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QI Panel:

Are Biden's Strikes Against the Houthis Bringing America Closer to War?

January 26, 2023

11:00 AM - 12:00 PM EST

Trita Parsi 0:44

Welcome, everyone to the Quincy Institute's panel discussion titled, "Are Biden's Strikes Against the Houthis Bringing America Closer to War?" My name is Trita Parsi, I'm the Executive Vice President of the Quincy Institute, a think tank in Washington that promotes ideas that move US foreign policy away from endless war and toward rigorous diplomacy. We favor a national security strategy that is centered on military restraint and diplomacy. President Biden's military strikes against the Houthis in Yemen have not worked according to Biden himself. Yet, he insists that they will continue and that they will be intensified. Biden took military action against the Houthis together with the United Kingdom, to restore American deterrence and to prevent the Yemeni militia from attacking ships in the Red Sea. But rather than pacifying tensions in the Red Sea, the military strikes have inflamed them further. Does this dangerous escalation risk bringing the US into wider war in the region? Or the what is likely to back down? And if they don't? Does the Biden ministration have an exit plan in order to make sure that it doesn't trap itself in yet another war in the Middle East? Could a ceasefire in Gaza have helped prevent it? And there's still a chance that it could pacify these tensions? And if the ceasefire can temper the tensions in the Red Sea, why is the Biden administration so adamant about not pursuing that option? And then, of course, given the ICG ruling today against Israel, in terms of South Africa's application that Israel has engaged in genocide, we will obviously address that issue as well and how that impacts the entire situation in the region.

To address these important questions, we have an excellent panel with Bruce Riedel, Akbar Shahid Ahmed, and Shireen Al-Adeimi. For those of you who are joining us via zoom, you can use the q&a function to ask your question, and I will try to get to those as quickly as I can throughout the conversation. If you're watching on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, you can put your questions in the comment section, and I will try to get to those as well. So with no further ado, allow me to introduce our excellent panelists and start the conversation. Bruce Riedel is a 30 year veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency. He has served in the National Security Council at the White House for four different presidents. He's also the author of eight books, the latest one titled "America and the Yemens: A Complex and Tragic Encounter" that was published just a few months ago. Shireen Al-Adeimi is a non-resident fellow here at the Quincy Institute and an assistant professor of language and literacy at Michigan State University's College of Education and expert on Yemen. She is regularly interviewed by national and international media outlets including NPR, NBC, Al Jazeera, the BBC, and many more. Akbar Shahid Ahmed, last but not least, is senior diplomatic correspondent for HuffPost, a recipient of several journalism awards, Akbar has just in the last few months broken several stories about the inner workings of the Biden administration in regards to the war in the Middle East, as well

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as the internal strife that exists within the administration, given that very large amount of opposition that exists to the policy internally. Akbar's reporting has been absolutely essential and are highly recommended. Given what has happened just in the last couple of hours, let me start off by asking Bruce, a question for you. Tell me your reaction to the ICJ ruling and how you think that will impact or not impact the current situation in Gaza, the administration's position in which so far he has resisted any pressure on these rallies at least publicly and what that will do to other actors in the region. And in fact, if that potentially also will cause them to potentially changed their course of action.

Bruce Riedel 4:51

Okay, first of all, thank you for having me on this very important panel. Um, the ICJ result, decision underscores just how isolated Israel is in the international community, and by implication, though, is the United States. The judgment is a is a very powerful one, it doesn't say Israel as committed genocide, but it says that that is a serious question. The Israelis have been visibly nervous about this whole thing. Israel could have easily said, you know, we don't care, we're not going to send anybody to the Hague, you have your trial, and we'll ignore it. Instead, they engaged quite a senior level and with very competent pieces, people. But in the end, they have been found very isolated. It's an American judge, after all, who announced the ruling. And many countries who you don't normally put into the basket of anti Israel signed on to join the complaint, including Chile and Belgium. Now, what does this mean for the Israelis? Will they respond? I think it means that they will, they will denounce this, will this encourage them to start looking for an end game in Gaza? That would be the rational choice, whether that will be Bibi Netanyahu his choice? I'm skeptical. It does put pressure on the Biden administration to rethink it's almost full support for Israel and to start thinking seriously, about a ceasefire. I was heartened yesterday to read that the administration is going to send Bill Burns to Europe to talk to the Israelis, Qataris, Egyptians and others, that he's the right person for the climate. And the least that shows we're interested in talking now, whether we can get to a ceasefire, I think that remains to be seen.

Trita Parsi 7:11

Thank you so much Bruce, Akbar, as Bruce mentioned, this is not just isolating Israel, there's also by implication isolating the United States further, we've already seen significant isolation at the UN. It also may intensify the viewpoints inside the administration in which there is a significant amount of senior people that are in disagreement increasingly with this policy. Tell us what you're hearing about first, what is the administration's game plan on handling this? And for instance, are we going to see another veto at the Security Council, when, inevitably some country as I understand it, Algeria is likely to bring it forward? And also, what will the implications be for these internal dynamics in the administration?

Akbar Shahid Ahmed 8:00

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Absolutely. So on to your first question, I think the US has a really shifting narrative on this ICJ case, as the Biden administration has had competing and shifting narratives on so many aspects of this war. Initially, John Kirby in the White House was saying, this is a baseless case, we've never heard of the ICJ. What is is evidently the new plan, according to sources inside the administration is to say, actually, the ICJ is just doing what we want it to do. So you know, it's a different plan. I don't think that will quell the internal dissent. Because Trita and the panelist, I think, important to remember, the US is going to say, look, we're already calling for aid, for shielding civilians, for not violating international humanitarian law. But it's clear, almost four months into this war that the US calls for that are not having an effect, right, and the reality is, while there may be rhetorical goals for that, actual tangible U.S. support has not been touched, if anything, Biden who has gone above and beyond, for instance, by using emergency authorizations to send more buttons to Israel. In terms of what happens at the UN, I think it remains to be seen. I just reported before we hopped on this that a couple of diplomats told me there are active conversations Algeria is currently the Arab state on the UN Security Council. All that said Algeria may not bring a resolution on this, it's it remains to be seen, and we can get more into the details of why. Certainly, the US does not want another vote on this and Algeria had initially said we will bring a resolution if there is a ceasefire call. There hasn't been that. So I think that will be interesting to see. And then just in terms of the ICJ consequences, I think, really important to remember for the internal dissent is part of the challenge for the people inside the administration, national security experts, not just Arabs and Muslims, I think that has been a really unfair portrayal of the dissent, I think it's really widespread, are coming at this from strategic reasons that coming out from diplomatic reasons. And the the issue for them is the it has to be dealing with foreign counterparts, defending this US policy. And that all becomes harder. The more that international courts, international experts, human rights groups, third parties say, Listen, this is unconscionable. You have to change your policy.

Trita Parsi 10:24

Yeah, yeah. Very interesting. I definitely want to hear more about how this potentially will play out at the UN Security Council, but also the implications of not having an explicit call for a ceasefire. Shireen? What will this do to the calculations of the Houthis, the Houthis already have actually invoked the Geneva Convention and said that they have an obligation to prevent a genocide. And that is a justification they say, for targeting ships in the Red Sea that are going to Israel or Israeli ports. Now, they have further fuel for that argument. Although, of course, there's not been a final ruling on genocide, but they will probably have greater strength to make that argument. How do you see this ruling affecting the calculations of the Houthis?

Shireen Al-Adeimi 11:15

I think Geneva convention or not, we would have seen some kind of response from the Houthis in Bab el Mandeb Strait, in support of the Palestinian people. And the support and the solidarity that we're seeing them monetary in the you know, otherwise, support for the Palestinian cause in Yemen is not inauthentic to Yemenis. It runs decades, Yemen in 1947, when it was still a monarchy in northern Yemen, they were one of five states that walked out when Palestine when

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the vote to partition Palestine took place at the UN. In the 1960s, when we saw the Marxist government in South Yemen, close Bab el Mandeb, in support of the Egyptian war in Israel, in the 1990s, and 80s when we had President Saleh, who was a longtime dictator, we saw that he lends support for the Palestinian leadership, especially during the time of conflict with them in, in Lebanon in the Lebanese Civil War. And so the the solidarity between Yemenis and Palestinians is decades long. And ironically, whichever government we've had in power in Yemen, they've been aligned with the people and their support for Palestinians and the Palestinian cause. And so I think the the Houthi response in Yemen is a natural extension of that. And the Houthis, of course, have been I mean, it's part of their slogan is Death to Israel, so the slogan was created in the late 90s, early 2000s. And so this is part of their mission in that area to free Palestine, or to lend support for the freedom and liberation of Palestine.

But the fact that they are invoking the Genocide Convention gives them more clout and more legitimacy to at least, you know, among people in that region, to direct misdirect ships that are Israel bound in support of Palestinians. And they've said from the beginning, lift the blockade in Gaza and we're going to stop rerouting ships that are Israel bound. And the few days that we've seen the ceasefire take place when there was an exchange of hostages and, and prisoners, they didn't, there were no attacks in the Red Sea during those days. And so we need to take them at face value when it comes to that, and they never disrupted global shipping, or Israel bound ships throughout the nine years that they've been fighting with this with the US and the UK and the Saudis and the coalition of 17 countries. They've only done that in response to what's happening in Gaza. And bear in mind, also, these are people the Yemenis have suffered under blockade for the last nine years. And so they know what hunger is, they know what it is to run out of medicine for cancer patients, they know what it means for fuel to shut down entire hospitals. They know what it means for babies to die, because there's no title on the shelves. And so they've suffered the consequences of blockade. And their support for the Palestinian has been very explicit that we are supporting this, we are imposing this blockade in the Red Sea, because of the situation on the ground and Reza that is making it impossible for people to live and to survive. And as soon as there's a ceasefire there, as soon as there is a lifting of blockade, then that is also going to be lifted in the Red Sea. So I think this ruling, the fact that Israel is now formally under investigation for genocide, gives them an even stronger case.

Trita Parsi 14:18

Very interesting Shireen, but so, I assume that means that you flat out reject what the British Prime Minister said in the Parliament, which is that what the Houthis are doing is completely disconnected from what is happening in Gaza. But, what would you say to the argument that some are making that yes, this may be very well driven by that, but the Houthis have other political calculations as well, this is playing out well for them internally, this is increasing their cloud, and that as a result, even if there is a ceasefire, there should perhaps be some expectation that the Houthis may nevertheless not live up to it because of their own political calculations.

Shireen Al-Adeimi 14:56

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I think that's an interesting point to make because the Houthis would not have been able to maintain support and control over northern Yemen, where 80% of the population resides without popularity and support from the Yemeni people? Well, we've seen those masses, you know, coming out in the millions, not just in supportive Gaza, but in support of the, you know, the Houthis over the last nine years. Maybe people have not been paying attention, but these, you know, these, these, the show of support, and this defiance of foreign intervention, as part and parcel of what Yemenis have been doing for the last several years, and so sure, they could get more support now from maybe the southern Yemenis who have supported the coalition, but they don't really need that support, they already have the support of most of Yemenis.

The other thing is that they have a lot to lose here. So they were very close to signing a deal with Saudi Arabia. The blockade has been eased since 2022, but we're still, the country is still under, you know, blockade Saudi Arabia still gets to decide who comes in and out of Yemen, there's only one flight operating from Sanaa airport, which was just opened in 2022 to Jordan, just this one city. This is an international airport. And so Yemenis have suffered under the blockade they've suffered through this war, and they're very close to achieving this peace deal with Saudi Arabia. Rumors on the ground were that they were going to sign a deal in January. So this month, they were supposed to finalize that now, now that they're designated as terrorists. You know, Saudi is going to think twice before signing a deal with what their allies, the United States, have called terrorists. And so that's, of course, going to disrupt the peace deal. And, you know, and so I think this idea that they have a lot more to gain than to lose, I think is a bit misguided, because there's a lot more to lose here, which is peace and stability in Yemen, which is what majority of population wants and needs, which is what the Houthis wants and need if they're going to be ruling Yemen, in times of, you know, stability and not war, because we haven't seen what they look like what their leadership looks like outside of war. So I think that's a bit of a misdirection there when people say that they're only doing this for their own interests.

Trita Parsi 17:02

Interesting. Bruce, I would love to get your reaction to what Shireen just said. But also, if you could add two other components to it. One is, has this changed Saudi Arabia's calculation, in the sense that, you know, the Saudis obviously, were bombing the Yemenis and the Houthis, for several years did not achieve anything, was constantly trying to get the US to be more involved in that war, now that has happened. Is this changing the Saudi's calculation in the sense that they actually want the US to go in deeper into this? And also, what does this say about the US as terrorists list in the sense that they were added to the list and immediately thereafter, Biden comes and takes them out and now they're added back on because they're doing this to ship? I mean, what's the integrity of the terrorist list at this point, when it seems to be so arbitrary for political expedience, to add or take a country's off of it, or groups off of it?

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Bruce Riedel 17:58

Well, first of all, I fully agree with what Shireen said about the Houthis. And the very important point she made, that the blockade is not over. We still have a long way to go from ceasefire to a real peace in Yemen. And one of the first steps that should be taken is to allow airlines to fly to other cities other than Amman, Jordan and to have more frequent flights. This is particularly important because people who have health issues that cannot be addressed in Yemen's very primitive medical infrastructure, need to go travel abroad. And while the health infrastructure in Jordan is significantly better, that shouldn't be limited, basically, to going there, they should be able to go to Cairo, to the Gulf states. And I would argue someday, direct flights from Sanaa to Tehran, I realized now that pushes a lot of people's buttons, but there isn't a reason why that can't happen at some point, or shouldn't happen at some point. I think the Saudis are very nervous about what they see going on here. They are well aware that the Houthis could at any moment, start resuming military action against targets in Saudi Arabia, or they could also at any moment, launch a military operation with missiles against Bahrain, Bahrain, after all has come out in favor of the US approach, US UK approach. It's the only Arab state to have done so. US Central Command is headquartered in Qatar, but there's a very, very large facility in in Bahrain. And even if it was only a symbolic missile firing, it didn't do any significant damage, it would significantly increase tensions in the region.

You rightly noted that the Saudis spent nine years bombing Yemen, they understand well, that bombing Yemen is not going to deter the Houthis, or significantly weaken their capabilities. They've tried, with our help, with lots of American help especially in the Trump administration, and it didn't work. They are vulnerable, and they know it. And they want this war to end as quickly as possible. It's also worth noting that Oman, which is actually America's oldest ally, in the Middle East, Oman recognized the United States in the 1830s. They have come out very strongly against what's going on here. And they've been a crucial negotiator, intermediary between the Houthis and the Saudis over the years. So the danger for the Saudis is significant that this war will expand to include them or their close allies, like the Bahrainis. And that's something they don't want to see.

The terrorists designation, the whole business of terrorist designations by the United States has always been very political. You know, South Yemen was a terrorist state, the only reason it stopped being a terrorist is because it ceased to be a state. It wasn't like they did something different, we just decided, well, they're not a country anymore. So we can't be on the list. It's also bad in a way. The Biden administration came into office two and a half, three years ago, and immediately took the the terrorist designation off. And the President in one of his early speeches said bringing into the war in Yemen is a top priority for American foreign policy. Now, it's clearly, it was not a top priority for the Trump administration, nor had it been a top priority for the Obama administration. So significant change in the right direction. And I think the Biden administration deserve some credit for getting the ceasefire that we got, obviously, a lot of people were involved, and obviously the fact that the Saudis were increasingly eager to get out of the war, all helped. But the Biden administration helped to get the ceasefire. I think it's unfortunate that Biden administration now has reversed itself, gotten itself involved in another

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war in the Middle East. did so without going to the American Congress, which is a serious question in my mind. I don't, I haven't heard a real legal basis for why we're there. They can't use the, the basis that we've been using the war on terrorism for the last 20 years, that the Houthis are somehow an al Qaeda-derived organization, the Houthis are a lot of things, but they're certainly not an al Qaeda friend. So I think the President's going to find himself facing some serious congressional criticism on this issue. And, is firing a missile or a drone, an act of terrorism? Do we really want to establish that firing drones is an act of terrorism? I don't think that is in the American national interest.

Trita Parsi 23:43

Very interesting, Akbar, if I can turn to you, given what just what Bruce just said, in terms of the implications for the United States, and significant shifts, that seems to have happened in the administration, they came in talking rather strong terms. I mean, the President said this war must end very decisively. And now we're in a very different place. But if we just take a look at what's happened in the last couple of weeks, did the administration expect that a few airstrikes would deter the Houthis? Did they, what was the calculation there? Because now we're in a situation in which it's even more difficult for shipping to go through the Red Sea, because the risk to those ships are greater as a result of a shooting war between the US and the Houthis. And the who is, of course, don't have to succeed, they just need to continue to try that's enough to inject risk into the calculation. Did they miscalculate or was there a calculation that by actually intensifying tensions, this would now start becoming costly to the Chinese as well, which hadn't been the case prior to that. And by that create an incentive for them to step in and use their influence to the extent that exists to pressure Iran to pressure the Houthis to get a ceasefire. Was it that sophisticated? Or was it just a massive miscalculation?

Akbar Shahid Ahmed 25:06

Yeah, I mean, I think Trita you know, like writing the script of The Diplomat in that Netflix series, it's never that sophisticated. So to follow, backtrack to violence strikes began now two weeks ago, I was the first reporter to break the news that the Biden administration had decided to strike. So I remember that night very vividly, I was on the call with the White House as they tried to explain what they were doing, their argument then was deterrence to some extent, ut really, it was about capability, really, they were saying we have used sophisticated intelligence analysis to identify these, like 10 or 12, or 15 key sites. So regardless of the Houthi calculus, the point was not going to change what they want to do at that point, is we are going to change what they can do. Now, that argument, maybe was was validated by their initial approach of, you know, one day of strikes, no strikes for a while, but it became quickly clear that they actually hadn't identified things, right. So they've continued to strike, now, I think seven or eight times, and clearly Houthi capacity has not been degraded, I think it's important to remember to, to Bruce's great point about congressional concern, the relative cost here. Right, so the Houthis are using pretty cheap equipment, weaponry, you know that they can resupply, they can kind of make it, they've been doing it for a while. It's not, they're under sanctions already, right, even before the sanctions, Yemen had the blockage, there were sanctions on various Houthi leaders. They had

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limits on that technical capability. The United States is using, you know, multimillion dollar missiles bombs in one instance, I mean, two seals died, right this month trying to intercept a boat that the US said was bringing weapons to the Houthis. So there's a military cost as a human cost. And that's all only going to grow if you don't have a plan or strategy. And if it is, if this is all spiraling out of control. And to your point about the China thing. I mean, it's interesting. I mean, it's an argument that the administration is putting out these days, that doesn't seem to be, you know, much, so far there doesn't seem to be like a significant Chinese interest in helping the US and Israel clean up their mess. Right. And I think, yes, perhaps there will be an economic toll on China, but I think that's a big gamble to take for this administration.

Trita Parsi 27:27

Shireen, before we completely leave that, we have a question from Depesh in the chat about what the implications will be for humanitarian aid to Yemen, which was a critical justification that the Biden administration used when they first reversed the Trump administration's terrorist designation. What do you think will happen on the ground in Yemen as a result of this designation?

Shireen Al-Adeimi 27:54

So the Biden administration knows fully well that this is going to cause massive disruptions to aid because if they're saying that they I mean, the Houthis are the de facto government in northern Yemen, let's just be honest, whether they recognize that anybody or not is irrelevant. They are the de facto government. And they control area, an area where 70 to 80% of the population resides. And because of the blockade, 80% of the Yemeni population has relied on aid over the last several years. Yemen economically was impoverished, and so prior to the war, they used to import 90% of their food from from the outside. And that's why the blockade had higher humanitarian impact in Yemen. And so the Biden administration when in February of 2021, when they delisted them, they said, well, we have listened to the United Nations, and you know, and other humanitarian groups, they know that this was going to cause widespread suffering. They knew that this was a political tool, and they knew that it wasn't going to achieve anything other than starve more Yemenis. And so then they've they've used that, you know, as a as a, you know, as a stick in 2022, as well, there were questions about relisting the Houthis on to put them on the terror list. So they've used this before. Now we see that they're saying, well, if you stop those attacks, we're going to remove you from the list. The Houthis are saying, of course we don't care, do what you want, and the Yemeni Parliament actually designated the US and the UK as global and Israel as global terrorists as well. And so they're playing those games back. But I think you know, and they have no foreign assets, and so that's not going to impact them personally. It is going to impact the Yemeni people, remittances are a major part of the Yemeni economy has been before the war has increased. Since so many of us, living abroad, we rely on sending, our families back home, rely on the money that we're able to send whether those people are living in the United States, the UK, Europe or, you know, or Saudi Arabia and Yemenis working abroad and sending money back home. So those transactions

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could be disrupted if financial institutions are not going to be operating in so called terrorist control areas. So the cost is potentially humongous for the average Yemeni person.

Trita Parsi 29:59

Thank you Shireen, I have a question for both Bruce and Akbar, Barbara Slavin from the Stimson Center asks, what does this say about the lack of enthusiasm that countries such as Spain and France have for Operation prosperity, and and they essentially exited from the original group that had been put together by the US. But if we take a step back, you know, if this is some sort of a coalition of the willing, it is a very small Coalition of the Willing compared to what George W. Bush managed to put together, what does that say about how the Biden administration is operating? Does it say, tell us something about how the position of Biden has already had some clear, negative impact on America's convening power, showing the lack of influence it will get by becoming so isolated? And Akbar to you, what is the administration's reaction to that, and your conversations with them? How do they defend or explain away these very clear numbers that show that you are simply doesn't seem to have that capacity, that convenient capacity? Bruce, if you want to go first?

Bruce Riedel 31:08

Our isolation is quite striking. This is an administration after all, that came into office saying it was going to end America's forever wars in the Middle East. And it actually did help to get a ceasefire in Yemen. And of course, it withdrew from Afghanistan. Now, the implementation of that withdrawal was catastrophic, but it did withdraw. And now we find ourselves back in a shooting war in the Middle East, against an insurgency in a country, which is known for the fact that foreign invaders, get bogged down in Yemen, and lose spectacularly. That's why the Egyptians never wanted to join the Saudi effort against the Houthis, or join it without ever putting anybody on the ground. So we now find ourselves very, very much isolated. Traditional allies, like Spain, like Belgium, like France, are not comfortable with supporting this. And a part of that reason, of course, is that by definition, if we're attacking the Houthi is because the Houthis are attacking Israel, we are even more closely tied to the Israeli war in Gaza. And the Israeli war in Gaza, is universally unpopular. The ICJ result only underscores that more people see what's going on in Gaza. They understand that Israel was attacked, nobody disputes that Israel had a right to defend itself after the seventh of October. But, we're in January now. This time for self defense has long since been passed. Israel has now killed 25,000 People in the Gaza Strip. And that's probably a conservative number. It's put 2 million people out of their homes. These are really horrendous activities, and there's no end in sight. So I think the administration finds itself very much isolated. British support is politically important. But with all due humility towards my friends in the Royal Air Force, I don't think that they're actually going to be the ones who decisively defeat the Houthis. I think their military action is more for political reasons than anything else. It also raises the question, which I don't have an answer to, which do the Houthis have a missile that can go far enough to hit the base in Cyprus, that the British operate from? The Cypriots are very unhappy that the British are using those bases? Because that ties them more to the war in Gaza as well. But I think the administration has put itself in a in a weak place,

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and it doesn't have a very coherent narrative to explain what we're doing to the American people.

Trita Parsi 34:36

Akbar, on that narrative, what what are they telling you when you asked him point blank about this clear appearance, at least of isolation?

Akbar Shahid Ahmed 34:47

Yeah, I'll just pick up for a sec on the Gaza link. Because I think it's really important to underscore that right. The the UK and the US are repeatedly saying the Houthis escalation has nothing to do with Gaza. it would be important to remember France is a country that has called for a ceasefire, Belgium as a country has called for a ceasefire, Spain has.. There's there are clear rifts and the European Union is a major player right France is on the Security Council. So I think that that division is very clear. In terms of the administration narratives, it's, I'd say it's twofold. One of it is similar to the narrative the pushing domestically, particularly to critics of the war in Gaza, particularly to Muslim and Arab American communities. And it's, frankly, a very, it's a blunt instrument. It's a very harsh narrative. It is you want Donald Trump, which, you know, that's really not a super convincing argument for your case, right? You can see the other guys that but what are you offering, but that is very much what they're saying to foreign diplomats is, you know, if you undermine us, you're gonna get the other guy, he's gonna leave NATO, he's gonna nuke Iran, he's going to do X Y Zed, it remains to be seen how much that gains traction, it's not a logical or strategic argument. It's really more an argument playing into fear and uncertainty.

I'd say the second aspect of their argument is, well look at our record elsewhere. Right. And especially with the Europeans, they sort of focus on Ukraine support, and look how much we did for Ukraine and continues to do for Ukraine, and hence for European security, all of which I think our points well received by Europe. But this is also coming at the same time as the Biden administration, proving unable to advance additional military aid for Ukraine through Congress. Right, so there's also a sense of, you're asking us to take you on your word, but Ukraine is fumbling, you are not being able to rely on them politically, so what are we supposed to sort of give you? And the final thing I'd say they also on that on that argument of looking at the rest of us is, they do make a deal of international humanitarian law, so something I've reported on quite a lot. Another channel for international accountability for Gaza, that I think has been overlooked is this idea of a Geneva Convention Conference, which the Palestinians and some other countries want to see happen. The US is trying to privately say, don't let this happen. And the person that tried to pressure Switzerland in that instance, what they see is, actually during this conference will violate international humanitarian law even further and muddy the waters and have confusing effect, it's very hard to make statements about IHJ, when you're supporting the campaign in Gaza, and to the global south in particular, that hypocrisy is, frankly, it's unsustainable.

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Trita Parsi 37:27

Certainly, certainly, Shireen, we have a question in the chat that is very important, particularly given the Washington narrative, which I don't think I've ever seen, the Houthis so consistently be referred to in the media or by US officials, as Iran-backed. Now, there seems to be clear evidence that there is support for the Houthis by Iran. But it was an interesting statement by one of the Houthi spokespeople about a week or so ago, on an outlet in which was asked about this point blank. And the response was that if the Houthis actually were controlled by Iran, the Houthis would not be in a direct confrontation with Israel right now, suggesting not only that they're not acting on behalf of Iran, but actually that there is unhappiness in Tehran about what they're at least disagreement with interval with what the Houthis are doing, because it may not work out exactly the way the Iranians are planning things. Could you speak a little bit more to that not just the question of are they a proxy or not? Because I think it's been debated to death. But what is the actual dynamic right now between the Iranians and the Houthis on this very issue of the attacks in the Red Sea?

Shireen Al-Adeimi 38:37

I mean, the dynamic has existed for quite a while now at very key moments in in key decisions that the Houthis have made, whether it was September 21, 2014, when they marched all the way from Saada in the northern province, and all the way to the capital Sanaa and took over the capital. Iranians came out very vocally saying, this is a bad idea, we don't want you to do that. And the Houthis publicly said, who are you to tell us what to do. And this was a pivotal moment in the course of Yemeni history, Saudi Arabia would not have bombed Yemen in 2015, alongside the UAE and the US and UK, were not for the Houthi takeover of Sanaa, because finally they were nervous about having the Houthis be part of the coalition government or even part of the government or the governments in Yemen, given their hostility to the US and Saudi interests. And at that key moment, the Houthis rejected Iranian interference publicly. And right now we're not seeing an Iranian response to what's happening in Gaza. Iran is fighting its own issues with the Baluchis in Pakistan and that distraction, right but it's not responding as a state to what's happening in in Gaza, their interests in the region are very different from the from Yemenis. And so the idea that, you know, Iran is this puppet master or, you know, and they're controlling these different groups, I think sure, hey're aligned, they have a healthy relationship. But by no means do they wait for Iranian orders or that they're fulfilling Iranian desires in the country. Even this idea that they're proxies, of course, is just completely ridiculous, and it speaks to the lack of understanding of who Yemenis are, what their motivations are, what their relationship is to Iran, and what their own interests are, geopolitical interests are in the region. Iran at the end of the day, didn't come to rescue Yemen, from the blockade that has been happening over the nine years, they haven't been able to rescue them from the bombing, you know, to join a coalition on their behalf to support them in their cause. Yemenis were basically fighting this alone, the Houthis, in particular and their leadership, beginning at the beginning of the war with Ali Abdullah Saleh later on on their own, but against the coalition of 16-17 countries. And so to constantly use this, like Iran-backed Houthis, and not acknowledge the other side, and the fact that they wouldn't exist without foreigners, I think it just speaks to the either misunderstanding

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and understanding of the situation on the ground, or just this unwillingness to understand what the local dynamics are, and to just use this cheap low of Iran backed Houthis because Iran has just become a euphemism for enemy. And so it's just a very quick way of telling the public that hey, these these are the bad guys, because they're Iran allied. That's that's how I see this, I think it just misrepresents what's actually happening in the region.

Trita Parsi 41:25

Bruce, I'm gonna let you come in. And let me just push you on one point. There is a fascinating discrepancy in the Washington narrative, on the one hand, an argument that the US actually doesn't have much leverage with Netanyahu, despite the fact that the massive massive armament and arms shipments that we're sending to Israel, and on the other hand, saying that obviously, the Iranians have leverage over the Hutus because they're providing weapons. So Iranian weapons shipments clearly provide leverage, America's armament of Israel apparently does not. But let's actually take it for face value that at the end of the day, if you're providing weapons to a movement, it does provide you with a modicum of leverage. How would you assess that leverage? If the Iranians were to stop at this point, how much longer would the Houthis be able to sustain what they're doing?

Bruce Riedel 42:14

I think the Houthis could be able to sustain what they're doing indefinitely without Iranian support. I would underscore Shireen's point, the Houthis are not a proxy of Iran. I've heard otherwise quite knowledgeable Americans, experts on diplomacy speak in the last several days, that all of this is being directed by Tehran. No, it's not. Shireen pointed out several key points in the last decade, the Houthis have very explicitly not followed Iranian advice. My own research on Iran support for the Houthis is that most, there may be two dozen Iranian so called experts or advisors in the country, with the Houthis, just a very, very small force on the ground, and the kinds of equipment that they help the Houthis with. I think the points have been made earlier, we are firing a several million dollar missile at a facility, which looks a lot like their neighborhood garage is more sophisticated than that. And why lot of the equipment that they're using to make these things are recycled pieces of tin and steel and stuff like that. This is not we're not bombing Germany in 1944, we're bombing a very, very unsophisticated apparatus, which has demonstrated now that it alone with the possible exception of Hezbollah, is the only part of the Arab and Muslim world that has come to the defense of Gaza. That's that's a very powerful place to be in the, in the inter Arab and inter Muslim propaganda wars and policy wars. They can point look, Saudis aren't doing anything. You know, the Saudis claim to be the defenders of Palestine. They're not doing anything. The Gulf is the Algerians, you know, all of these so called defenders of Palestine, where are they? Well, the Houthis can say, well, we're there. We are actually physically supporting them. Now, how much damage are they doing to Israel? I doubt very much. What has also been remarkable in following the course of the attacks on shipping is that I'd say a significant percentage of the attacks have been on ships that have nothing to do with Israel at all. So if Iran is providing intelligence on which ships to go after has been, which has been alleged by the administration, it's not very good intelligence, it's certainly not

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something that you would suspect would be coming from some two particular spy naval vessel in the Red Sea. This is not a question of the United States, fighting the Iranians through the proxy. This is a question once more of Iran, of America sorry, of America's obsession with Iran, which has now gone on for decades. We have been upset by the Iranians, all at the same time, as Iran's role in the region has steadily gotten larger and larger and has gotten closer and closer to a nuclear bomb.

Trita Parsi 46:14

Bruce, since you served in the White House during very volatile times in which Israel was a major, major player and factor in many decisions made by presidents, what is your reaction to the argument that there really isn't much Biden can do to press Netanyahu for a ceasefire, if Biden even wants that, let's assume that he wants it, that there really is that the U.S. simply doesn't have the leverage to be able to make sure that doesn't happen?

Bruce Riedel 46:47

I will use the, the colorful term, hogwash. The US has immense leverage here. Every day we provide Israel with the missiles, with the drones, with the ammunition that it needs to sustain a major military campaign like the campaign in Gaza. Israel has, has called up 300,000 reservists, I don't think they're still all called up, but that's a sizable number. American support is vital, given that much of the Israeli economy has for all intents and purposes been shut down. No, that leverage is there. In my experience, American presidents have been notably shy about using that leverage for domestic political reasons. But it has been used on occasion. I'm giving you a good example, in 1991, the Bush administration, Bush the elder did not want Israel to attack Iraq, for the scuds fired at Tel Aviv, and Brent Scowcroft the National Security Adviser then, knew that they had to do more than just tell the Israelis they didn't want them in. So what Scowcroft ordered was that the United States would not give the Israeli Air Force what are called the IFF codes, identification, friend and foe, which sent a signal very quietly below the radar stream to the Israeli airport, that if you operate in Iraqi airspace, we will shoot you down. That's leverage. Now, Scowcroft was one of the smartest national security advisors we've ever seen. This administration clearly doesn't want to take on it. They will insist on everything again. Since October 7 does show its very strong support for Israel and for Bibi Netanyahu as a consequence. As I said earlier, I take some hope, in the notion that Bill Burns is now going out there looking for a way to get a pause in the fighting and get the hostages home. Once you get a significant pause in the fighting is going to be much harder to announce, oh, we're going back to war. Not impossible, but it's going to be much harder to do that. And Bibi is also once he has a pause in the fighting, going to have to face his demands domestic situation in which he is now incredibly unpopular. And I don't think he'll survive in office once the war comes to an end.

Trita Parsi 49:46

Akbar, since as Bruce said, it is hogwash to suggest that Biden doesn't have any leverage. What are the main factors that has made Biden so resistant to actually using his leverage,

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despite the very significant costs this is imposing on the US, as well as now a risk for a wider war, which, as Bruce, rightfully pointed out, in my view, can likely cost him the election. And is it you know, they're talking about the Abrams, of course, still being viable? Is that just a talking point? Is that a serious view in the administration, that there actually is still the chance to be able to move in that direction? With Saudi Israeli normalization?

Akbar Shahid Ahmed 50:32

On the first one, I'd say there are three reasons why President Biden is not using his leverage. The first is emotional, the first instance that President Biden came up in earlier decades of US foreign policy, when Israel truly was a small country, mostly a refugee surrounded by many countries that wanted to invade it and had invaded it. Right. So Biden came up in that period, he speaks often about sitting down with gold in my ear and hearing this narrative. And it's my understanding based on people who spend time with the President that he sincerely believes this right that Israel is under attack, if we were not supporting them, there would be no homeland for Jews, and it would be a human rights and just a moral catastrophe. He sincerely believes that and I think that that link to that comes a long history of disdain for Palestinians, something we saw kind of tried him emotionally in a very spontaneous way, when he said, I don't trust the Palestinians on that death at all right, something that every single expert said was a baseless claim. So I'd say emotionally as the first second is strategic, I think the President is surrounded by very, very tiny circle of advisers. One of them is Brett McGurk, of course, rock solid and National Security Adviser. And he's not hearing from people all across government. I mean, that's what a lot of my reporting has shown. It's not hearing from people in the intelligence community at the State Department at the Pentagon who have opposing views. And so it's it's not accurate to see that, you know, the whole US foreign policy establishment has sat down, me the strategy and said, this is what we think is advisable. I'd rather see a kind of distorted policymaking process that that unfortunately persists, because the White House is so circular and so resistant to hearing from critics, even within the government.

Trita Parsi 52:18

Pause there for a second, Akbar. But this suggests, though, I mean, I assume you're not suggesting that the President is unaware of how unpopular this is, because I mean, he's getting heckled at every event that he's doing with his own supporters. So there must be an active effort on his own behalf not to seek out these views.

Akbar Shahid Ahmed 52:38

I think there's a difference between being able to say, Oh, this 19 year old college student is calling me names. They're irrelevant. And you know, this 25 year diplomatic veteran at the State Department wrote me a detailed memo of why this is a terrible policy. Right. So I think he sees the former, but not the latter, is what I'm trying to say. And I just think the third reason for him is political. I think they made a political calculation that the possible tool of being seen and smeared as anti Israel, something that Donald Trump did do repeatedly to Democrats, we have

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to remember he did that for years and his presidency. He said, all Democrats are Ilhan Omar and Ilhan Omar is, you know, a terrorist, essentially, Democrats, like it's really anxious about that. But I think that focus has blinkered them from the political tool of being seen as organ with Israel. So I think those are the kinds of reasons for for his approach.

Trita Parsi 53:31

Very interesting. We only have a couple of minutes left. So I want to ask a question of all of you. And I'm going to start off with shooting, which is, what do you see as being the most effective path for de escalation? At this point, we're finding ourselves in a situation in which there's incremental steps that are escalating the situation each and one of those steps have significant problematic elements to it, but none of them are in in an open declaration of war. And as a result is may not generate the type of reaction as it otherwise would have. And also, they're oftentimes tactical reactions to what the other side says. So we're dead so we can give an appearance of justification to it. But we're missing the larger picture, which is that the trajectory since October is that we're much much closer towards a larger war in the region. How do you see that risk Shereen? And what do you think the most effective the escalatory path for the Biden administration would be?

Shireen Al-Adeimi 54:29

It's ceasefire, but he won't call for it. It's a lifting up using all of the leverage that he has with Israel to lift the blockade on Gaza to work toward a two state solution at the very very least ceasefire, which is what most constituents here in the United States are calling for. Where all Arab Americans and Muslims in Michigan would be spring state are calling for and there's an abandoned by a bad Biden campaign that is alive and well and you know, his advisors is not even a Well to meet with leaders in the community because of the vitriol that they're receiving from the community here in Michigan. And so there's no path to victory in Michigan for the Biden administration. That seems like looking at it now. And they're not going to forget in November. This is a genocide that's been broadcast on people's phone lives. And these are people in the Michigan community who have relatives back home in Lebanon and Yemen and in Iraq, and, and in Palestine, importantly, who have been killed and displaced. And so he is more interested in his solidarity with Israel. You know, we know from the statement from the 100 days meant that there was no mention of Palestine and their suffering at all, there was a focus entirely on Israel's toil and the hostages. And so he knows what he needs to do. He's choosing not to listen. I mean, he's not even looking out the window there. 400,000 protesters in DC last week, and so he knows what he needs to do, he seems to be willing to prioritize his support for Israel. For the reasons that Akbar mentioned. Over even it seems like his reelection campaign. And so it's it doesn't make any strategic sense, given what Democrats are asking, but I think the easiest way to de de escalate would be calling for a ceasefire.

Trita Parsi 56:11

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Bruce, could you react to that? Do you agree that it is a ceasefire? Do you agree that Biden won't do it? And if so, is there any other path towards the escalation short of a ceasefire?

Bruce Riedel 56:22

I fully agree the solution to this issue is to get at the fire. And as I said earlier, the United States has the leverage to make that happen. Will Biden do it? I don't know. I can't read inside. They've got to realize they're becoming more and more isolated. They've got to also realize there's no viable end game for the Israelis in Gaza. Now, are they going to occupy Gaza indefinitely? You know, I've lived in Israel, no Israeli wants to occupy Gaza, maybe a few far right settlers. The vast majority of Israelis were very pleased by the decision of Ariel Sharon, remember, it was Sharon's decision to evacuate the Gaza Strip. That's the way to go a ceasefire. It has the benefit that a de escalate the war with the Houthis. Again, I agree the Houthis will fire when there is a ceasefire and Gaza could also put pressure on Hezbollah, to come to some kind of agreement not to have another war there. And it saves us from what is almost only now a matter of time, sooner or later, one of these Hootie missiles is going to hit a ship and think. And at that stage, what is the Biden administration going to do? Increase the number of airstrikes that's not going to look like much of a response? It's in all of our interests. And it's a humanitarian imperative, that we bring an end to the war in Gaza.

Trita Parsi 58:09

Thank you, Bruce. Akbar, your thoughts? Your last.

Akbar Shahid Ahmed 58:12

People who followed my work may be surprised to hear this, given my criticism of these countries, but I think he has to depend on his friends, the Arab states, the Saudis, the Emiratis, the Qataris, the Egyptians to some extent, obviously, these are countries that have been regionally aggressive and reckless in their own right. But I think they are unified in this moment and not wanting their region and the broader world to blow up. So I think a really significant and interesting desultory route would be leadership through that. And I'll take it back to your question about normalization. I think the White House is talking about it in an unrealistic way. That's really expecting a little too much. But I think there is a path for a regional conversation that brings in the US, brings in Israel, brings them the Palestinians that's more realistic and sustainable.

Trita Parsi 59:00

Excellent. There's much to unpack in that one in particular, given the lack of us credibility to lead such an effort, but the effort itself I would strongly agree with could be quite useful. Shareen Akbar Bruce, thank you so much for a fantastic conversation. I thoroughly thoroughly enjoyed it and hope that some of your more optimistic assessments will end up being true before I let everyone else go. Let me just make a mention of our next webinar here at the Quincy Institute on January 29, Anatol Lieven will discuss with John Mearsheimer, his new book, How States

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Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy, which John Mearsheimer wrote co wrote with Sebastian Rosado, so if you haven't signed up for our newsletter, please go to quincyinst.org. Sign up for the new newsletter so that you will receive invitations to all of these different webinars as well as our other activities and intellectual products. Thank you all so much and hope to see you soon. Thank you all. Thank you. Thank you so much.