a lot of limitations. And I feel the same way, too, about sustaining the blockade in the long term. I mean, the blockade is costing us a lot. We had the strikes on Qeshm Island. It sounds like one of our aircraft was targeted by the air defenses there, and then we had to strike back. I mean, you play out that scenario for long enough, eventually their air defenses are probably going to get lucky, and they're going to take something out of the sky.

Or, you know, when we're doing this tanker-for-tanker shooting match, a missile finds its way to one of our ships. So I don't think the blockade is sustainable either in the long run. And I don't think the juice is worth the squeeze, given how much the blockade is costing us. That's another way that we could just be bled to death, you know, in a similar way to how we're trying to bleed the Iranians to death. But if we go back to high-intensity conflict, I mean, look, even if we had a decent supply of interceptors and some of these other critical munitions whose availability is in question right now, I think it would just be hard for us to continue to meaningfully strike away at Iran. And Iran has proven, through its mosaic strategy and just by how big it is and how many fortified mountains it has, that it can kind of go the distance.

And again, this is where I think, if we got into this scenario, pretty quickly the president would be tempted to either do something drastic, like drop a nuclear weapon, or, you know, he'd go to the Pentagon again and say, "Okay, what are my options?" They'd be like, "Well, we can bomb the same stuff. We're running out of critical munitions. If we want to use some of the other stuff that we have a lot of in inventory, we need to get in closer. We need to take a beachhead. We need to take one of the islands." And again, that gets us completely sucked into this war. So, I mean, short of the walkaway option that I've been recommending for quite some time now, I truly think the president needs to start viewing the options he's being given by the Pentagon as non-starters—not options at all.

#Glenn

You mentioned the possibility of a nuclear strike again. How would you assess the calculations within Washington, though? How do they look at the cost-benefit analysis of using a nuclear weapon? I'm assuming they would be tactical nuclear weapons, but again, it seems like madness. Once this happens, you can't predict anymore how this will escalate across the world, including what other nuclear powers will do. But how do you think the intelligence agencies and the Pentagon would respond to such a proposal? And does it seem more likely or less likely that the U.S. would support a nuclear strike after the midterms?

#Joe Kent

Well, you know, I think when you just take the use of a nuclear weapon on its own, everybody says, "No, that's not going to happen." You know, like, does anybody want to use a nuclear weapon? No. But again, when you go back to the scenario where Trump says, "Give me military options," we've hyperfixated on the highly enriched uranium. We've fixated on the nuclear issue. And this was another Israeli trap to have us forever chasing, you know, the nuclear dust or the highly enriched uranium. Like, "Oh, it was in the three nuclear sites. We bombed them. Okay, maybe it's not destroyed. It's under a mile of granite. Oh, no, no."

It moved to Pickaxe Mountain. So now we're fixating on this. And so I could see us running out of other options, the president getting frustrated and then saying, "Look, I need a victory. I need to say I prevented Iran from ever getting a nuclear weapon." And if we use a big bomb that actually penetrates Pickaxe Mountain, regardless of what's below Pickaxe Mountain, whether or not they have highly enriched uranium there, as long as we penetrate it and all the different civilian satellites out there can see that we actually penetrated it, then the president can say he got his victory, and he leaves. And so it would be sold, I think, in those terms.

"We're just going to use a tactical nuke. It's going to get us out of this situation." This is basically the sales pitch for Midnight Hammer: "We're only going to do three strikes. We're going to hit these three different sites. It's going to obliterate their ability to produce nuclear weapons. We can say that we took away that capability—mission accomplished—and we didn't get sucked into the war." That was the president's intent with Midnight Hammer. It didn't address the fundamental issue of restraining the Israelis to stop them from dragging us back into the war. But in the president's mind, that's what Midnight Hammer accomplished.

And so right now, if he's looking for a victory, I could see where we kind of talk ourselves into this. And then I think there'd be a lot of technical experts who would come forward and say, "Well, you know, it's not like a nuclear bomb like we dropped on Japan in World War II. This is a very sophisticated, very surgical, yada yada yada, nuclear weapon that we're just dropping on Pickaxe for this one reason." And if that doesn't work, again, I think this is where the Israelis come in and just say, like, "Okay, you can't do it. You've already publicly distanced yourselves from us. Let us go do it, and we'll be done with it." But again, how are the Iranians going to react to that?

I mean, the Iranians at that point, if it's a nuclear weapon, they're going to go, “We're going to go for broke.” And then I think, in very short order, you see Putin say, “Okay, thank you. I mean, if you guys did it, then I can do it too, and no one's going to stop me.” And then, you know, Pandora's box is open. What happens in North Korea with South Korea? What happens with India and Pakistan? But again, in desperate situations like we could be approaching soon, I don't think people think with that much clarity. They just want to get through the immediate problem.

#Glenn

Even if the U.S. or Israel is successful with a nuclear strike on Pickaxe Mountain, Iran still has the technology. It has the know-how. It can't unlearn this, and it can enrich more in the future. And once they become a victim of a nuclear strike, I mean, it would almost be foolish not to develop a nuclear deterrent thereafter. Not just a deterrent—they might actually want to carry out a retaliatory strike. So it just seems like pure madness. But the way you assess it, how certain are you that the Israelis would want a nuclear strike? Or do you think they're a bit in the same camp, that they simply might see it as a last option?

#Joe Kent

Well, I think the people who are in power right now, the Likud government, desperately want us engaged in this war. And the more intense the war is, the harder it is for us to extract ourselves from it, which meets their objective of having us do the heavy lifting against Iran. I mean, if you talk to folks in Likud and Mossad, they believe that right now is the time for them to take down the Iranian regime. They need us to do it. So even if it wasn't their first option, I think they would say, “Well, good enough. Like, let's have them drop the nuclear weapon.”

You know, I think a more likely scenario is that the Israelis come in and say, “Okay, politically, you guys can't bomb the civilian infrastructure. Let us come in and bomb the bridges, the power plants, the desalination plants to put more pressure on the regime,” and then tell us that, yeah, that will be the final straw that breaks the camel's back, and the Iranians will fold after that. But they know that once they do that, they'll inflict a lot of pain on the Iranians, and the Iranians will then retaliate, sucking us back into the war as well, without the nuclear option. But I don't know.

I just think unless we meaningfully restrain the Israelis, they're going to do all kinds of things that I probably haven't even thought of yet to get us sucked back into this war, because we've really failed to realize that having us involved in the war with Iran is existential to the Israelis, in their view. The Israelis will pretty much stop at nothing now to get us entangled in this war in a way that Trump can't extract himself from. Even if the Democrats are successful in removing Trump from office, or he resigns, or something like that, the war will go on, much in the way that Obama ran against Bush's wars, but by and large, he continued them. I think that's kind of the model that the Israelis want to enact right now.

#Glenn

Let's say they don't go down the nuclear path, but they carry out this heavy strike on all of Iran's energy infrastructure. And Iran then does what it has warned it will do: it goes after all the energy infrastructure across the Gulf states. This becomes a disaster, not so much for Israel, but for the United States overall. Is it then too late for the U.S. to pull out? Because it seems like it would be difficult for the U.S. to accept all of its Gulf state allies being bombed to the ground. A lot of these countries don't look like they have a stable footing, especially Kuwait and Bahrain. I mean, they're not that old as nations, I guess, or as states, at least. How do you see this? What would round three look like, essentially?

#Joe Kent

I mean, it's anybody's guess at that point. I think that you're right. That would put so much pressure on us. Like, if we did heavy bombing and the Iranians hit the Gulf energy infrastructure, which they've said they'll do, that's going to make the crisis we've had for the last couple of months with the Strait of Hormuz, I think, look like a walk in the park, because that's immediately going to have ripple effects on the American economy and the world economy, too. I mean, in terms of fertilizer, you know, the potential for famine—the list just goes on. That's how disastrous that would be. But at that point, it's going to be really hard for us to then accept defeat.

That's why I say the president, this entire time, but especially now, has kind of had a sweet spot where he can say, "I won. I accomplished all my military objectives. I know it wasn't popular, but good news: the war is over." But if we get involved in round two, this retaliation cycle, it's going to be really hard for him to just pull out and say, "Okay, now we're done." Because everyone's going to be like, "Well, you just lost the war." And so he's basically going to be locked into the conflict, because I don't think any president's going to want to say that he lost the war. And again, this is the Israeli trap. Like, if the Israelis can get us in on another round of strikes, then they know the president really can't extract himself from it.

And he's in it probably for the long haul. And, you know, I think an interesting restraining factor that we might not be seeing overtly, but that I think is taking place in the background, is the Gulf states, because we have seen the majority of the Gulf states shuttling back and forth to Tehran. And so I think a lot of them are cutting side deals. I think most of them have already cut side deals to get their oil out. A lot of them, I think, are probably already paying the Iranians in some way, shape, or form to get their oil out of the Strait of Hormuz. So it is possible that as we ramp up and get ready to do another round of strikes, a lot of the Gulf countries come to the president and just say, "You can't do this."

“Otherwise, we're going to have to change our relationship with you.” Now, will that be enough pressure? I don't know. But I do think all the Gulf states are trying to cut side deals right now with the Iranians, saying, “Okay, if this kicks off again, please don't hit our energy infrastructure.” But at

that point, the Iranians kind of have to, because if they get hit again, I think they're going to view that as existential. And so they have to inflict as much pain as they possibly can on the Gulf states that enabled it by hosting our bases, but also on world energy production, to make the whole world feel the pain of, you know, America and Israel's war.

#Glenn

Well, let's say Trump were successful at pulling out. There's no going back to the old status quo. I mean, I think that was a possibility. He could do what he did in Yemen: just declare victory and go home. But if the United States pulls out of this war completely and accepts that the Strait of Hormuz will at least be under Iran's administrative control, how do you think the region will likely develop from here on? Because you have a lot of new powers in the region, like Turkey and Pakistan. I guess Iran would come out much stronger than it was before. I mean, they've suffered a lot of destruction to their economy, but nonetheless, without the entire region organized against them, certainly they would come out on top. So how do you see the region being reshaped by this?

#Joe Kent

I mean, I think whether we in America want to admit it or not, the era of America providing all the security guarantees and being the, you know, top dog in the Middle East is over. You know, the sooner we accept it, the better it is for us. But I think our Gulf partners have already accepted that. I think they're already more than willing to work with the Iranians to keep the Strait of Hormuz open. I think they've already kind of quietly acknowledged that the Iranians are now a regional power, if not more than that. I mean, there's a question: if you stand up to the world power, are you not a world power? I don't know. I don't know what the answer to that is, but I know all of Iran's neighbors are like, “Okay, this is just a new status quo.”

I think the Saudis are probably the least happy about it, but we've even seen them, you know, send a delegation to the Supreme Leader's funeral. They've had back-channel communications. Now they're trying to find a way to get out of this war with the Houthis. But the rest of the Gulf, I think, has already kind of accepted this. I think right now the rest of the Gulf kind of wants the best of both worlds. They don't want to publicly have to distance themselves from us because there's still some value in, you know, us being on good terms with them. But they're working with the Iranians already. And this is where I think the walk-away strategy actually, you know, puts the ball back in Iran's court. It basically says, “Okay, we've walked away. There's no military aggression against you now. What are you going to do?”

And I don't think there's any data to support this idea that the Iranians are just like the crazy, mad mullahs, or that they're going to become like the pirates of the Strait of Hormuz and just start charging everybody exorbitant fees. I think they've proven to be pretty rational. And I think free-market principles would basically dictate what the Iranians are really going to charge for ships passing through. And even then, we can sweeten the deal by lifting some of the sanctions. That

basically makes it in Iran's best interest to keep the strait open and flowing so they can make money as well. So I'm less worried about that. I think the problem comes in if we try to cling on to it.

If we do something crazy, like trying to reestablish some of our bases in the region, you know, that's just absolute insanity. Because in the next round of fighting—and especially if we keep a military presence there, there most certainly will be a next round of fighting—the bases are just going to get destroyed again. I mean, Trump has a unique opportunity to pull everybody out and then to say, "Yeah, I'm not going back to our bases there. Those bases were put in by Bush Senior in the Gulf War, and then they were used during the war on terror that Obama and Bush messed up. So, you know what? I'm pulling our bases out of the region anyway." And he can kind of save face that way. So, you know, the sooner we recognize that the world's changing and we change with it on our own terms, the better off we'll be. If we try and cling on to it and we get forced out, that's horrible for our country.

#Glenn

You said the world is changing. What is the most important change you see here, though, especially for that part of the world?

#Joe Kent

I mean that America is no longer providing security guarantees, that we're no longer capable of projecting power in the way that we once were. I think, as dumb as the Iraq War was, Saddam Hussein had one of the bigger militaries at the time, especially in 1991 when we went into Kuwait and expelled Saddam from there. We kept sanctions on. We choked off Iraq. And then in 2003, we ran through the Iraqi army like a hot knife through butter. And we just showed how muscular and powerful we were. We got humiliated because we didn't understand, you know, the insurgency factor. We didn't learn any of our lessons from Vietnam. But we still had a lot of military might. We could still project power.

We could still dominate the country, the Persian Gulf with our aircraft carriers. We dominated the skies. Like, other than some rockets and mortars here and there, we never even thought about being threatened from the skies. But the world has changed, so we're no longer going to be, you know, the guarantors of security for the entire Gulf. I do think, too, that we've shown a lot of our weakness, and that is going to affect the petrodollar, and that's pretty dangerous. So I think we should be trying to mitigate that as much as we possibly can. You know, we've already basically shown the Gulf countries that we can't keep our word.

Our part of the bargain was: you guys use the petrodollar, you cut us in on all the transactions by using the dollar for your oil sales, and we'll provide your security guarantees. Well, our security guarantees bought them a bunch of ballistic missiles and Shahed drones that took out a lot of their infrastructure. So that part's changing. But also, I think the ability of any kind of great power to go

and conquer another country just with ballistic missiles and drone defense has proven to be almost a zero-sum game. And Russia, to a certain extent, is running into this in Ukraine. Now, obviously, we're backing the Ukrainians and accelerating that war.

And that's dangerous as well. But in terms of the old way we thought, where one of the great powers could just go smack around another country and accomplish whatever their objectives were—I mean, that has changed. Overall, I think, in terms of moving towards a planet that actually has less conflict, that's a good thing, because countries are going to see, you know, they really have a limited ability to go in and enforce their will in other countries. We do need to rely on diplomacy, on, you know, mutually beneficial trade and commerce, as opposed to the idea that the big country can go smack around the little country.

#Glenn

What I found appealing about America First was not just scaling back to avoid the forever wars and essentially adjusting to the changes in the international distribution of power. I also thought it was less ideological, because the past 30 years—and that's not just the U.S., but the Europeans as well—have been so incredibly ideological. Every foreign policy interest has to be framed in the language of values, which makes everything uncompromising and more confrontational. The U.S. would still pursue its power interests, but again, in a less ideological way. And once it becomes less ideological, more pragmatic, you also see that it opens up the possibility of some compromises and setting clear priorities.

And as you suggested, possibly working with Iran. And I was just wondering, you know, not at the moment, but if we go a year or two down the road, do you see a scenario where it's possible for the U.S. to actually work with Iran? Because I'm thinking, over the past years with this global war on terror, you know, sometimes it looked as if the United States and Iran kind of should have been on the same team, fighting ISIS. Again, you have a lot of experience with counterterrorism. From what I understand, the U.S. often ended up backing Al-Qaeda while the Iranians were fighting them. Do you see any possibility there in terms of actually finding themselves on the same side?

#Joe Kent

I do. I mean, I think if you take a step back and you just look at the ideologies, our enemies are the Salafi jihadis. It's ISIS. It's Al-Qaeda. Those are our enemies. That's who has sought to come to America to attack us here. The Shias, especially the Persians, have never gotten on airplanes to come over to America to try to kill us. They have fought us with great intensity when we are on their borders, which we were in Iraq, which we have been in Lebanon, Afghanistan, et cetera. But after 9/11, I think we missed a big opportunity to partner with the Iranians and say, hey, we have a common enemy, because ISIS and Al-Qaeda, they hate the Iranians. They hate the Shia.

But we didn't do that. We made a lot of blunders. And a lot of this is the Israeli influence. The Shias are a much bigger threat to the Israelis, especially Hezbollah, than the Sunnis were. And so we've gotten a lot of this wrong. When I was in Iraq in 2016 fighting ISIS, we were partnered with the Kurdish Peshmerga. But, you know, working in coordination with us were the Iraqi Shia militias, the Popular Mobilization Forces. And just like the Kurds had American special forces advisors, there were Iranian Revolutionary Guard Quds Force officers advising the Shia militias.

And we were fighting against ISIS. We were calling in airstrikes, and we were essentially acting as the air force for, you know, the Quds Force's proxy forces, which were the Shia militias. And we were fighting against ISIS together. Now, I think we could get back to working with them, especially in counterterrorism. I mean, Yemen's a great example. Again, the Houthis have never gotten on airplanes and said, like, "We want to go attack America." When we've come aggressively into the Red Sea or, you know, backed the Saudis, they've gone against us.

But the Houthis really just kind of want to control their area of Yemen. Now, the Houthis' sworn enemy inside Yemen is al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is the most dedicated branch of al-Qaeda to doing external operations against the West, either reaching out and trying to recruit people who are already in the West or deploying operatives like the underwear bomber, the printer cartridge bombers, etc. Anwar al-Awlaki, the whole Inspire brand that came from al-Qaeda in Yemen—they were sworn enemies of the Houthis. Now, unfortunately, because we took a lot of pressure off al-Qaeda to focus it on the Houthis, they've been able to exploit some of that space.

The Emiratis and the Saudis know those al-Qaeda operatives are capable fighters, so they've recruited some of them to go fight against the Houthis. And so, again, we're in this lopsided position where the guys that we should be working with, we're actually fighting. So I think if we get away from this conflict, especially if the administration changes, I do think we can have a much better and more pragmatic approach to the Iranians. And at the end of the day, for God's sake, we're working with Ahmad al-Sharaa in Syria. So this is where I think we can get over a lot of our moral hyperventilating about, "Oh, my gosh, the Iranians, years and years ago, you know, they did stuff against Americans."

Well, they only did it when we came into their backyard. But actually, we're working with a guy right now in Syria who literally deployed to Iraq to kill American soldiers, who was in Camp Bucca, who was a founding member of ISIS. And I get it. He's doing things differently now. And actually, all things considered, he's doing an okay job, and he probably is the best hope for Syria. So we might not like the guy, but let's accept the world as it is. Let's work with him. We're doing it in Syria. And if we can work with Ahmad al-Sharaa, there is no reason why we can't work with any leader in Iran for our own benefit and just for the stability of the region.

#Glenn

That’s often my main advice to the world: accept the world as it is, not how you wish it was. I think a lot of our mistakes come from this. But it just seems like, over the years, things became overly complicated. From your experience, looking back at Libya and Syria, how did the US end up in this situation where it was actually supporting, arming, or empowering forces that were officially described as enemies, as jihadists, who were supposed to be the target of the global war?

#Joe Kent

Well, a lot of it is us lighting brush fires to put out the fire that we started. So we're always having to support one group because we already messed up and armed a different group here and there. I think the fundamental problem is we really failed to understand why people in the Middle East, you know, were upset with us. A lot of it goes back to our blind support for the state of Israel. And Israel, for decades now, going back to its founding, has effectively deployed a lot of lobbyists into America.

They've done a good job of capturing a lot of evangelical Christians. And our policies of supporting Israel, and the way that the Israelis have treated the Palestinians, have radicalized a lot of people. I mean, guys like bin Laden were probably always going to be our enemies. However, when the people he recruits cite a lot of the massacres that the Israelis conducted in southern Lebanon, in the West Bank, and in Gaza as a reason for joining al-Qaeda and attacking the far enemy—us—we should listen to that and say, like, hey, is our support for this little country of Israel actually worth the blowback that we're getting?

Like, what are we getting out of this? And we never really did that. Unfortunately, we actually did the exact opposite. After 9/11, we let the Israeli lobby really kind of dictate where we went next. We immediately went after al-Qaeda. We chased them into Pakistan. But then, in very short order, we were told, like, yeah, we're going to nation-build in Afghanistan. But then the Israelis did a very effective job of saying, “The next place you need to go is Iraq,” because the Israelis understood that you need to dominate Iraq in order to leapfrog into Iran.

Now, we got bogged down there, and through our own blundering, through the de-Ba'athification process and not understanding Iraq properly, we actually ended up empowering and putting a lot of Shias who had ties to Iran in charge. And then the Israelis came back and said, “No, no, that doesn't work at all. You can't do that.” Because that created the Shia crescent from Tehran through Baghdad into Damascus to directly support Hezbollah in Israel's backyard. And that's where the Israelis came to us and said, “That doesn't work. You guys need to get rid of Assad, at least.”

And that's how we got talked into supporting the popular uprising against Assad via Hillary Clinton and Jake Sullivan. Well, the most lethal insurgents against Assad were guys who were affiliated with al-Qaeda. And we knew that. And then we went and did the regime change in Libya for a lot of

economic reasons. But we also wanted to take a lot of the weapons from Libya and push them up into Syria as a part of that dirty war as well. And that ended up emboldening ISIS and kind of the rest. Then we had to go back and fight ISIS, you know, after we empowered them.

So a lot of this ties directly in with what the pro-Israel lobby laid out in the Clean Break memorandum of, I think, 1996, where they basically said, "We're going to go to war with basically all their neighbors, culminating with Iran, in order to actually have a true defensive posture for Israel." But they knew they needed us on board to do it. And, you know, we keep letting the Israelis influence us this way. I think the only good thing that comes from the war that Trump launched is that it was so blatantly at the behest of Israel that now people can kind of see behind the scenes and see just the amount of control the Israeli lobby has over our foreign policy. So the only good thing that comes from this is that people understand this. And now we can kind of treat this as the cancer that it is in our political system going forward.

#Glenn

Yeah, correction seems way overdue. Well, with all civil wars or revolutions, whatever it is, it's always the most violent forces that rise to the top. Again, you see the same in Ukraine. That's why a lot of the right-wing fascist groups were supported, because they're great fighters. They are motivated. They hate Russians, and they're great at fighting. But then, of course, you end up in a situation where Poland suddenly begins to criticize that: "Oh, you know, we don't actually get along with these guys either." So, you know, it's difficult. A lot of this, I would say, was unforeseen, but some of it should be very predictable.

Just as a last thought, though, if it is possible to find some new peace with the Iranians, the main argument against it—again, the predictable one—is always the more ideological one, which is that the regime is intolerable, it's too fanatical, it's extremist, and it must be removed at all costs. I mean, this is often an appealing argument if you want to make war, because if they are all crazy mullahs who just want to get a nuclear weapon so they can blow up the world, suddenly, yeah, war seems just. But how do you assess the actual government there? I mean, again, one doesn't have to love the government or hate it, but what is a realistic approach in terms of how you see the Iranian authorities?

#Joe Kent

I mean, the Iranians have proven throughout the course of this administration, over the last year and a half, that they're very pragmatic and they're very calculated. I mean, the idea that they were just going to go ballistic and start carrying out terror attacks here in America, that they're mad mullahs—there's nothing to support that. I mean, basically every step they've taken shows that. From the time Trump came into office, they had their proxies stop attacking us because they wanted to get to the negotiating table. They understood that we were backing the Israelis in the 12-day war, but they didn't attack us. After Midnight Hammer, they literally messaged us that they were

going to shoot some rockets back at an empty quadrant in one of our bases, but then they wanted to get back to the negotiating table.

And then the way that they have observed different levels of escalation, the way they got into the MOU, the way that they viewed getting back out of the MOU. I mean, if anything, the Iranians have proven to be incredibly procedural. They have a pretty well-oiled bureaucracy, I'd say, and they make very calculated decisions. So they're kind of the opposite of the crazy, bomb-throwing radicals that we try to make them out to be. So, if anything, they've proven to be pretty pragmatic, very tough. And I think when you see a country like that, you should say, "Okay, we can actually work with that." And this used to be some of the beauty of Trump. He did it with Kim.

He did it with North Korea. I mean, he was just like, "Okay, this guy may be portrayed as kind of crazy, but I'm going to kind of hear him out, and maybe there's a space in there where we can make a deal." And the deal didn't necessarily materialize, but we didn't hear a lot from North Korea for quite some time because Trump did sort of just accept the world as it is and said, "Okay, he's there. I'm going to deal with him." So I think there's a lot of potential going forward for that. We're going to hear all the nonsense from the pro-Israel lobby. But again, I think just based on their election results last night, people either understand that Iran wasn't actually an existential threat, or they just kind of don't care.

Like, they know there's just another war in the Middle East. And so, at the end of the day, if we have our professional diplomats dealing with this and the Strait of Hormuz remains open, I think the majority of America is like, "Okay, I'm good with that." I think most American people just don't want to see us bleeding out in the Middle East anymore. They don't want to see actions being taken in the Middle East for Israel that result in higher gas prices. So if we fix that, I really don't think the vast majority of Americans who voted against Trump last night are going to care that we now have an embassy in Tehran or that we're quietly dealing with the Iranians here and there. Again, I just think the Iranians are practical, and we can deal with them.

#Glenn

My last question. I know that after the midterms now, given that Trump has said a big attack is coming, the Israelis have every incentive in the world to pull the US into a big war. But do you see any argument going the other way—that this could be an opportunity as well for Trump? Because I'm thinking, if I'm Trump and I'm looking after myself and looking for an out, why not blame the Democrats here? If they are controlling the purse, you know, and they say they don't want to support the Iran war anymore, why not just say, "I was on the cusp of victory. Then the Democrats came in, and now they don't support the war"? So essentially, put it on them. Is this likely, or is it too early, given that they won't even come into office for another two months?

#Joe Kent

Yeah, I mean, I think it's possible. Look, the President Trump that I know, that I supported, that I took a job with, he would just pragmatically see, like, "Oh, the American people don't like this. They just voted against me, and I've got two years to figure out what my legacy is." Like you said, just thinking about him and his legacy, he's going to be like, "Let's get our guys out tomorrow. Let's end this thing. I need to be able to have maximum space here domestically to say I won the war on my terms," etc. You know, maybe when the Democrats come in, he will do that.

He'll be like, "Okay, fine. If I can't work with the Democrats at all and they're just going to give me a bunch of crap about this war, then I'll just end the war and I'll pull them out." I think that's possible too. Unfortunately, that's the Trump that I hope is still in there somewhere. But for the last, you know, year and a half, that President Trump has been pushed to the side for this other President Trump who we see now, who got us into this war. Even when it was in his best interest to get us out and walk away, he continues to escalate it.

And so I really fear that right now, in this period between now and January, you know, for one reason or another, he does get sucked back in. We need to see that decisive President Trump come out and just say, like, "Okay, nobody else is going to put their hands on the controls. I'm going to yank this whole thing out right now. I'm going to pull our guys out. No one's going to stop me from doing it. This was a dumb idea. You know, it's not open for discussion." If he doesn't come out definitively like that and actually just take the wheel away from every adviser who got him into this situation, put the Israelis in a box, then I'm afraid we will get sucked back in.

And it's in his best interest, too. I mean, it's in the best interest of the country, obviously. But he's got two years. Trump has proven to be politically very unique and to have a lot of political skill. He could potentially salvage his reputation in two years if he works diligently at it and ends this war. And so I'm not as pessimistic as a lot of people out there are. I still have a glimmer of hope that President Trump is going to just end this thing any day now. But every minute that goes by, he is missing an opportunity to just end it. And he gives the Israelis and the hawks here more angles to kind of weasel us back into this war.

#Glenn

Yeah, that's the problem. The longer the war goes on, the more diplomatic solutions begin to wither away. But to his credit, though, I think he became one of the most remarkable comeback stories in American history. You would think that he could just come up with some new approach, arguing that, "Well, I said I would adjust to this new world order, as our national security strategies suggest. I'm going to pull out of Europe because we're not going to partake in the war with Russia. We're going to pull out of the Middle East. It's not our problem." And it would essentially fulfill that strategy. So he could still make a victory out of this. Well, again, let's cross our fingers. Thank you so much for taking the time.

#Joe Kent

Yeah, anytime. Great to talk with you.