

Middle East Policy from Trump to Biden: Views from Inside the State Department's Near East Bureau

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Brief Analysis

The former assistant secretary of state in charge of the Middle East portfolio from 2019-2021 discusses his time in office and how the region's challenges and opportunities are evolving at the start of the Biden administration.

On March 10, The Washington Institute hosted a virtual conversation between executive director Robert Satloff and senior fellow David Schenker, who recently rejoined the organization after serving in the State Department. The following is an edited transcript of their

conversation.

Robert Satloff: Today I'm really delighted that we are hosting my friend and colleague Dave Schenker. David Schenker served for nineteen months from June 2019 through January 2021 as the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs in the U.S. Department of State. In that position, he was the senior State Department official with specific responsibility for the broad region, from Morocco to Iran and everything in between.

Dave has been a vital member of The Washington Institute for many years. He has served in government previously in the George W. Bush administration as country director for the Levant in the Pentagon, and he brought all that experience—academic, policy practicing experience—to his role at the State Department.

We're very proud of the contribution that you made to our American national security, Dave, and we are delighted to welcome you back as a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. So, to spill the inside scoop or to spill the inside beans on politics and policymaking inside the Trump administration's State Department vis-a-vis the Middle East, I'm very happy to welcome Dave Schenker.

David Schenker: Thanks Rob for your kind introduction. It's great to be back at The Washington Institute, my home base over the past twenty-one years. It was an honor and a pleasure to serve at the State Department. Looking back, these nineteen months passed like a blink of the eye. When I was there, though, it seemed a lot longer.

Before I start, I want to give a shout-out to my former colleagues at State—both the civil servants and foreign service officers I had the honor to serve with. The team at the Near Eastern affairs bureau is committed and highly talented. NEAers work on some of the most difficult issues and serve in some of the more dangerous posts in the world. Under enormous and sustained pressure, they keep their cool and maintain a sense of humor. They see their work as a calling—their vocation and avocation—and a duty, working with both Democratic and Republican administrations to advance U.S. interests abroad. They are great Americans and were outstanding colleagues, and we are lucky to have them.

A few years back, prior to joining State, Rob asked me what issue I thought would take most of my time as assistant secretary. I answered without hesitation, "Iraq." Turned out I was right.

I started at State in the midst of the maximum pressure campaign on Iran. At the time, Iran and its proxies were involved in an escalating series of attacks on U.S. allies in the region. My first day saw a lethal Houthi missile attack on Saudi Arabia. Iran also sabotaged several ships in Fujairah and targeted the Saudi oil processing facility in Abqaiq with missiles.

But the frontline for the United States in the maximum pressure campaign was Iraq, where Iranian-backed Shia militias were periodically targeting the U.S. embassy in Baghdad and anti-Islamic State coalition forces in the country. Then-premier Adil Abdulmahdi was doing precious little to undertake his Vienna convention obligations to protect American diplomats. He likewise wasn't making any effort to move Iraq toward energy independence from Iran, or to hold militias responsible for the routine killing of demonstrators.

After the orchestrated attack on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, the killing of Qasem Soleimani in January 2020, and the subsequent nonbinding vote in the Iraqi Council of Representatives to expel U.S. troops, the situation further deteriorated—as did our relationship with Abdulmahdi. The selection of Mustafa al-Kadhimi was a welcome change, and one that signaled an improvement of the dynamics between Washington and Baghdad.

All told, over the course of my nineteen months at State, I visited Iraq more than any other country—about a dozen times. With the exception of about five months when we were grounded for COVID, I traveled to Iraq most every month. I was on a plane to Erbil the night Iranian missiles fell on U.S. bases in Ain al-Asad and Erbil.

Our diplomacy with Iraq and our signaling to Iran were, I believe, a modest success. The goal was not to move Baghdad into an exclusive relationship with Washington, but rather to keep Iraq between the forty-yard lines—in the middle of the field between the United States and Iran, which by virtue of geography and demography has the home-field advantage.

We ended up hitting a lot of singles. First, who could have imagined that after Abdulmahdi's departure, Iraq would choose between Adnan al-Zurfi and Kadhimi as the next premier? Second, who would have thought that a year after killing Soleimani, U.S. troops would still be in Iraq? We protected our people, deploying Patriots to coalition bases to defend our troops and installing a C-RAM at the embassy in Baghdad to secure our diplomats from indirect fire. During Prime Minister Kadhimi's visit to Washington in August 2020, he signed billions of dollars of contracts with American companies, including to capture gas flares in southern oil fields, a step on the road to Iraqi energy independence. Meanwhile, Kadhimi is arresting Iranian-backed Shia militiamen who fire rockets at Americans. There's a long way to go on Iraq, and we're not out of the woods by any stretch of the imagination, but the situation following these positive developments was relatively good.

I also spent a lot of time contesting the space with Iran on Lebanon. And I think we got the policy right there, too. As Lebanon careened toward financial collapse, we focused not on personalities, but on the principles of transparency, fighting corruption, and reform—all concepts that, if implemented, would undermine Hezbollah. And we managed to keep the French on the reservation, preventing a bailout of the state prior to the implementation of critical economic reforms. In addition, we leveled a series of sanctions against Hezbollah and its Lebanese allies, including, importantly, non-Shia, culminating in the Global Magnitsky designation of Gebran Bassil for corruption. We also convinced the French penholders to make some small but significant changes, under threat of veto, to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

Regrettably, the situation in Lebanon is likely to get worse before it gets better. But Washington can't want Lebanon to succeed more than Lebanese political elites. It was with some small degree of optimism that in fall 2020, I launched the maritime border delineation talks between Israel and Lebanon. I say some degree of optimism because based on my conversations with Lebanese leaders, I hoped Beirut would negotiate in good faith with their Israeli counterparts to reach a compromise solution within the lines filed by the states at the United Nations. Alas, Lebanon's leaders never fail to disappoint.

One other way things can get worse in Lebanon is via another war with Israel, the chances of which seem to be getting better every day, as Hezbollah continues apace with its precision-guided missile upgrades and the import of more advanced antiaircraft systems. Should Iran find itself once again flush with cash—say, through the alleviation of sanctions—more money will again flow to its proxies, and the tempo of Hezbollah's qualitative improvements in its capabilities will all but certainly also increase, making a very costly war even more likely.

NEA is a big region, and I'm not going to be able to touch on all of it today, but I would like to discuss two more issues that consumed much of our time at State. Yemen, like Iraq and Lebanon, was another priority intersectional issue with Iran. Not only was it a humanitarian disaster for the Yemeni people, when I arrived at State, Saudi Arabia's conduct of the war was draining whatever currency it had left with the U.S. Congress. Over time, I believe our engagements with the Saudis—Ambassador Princess Reema and Prince Khalid bin Salman (KbS)—had a positive impact in encouraging Riyadh to move toward a more positive and pragmatic outlook on negotiations with the Houthis. Along the way, the Saudis announced a few unilateral ceasefires, and in my view, KbS invested in diplomacy and engaged in goodwill negotiations with the Houthis. They also donated hundreds of millions to help feed Yemenis. The problem wasn't the Saudis—it was and remains the Houthis, who (1) lie, (2) don't keep agreements, and (3) are committed to winning this war militarily, by taking Marib.

As for the controversy surrounding the designation of the Houthis, let me say this. As of December 30, Secretary Mike Pompeo was, I believe, still considering the designation. We had engaged with the NGO community, including with David Beasley of the World Food Programme, who expressed concerns about a chilling impact on humanitarian work in Yemen as a result of the designation. We felt that we could mitigate the impact through waivers from the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control; in any event, the Justice Department would not be prosecuting humanitarian organizations for inadvertent leakage to the Houthis. Then, on December 30, the Houthis fired missiles at Aden airport in an effort to kill the entirety of the new Yemeni government arriving just then by plane. And that was it—they were designated.

We can debate the impact of the designation, but by all standards—the connection with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the kidnappings, the targeting of Saudi civilians—the Houthis meet the criteria of a Foreign Terrorist Organization. This was not about Secretary Pompeo salting the earth. I tried to meet with the Houthis during my trip to Oman in December. Abdul-Malik al-Houthi gave the Omanis a message for me, but they were not interested in directly engaging with the administration. As for the critics who warned that a designation would drive the Houthis into the arms of Iran—you're a little late. The Houthis are firmly in bed with the IRGC. For those keeping score, the Houthis have responded to their delisting by exponentially increasing the operational tempo of their attacks on Saudi Arabia. And get ready, they may eventually look to target Israel.

On the plus side, the indefatigable and eternally optimistic UN Special Representative Martin Griffiths continues his work, now joined in the effort by the excellent career diplomat—and my former deputy assistant secretary of state for Arabian Peninsula affairs—Tim Lenderking.

The final issue I want to mention today is China, which, although not technically housed in NEA, is increasingly present in the NEA region. When I talked with our friends in the Middle East—including Israel—I wasn't asking them to make a choice between the United States and China, but discussing some of the risks entailed with doing business with the PRC—debt traps like the one Jordan got into in Attarat, compromised personal data with Chinese COVID testing labs and communications over Huawei equipment, and of course, the challenges of maintaining a strategic relationship with Washington while flirting with or enhancing cooperation with Beijing. This is particularly important in light of the Abraham Accords.

I believe that we laid a good marker for our expectations going forward, but this too is a problem that will require continuous attention. For both Democratic and Republican administrations, this is going to remain a critical issue.

Just a few final thoughts before I conclude about the job of assistant secretary of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. NEA has more failed and failing states per capita than any of the State Department's six regional bureaus. So it's easy to get caught up in the crisis of the day and lose sight of longer-term priorities. When I started, I told Undersecretary David Hale that I wanted to spend time on Algeria—an important counterterrorism partner and a bilateral relationship with room to grow. My aspirations were overtaken by events; I wasn't able to get to Algeria until January 2021. Same goes for my intent to try and repair Jordan's stressed relationship with Israel. I took some steps on this front, and things look a little better these days, but I wasn't able to devote nearly as much effort as I had hoped. And the list goes on.

And then there are the perennial "seam issues." The United Arab Emirates is in Sudan and Djibouti, which is in the Africa bureau; likewise, Egypt is focused on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), Sudanese mercenaries are in Libya, and so are Turkey and Russia, both of which are in Europe. What happens in the Middle East doesn't stay in the Middle East. And many of the region's most complex problems have been exacerbated by external actors from outside the region, which requires a lot of coordination with other bureaus.

Last but not least, it perhaps goes without saying that diplomacy can be a dangerous business. The safety and well-being of U.S. personnel in the

Middle East is an abiding priority for the assistant secretary. Regional security officers and diplomatic security are very good at a job that has zero margin of error. Instinctively, we want to err on the side of caution, but the work of diplomacy in several of the states in which NEA operates is inherently dangerous. No doubt, we can't be in every state, but the absence of ongoing U.S. engagement has consequences. We have to be able to tolerate a certain degree of risk. Our diplomats understand that, and the assistant secretary has to advocate for it. If we hope to get Libya right, our intrepid Ambassador Dick Norland is going to have to periodically be on the ground with an eye toward a more enduring U.S. presence. And we're going to have to be in Baghdad, where our amazing Ambassador Matt Tueller is engaging every day with the government of Iraq to press our interests.

Satloff: Excellent, very useful, and really eye-opening in many respects, I think. So, David, I have a long list of questions, lots of topics—substantive as well as sort of institutional—about the job. When you look back on your experience, is there some issue or some theme that you went in with a certain preconceived notion about, but then when you finally saw the details, when you finally understood all the complexity and the realities, you said “oh my gosh, this is a lot more complicated than I originally thought, and this is going to be a lot tougher to solve”?

Schenker: Yes. Across the board I think that actually all administrations, including the current administration, want to make a clean break with the prior administration, and it is currently in this process in NEA and elsewhere. They're taking a look at these issues and saying “hey, we don't think they did it right,” and then they're digging down and seeing these problems are incredibly complex. These aren't choices—as policymakers they know—between good and bad, but between bad and worse.

One issue that I thought I might be able to solve, and one I had hoped to solve, was the FSO *Safer* off the coast of Yemen. This enormous oil tanker, triple the size of the *Exxon Valdez*, is forty years old and rotting just some miles away from the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Should something happen to this ship and the oil should leak, it will not only close Bab al-Mandab and prevent shipping through the Suez Canal, it would cause an environmental disaster that could stretch along the coast of Yemen and all the way to Oman.

And so I figured, hey, let me solve this. But of course, it's not only the issue of the Saudis and the Houthis—if you can buy the Houthis temporarily or rent them to try and solve the situation. For the Houthis, this is their nuclear weapon, their ace in the hole. I had hoped to be able to get to a solution on that, but I didn't get anywhere close. Smarter people than me tried to come up with solutions and work them, and they got nowhere fast. Fortunately, we finally got some people from the UN on the tanker to take a look and try to seal up some of the holes and prevent a catastrophe. But this is a disaster waiting to happen, and I couldn't do anything about it.

Satloff: I want to ask you about a couple of themes and issues that didn't come up in your remarks but are certainly high on the agenda for anyone who focuses on the Middle East. Let me begin with Syria, a huge issue that engages so many different countries. Now this is an issue that also touches on an administrative issue I wanted to ask you: in the administration you served in, as well as previous administrations, there's always been back and forth on the use of special envoys for unique and discrete issues. This is one of those issues. So, both on the substance of Syria as a policy issue and on the role of special envoys and their utility to address discrete issues—as opposed to the assistant secretary addressing an issue in your area of responsibility—what do you come away with, what impressions does this leave you with?

Schenker: There are, depending on the administration, a proliferation of special envoys. I think there were a couple dozen or more before Secretary Pompeo came in, and Secretary Rex Tillerson before him. And these are all people who directly answer to the secretary, in terms of the chain of command. The secretary also has to supervise and engage directly with undersecretaries and assistant secretaries. If you have too many people to supervise, it is just unworkable.

As for me, I was really pleased to have James Jeffrey working as special envoy for Syria. Not only is Jim eminently qualified, but this is a full-time job. You need somebody working this issue, because it's not only Syrians, but also all the international entanglements and engagements. I could not have done that job and my job, and at the same time have paid enough attention to all the other matters in my area of responsibility. There's a genocide in Syria: more than half a million Sunni Muslims have been wiped out by the Assad regime. You need somebody senior working full-time on this issue. The same can be said of Iran with Brian Hook—the sanctions regime, the international engagements. I had eighteen countries. These are crisis issues that require a special envoy.

There is an argument that we already have special envoys in places like Libya: Ambassador Norland is amazing, and he is intrepid. He goes to Russia, he goes to Turkey, to South Africa, and to the UAE. He is essentially not only our ambassador to Libya, but our special envoy. In some cases this is not required, but certainly in states where we don't have ambassadors it is very helpful. The important thing is to have a constant line of communication with the assistant secretary because the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs is supporting the work that he or she does, and we have to be in lockstep.

The other issue that I'll mention is that I must have gotten a dozen or more requests from Lebanese Americans—and letters from Congress—encouraging the administration to appoint a special envoy to Lebanon. The State Department team was especially deep on Lebanon. It's an issue I know very well and one I pay a great bit of attention to. Undersecretary Hale has served three times there, including as ambassador, and the secretary tracked it very closely. In Dorothy Shea, we have an amazing ambassador. So, it's not required. This is not a position that is best suited necessarily for somebody from the outside of government.

Satloff: Let's look at the substance side of this. When you look back on the Trump administration's efforts in Syria, how do you grade this? Are we closer to whatever a solution would be, and what does the solution to this crisis look like?

Schenker: I think that we got the policy right. Of course, it's a very difficult situation with both the military, economic, and political backing of the Russians for the Assad regime that has really prevented anything being done within the UN context. But the idea was to put pressure on the regime to engage in a political transition process. Maybe there wasn't enough time, but we denied Assad a victory. He still doesn't control a certain amount of the country where the United States has a presence, and the Syrian Democratic Forces continue, along with the Kurds, to fight the Islamic State in that area of the country. And we are denying Bashar al-Assad revenues, preventing the reintegration of this pariah into the Arab fold and the international community, and preventing the rebuilding of Assad's Syria. I think this puts a certain amount of pressure. Maybe it was the amount of time given. Maybe we'll never succeed. But I think that there are some leaders who are beyond the pale, particularly those who perpetrate genocides.

Satloff: So, connected to this is one of the great powers. You referred in your opening remarks to the time you spent dealing with China in the Middle East. Can you say a few words about Russia in the Middle East, and how you see the challenge that Russia poses to U.S. interests in the region?

Schenker: On the deployment of Russia to Syria, I think at the time, the previous administration had thought or hoped that this would be Russia's quagmire. It turned out that the deployment of forty fixed-wing aircraft, which Russia was surprisingly able to sustain and maintain for years, turned out to change the course of the war and solidify Assad's rule over Syria. And this has emboldened Russia in terms of its role in the region.

They are a spoiler most problematically in Libya, where Russian regulars and the Wagner forces—their mercenaries—are deployed with a very real prospect of someday setting up permanent bases on NATO's southern front. This is very problematic for U.S. interests in the region and for our NATO partners in Europe.

They also have played a particularly unhelpful role as a spoiler outside of the NEA but still in the Middle East: there is a lot of concern about Russia's engagement with Turkey, helping to drive wedges between Ankara and the United States. And this is a very important NATO partner and frenemy. The sale of the S-400s and other dealings with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan just put space between us and an important partner.

So, I think Russia is feeling its oats now. But it is at the same time costing them money to maintain this deployment. Now that oil prices are back up to \$70 a barrel maybe Russia will do better, but I don't know what the estimates are—something like a billion dollars a year—to keep this presence in Syria, and it's a drain on an already challenged economy. So yes, Russia is another big challenge for the United States in the region. And I think our presence there helps deny both the Assad regime and Russia, as well as Iran, this battlespace in Syria.

Satloff: We're going to hop around a bit because I have so many questions that people are sending in on all sorts of different topics. One other among several issues that didn't make it in your opening remarks was the theme of democracy, human rights, internal political change, both in our adversaries and in our allies. President Trump, you know, famously embraced some of our more authoritarian allies, be it the president of Egypt or the leadership in Saudi Arabia. Can you talk a bit about your own efforts in terms of human rights and internal political change during your tenure?

Schenker: Notwithstanding President Trump's close affinity for President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt—he called him his “favorite dictator”—there was space for me to focus on human rights issues in Egypt and elsewhere: a lot of my engagement related to dual nationals or American citizens abroad, but also on broader issues. Very early on, I was asked by Al Jazeera during the 2019 UN General Assembly what the U.S. position was on protests in Egypt against Sisi. I said, without thinking, that “it is the position of the United States that the Egyptian people have a right to peaceful protests, and it was the government's obligation to protect peaceful protestors.” I was waiting to see if there would be any pushback from Secretary Pompeo. There was not.

In fact, moving forward, the secretary made several statements from the podium at Harry S. Truman about human rights issues in Egypt, at my urging. The most recent one was his comments about Mohamed Soltan, an American citizen whose family members were arrested in Egypt in an effort to pressure him to drop a lawsuit against Hazem al-Beblawi, the former Egyptian prime minister who serves at the World Bank. Secretary Pompeo said from the podium, “Thank you, Egypt, for releasing some American citizens, but stop harassing the families of American citizens in Egypt.” I'm sure this came as a bit of a shock to the government of Egypt, but he said many things publicly, and I said many things publicly.

And privately I engaged with several of our allies, including with Saudi Arabia. I talked to them about the treatment of Loujain al-Hathloul, American citizens like Walid Fitaihi, and other issues in the kingdom. I saw that even though these matters might not pose a risk to relations with the administration, it would behoove the kingdom to move in a certain direction because the Trump administration would not always be here, and Congress matters, and administrations matter here in Washington. It's important to make a positive change. And so I engaged—not only with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, but a number of countries in the region—on these issues, and I had the space and the support of my leadership to do so.

Satloff: On this issue, what in your view is in the realm of the possible? There's a whole range of issues that if you had a few minutes with President Biden or Secretary Antony Blinken, and they asked your advice, I'm sure they would benefit greatly. On this issue—which the new

administration would like to make a more of a central feature of our foreign policy—what is in the realm of the possible?

Schenker: Rob, in the old days I think people used to call me a “neocon.” I believed in U.S. intervention to change dynamics and to promote our values in foreign countries. I still think it’s the right thing to do, to intervene, to speak out on these issues, and to put our money where our mouth is.

But in the aftermath of Iraq, I am somewhat chastened as to our ability to impact domestic politics in many Middle Eastern countries. I still think we have to advocate for it, we can condition funding, but this won’t necessarily compel change. But I think we have to look for areas where our values intersect with our interests. At the time, I advocated—before the Islamists took hold—for military intervention in Syria. But these things are tricky. I think we have to advocate for what our beliefs are, but I think we also have to be realistic, particularly if we are not in a position to invest either militarily or economically at certain levels in this country, to try and see these changes through.

Satloff: And can I ask you directly about the question of Saudi Arabia? To what extent did the Khashoggi affair color your tenure in your relationship with Saudi Arabia, and how do you assess how the new team is approaching this important relationship?

Schenker: Listen, I knew Jamal. I was appalled at what happened to him. The Trump administration moved forward and designated seventeen people. I think that was the appropriate response as the information that the Biden administration released echoed what CIA director Gina Haspel said at the time in that there was no smoking gun linking this to Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS). I believe that is a critically important relationship to the United States.

We can complain or take issue with a number of things that the kingdom has done, both before and during my tenure at the State Department, whether this was the kidnapping of then-Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri, the prosecution of the war in Yemen, the productivity of the Gulf rift, or the breaking off of relations with Canada at a certain point because Ottawa tweeted about human rights. At the end of the day, Saudi Arabia is an important partner of the United States, and we want stability there. We also want to promote some of the better inclinations and developments in Saudi Arabia that have happened in recent years. Whether that is, by and large, on the liberalization on the women’s front, or what Mohammad Al-Issa is doing in the Muslim World League in terms of tolerance, recognition of the Holocaust, and the promotion of a different type of Islam abroad. All these are important issues to the United States.

And I think the Biden administration is getting it mostly right so far. They revealed the CIA assessment, made it public, spoke about their displeasure, designated additional people, and they’ll hold the Saudis’ feet to the fire for accountability. But once again, it’s important to maintain this relationship, and I think they have got this balancing act right. So far.

Satloff: Okay, fair enough. Thank you, David. Let’s shift gears to a different topic and a different set of questions. I don’t think, except in passing, the word Israel has come up very much. Now this is a topic that certainly President Trump had a warm embrace with the Israeli political leadership—Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. And it’s also in terms of the peace process, a topic that was housed in an even more unusual fashion. Not in a special envoy, not in someone who had a formally designated role, but a sort of special advisor in the White House—the president’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner. So can you talk a bit about the U.S.-Israel relationship during your tenure, and how this peace process structure operated, and any lessons that you derive from that experience?

Schenker: Just off the top I’ll say: I saw the relationship with Israel firsthand when I was at the Pentagon from 2002 to 2006, and it’s at a different level now. It is deeper, stronger, and more important to U.S. national security than ever before. I know at the Institute there was a paper written some time ago by Mike Eisenstadt and David Pollock called “Asset Test,” and Israel is indeed a tremendous asset. [Note: As part of its [Transition 2021 memo series \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/transition-2021\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/transition-2021), The Washington Institute recently published an [updated version of “Asset Test” \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/asset-test-2021-how-us-can-keep-benefiting-its-alliance-israel\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/asset-test-2021-how-us-can-keep-benefiting-its-alliance-israel) covering U.S.-Israeli cooperation on not just security and intelligence matters, but also health, technology, agriculture, climate resilience, and numerous other issues.] Aside from the work that we do together and the military coordination, the intelligence sharing is just amazing and so valuable to the United States. So they’re a great partner. I think when we look around the region, their stock rises in terms of how valuable they are to the United States.

At the beginning you had three key players in terms of Israel, peacemaking in the region, and dealing with the Palestinians. They were Jason Greenblatt, Jared Kushner, and David Friedman, who was a very influential player. Not sure they always agreed on every issue, but they had a worldview and pushed very hard to move issues forward. Certainly, within the State Department, I will say that I did not find there to exist the archetypical “Arabist” out there, who thinks that relations with Israel are a drag on U.S. ties with the Arab world, and I don’t believe that if it ever existed it exists anymore.

There was some hesitancy to embrace some of the initiatives that were promoted out of the White House, but still, there was a way to get things done. The finessing of the Jerusalem passport issue, which was done a couple months before the end of the administration, was something that may have been unthinkable before, as that was a problem for consular affairs.

The approach was disruptive, no doubt. They looked for a certain degree of “maximum pressure” on the Palestinians, and annexation didn’t happen. In fact, the peace plan, while it didn’t move very far along, created openings. We saw it enable the UAE to do something that it wanted to do anyway, then Bahrain, and then flexibility on Sudan, and then another type of flexibility, by doubling the size of Morocco in a single swipe of

the pen. They were able to get a lot of things done that, while breaking some china, I think overall were pretty productive. And the relationship with Israel is as strong as ever. Notwithstanding, maybe some personality differences or some controversial history between President Biden and Prime Minister Netanyahu, I'm confident that the relationship will continue to grow and serve both of our national interests.

Satloff: Thank you for that, it was very interesting. Can you give us your take on where the Palestinian issue fits these days in overall Arab engagement with the United States?

Schenker: I think even before the administration came in it was clear that this was deprioritized. You saw it in the Arab Spring; the Arab Spring was about domestic politics, governance, corruption, and economic opportunity in these countries. It was not about a pan-Arab ideology of the Palestinian cause, but all about parochial domestic interests in these countries. And I think that carried through in what we saw with the normalization deals with the Emirates, Bahrain, with Sudan, and with Morocco. These states recognize that Palestinian leadership is not there. And they are not willing any longer to hold their parochial individual national interests hostage to the Palestinian cause, particularly when they have little optimism that this Palestinian government is going to be able to move forward in a productive way with Israel in normalization or on the peace track. So I think that's where we stand today.

Saudi Arabia may be an outlier. I think in terms of normalization there may be a generational issue with King Salman. But we see reports—when I was in NEOM with Secretary Pompeo a few months ago—that Prime Minister Netanyahu had just been there shortly before. There is a report, I think today, that the prime minister is negotiating a meeting with MbS. So, I think the attitudes are changing. But there are some states that aren't going to take that step. Kuwait: not going to happen. Tunisia: not going to happen. But other states, I think, are taking a hard look at their interests, where they align vis-a-vis national security and economic development, and they see Israel as a productive partner.

Satloff: But let me ask you about this fascinating sort of policy decision the Trump administration did, which was to barter, if you will, assets on other issues in order to promote Arab-Israel normalization. So, for example, the agreement with Sudan on its listing as a terrorist-supporting state, or the recognition by the Trump administration of the Moroccan claim to Western Sahara. In your view, are these reasonable things for the Trump administration to have put on the table? Do they advance overall American security interests in the Middle East on balance?

Schenker: On balance I think that they do. So we took, at one point, Muammar Qadhafi off the terrorism list when he met his obligation to compensate the victims of the Lockerbie disaster. Sudan had paid for the embassy bombing at Dar es Salaam. I think they've still got some exposure for the World Trade Center bombing. But the one that I was most intimately involved in was with Morocco. I went in January to Dakhla as the first senior American official to go to Western Sahara. I would go again in a heartbeat; they were very happy to see me.

The Moroccans wanted to do this deal. They saw an opportunity to get something that they wanted, which was a change in U.S. policy on Western Sahara. You have to question whether our interests lie with the Polisario Front or with our longtime ally, Morocco. It's a very close Middle East ally and an important friend. I don't think the administration or the White House lost much sleep about this.

On my way to Morocco, I did stop off in Algeria. I said earlier that I had been trying to get there for some time because they are important counterterrorism partners. There's a lot we can do with them, and I wanted to go talk with Foreign Minister Sabri Boukadoum. This was after the Western Sahara announcement. Obviously, as you can imagine, it was not a fun meeting with the Algerian foreign minister. Nevertheless, the engagement is important.

I don't think, based on the statements from the Algerians after the announcement, that this fouls the relationship. We have to take advantage of many opportunities with them. But the fact of the matter is, you have changed the dynamic across North Africa, opening up other opportunities for Israel and Morocco, and for U.S. cooperation with Morocco, by virtue of this deal. And while there may be international law issues that we have to hammer out at the UN and elsewhere, State Department lawyers are very good at finding the right answers.

Satloff: All right. Very good. Thank you. So, we have about ten minutes left, and I have about fifteen questions that people have sent in. We're not going to be able to get into them all, but there are some that I did want to focus on in our few minutes left to this fascinating hour with you, Dave.

We've seen what President Obama did vis-a-vis Iran. We saw what President Trump did vis-a-vis Iran. Neither achieved its ultimate objective. Now we're having a new effort, which is not quite what President Obama did, and not quite what President Trump did. What would you urge President Biden to do? How do you see the entire Iran policy developing? Do you see a good outcome possible for American diplomacy on this important topic?

Schenker: Well, it's a good question. First, there are critics out there who say based on the personnel that the administration has employed—like when you turn to Rob Malley and Wendy Sherman—they look at the list and say “they're getting the band back together” and that this is Obama III. They don't have, as far as I can tell, the full team on the field yet. They haven't taken steps one way or the other. I saw the hearings for Wendy Sherman, and I think she understands that the times have changed and that they are going to have to take a different approach, and I think a different approach is warranted.

First, let's recognize that there's a certain amount of leverage here. The maximum pressure campaign did not succeed in bringing us and Iran to the table. But it succeeded in putting an enormous amount of pressure and bringing the United States quite a bit of leverage that should encourage Iran to come to the table, because they don't want another four years of this. Time is not on their side. I would counsel patience from

the administration, and I think we are seeing that.

Second, the deal cannot be the same. I know that Iran is saying that we should go back to the same deal. I know what President Biden said as well, which is that we have to consider and talk about Iran's "regional meddling." This is all the Iranian-backed militias, whether it's in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, or Lebanon, and Iran cannot any longer have a free pass or *carte blanche* for funding, equipping, and training all these terrorist militias that destabilize the Middle East. They have to be held to account for that.

And my belief is that this cannot be disaggregated, along with the ballistic missiles, from the nuclear agreement. We can agree that the most pressing issue is a nuclear agreement. But we cannot let go of or give up on these other issues. They all have to be in the calculation. And I'm hoping—I'm not confident, but I'm hoping—that when this administration is at the table with the Iranians, these issues can be incorporated. And that Iran will not have a nuclear agreement whereby no sanctions of any kind can ever be leveled against the Islamic Republic ever again. There has to be American recourse. When Iranian proxies attack Americans in Iraq, or when eventually a Houthi missile fired into Saudi Arabia kills one of the 100,000 Americans there, it isn't just the proxies that have to be held responsible. Their masters have to be held responsible too. There has to be a degree of accountability for Tehran. They can't wash their hands of this, and I hope the administration starts taking that under consideration as well. I'm not calling for a war, but I'm calling for real deterrence.

Satloff: For real deterrence against Iran?

Schenker: Yes.

Satloff: I have quite a few questions from a country that is connected to the Iranian challenge. And these are the Lebanese that you know so well. In your earlier comments you talked about having helped avoid bad ideas, if I can summarize it that way—that is, helping keep the French from making some initiatives that were not so helpful. But what do you say to the Lebanese? Will they be forever under the thumb of Hezbollah? Or is there something that you suggest the Americans do differently vis-a-vis that arena?

Schenker: Well, it's not just under the thumb of Hezbollah, it's under the thumb of the political elite or *zuama*. This perennial leadership of the country has demonstrated—through the port disaster and the financial crisis, and by not moving ahead with a realistic proposal on the maritime dispute—a blatant disregard for the well-being of the Lebanese people. So it's not only Hezbollah, although they're at the crux of the issue here. I think part of what we did, and I would encourage the current administration to continue with, is to not just sanction Hezbollah. It should also sanction its allies and corrupt people in order to send a very clear message: that you can no longer have a bank account in Europe if you're stealing Lebanon's money and trucking with Hezbollah and helping to maintain its position.

The Lebanese people are coming out in greater numbers, again, to protest. Around 50 percent of the people are below the poverty line, and 25 percent are destitute. The World Bank just passed a \$247 million social safety net program that will feed 180,000 Lebanese families for a year, and that is very good. But we have to start holding Lebanese political elites accountable. The Lebanese people are trying to hold their leadership accountable, but they will not be able to succeed unless they have outside help.

It would be great if our European partners started operating this way as well, instead of trying to cajole Hezbollah to be more productive in government formation. This is missing the issue here. They've got to change their ways and reform, it's not about government formation alone.

Satloff: All right, very good. Dave, we're coming to the close of our hour. The Biden administration famously wants to downsize the role of the Middle East in overall American foreign policy, and a debate is emerging on the appropriate role. But of course, those of us who follow the region so closely know that regardless of whatever the intent of the administration is, "events," as a former British prime minister once said, "will have a way of drawing America back in." So before we close, can you look around the Middle East and point out a couple of places or issues that you think may not be on the agenda, or high enough on the agenda, but that are likely over the course of this administration to impose themselves in one way or another, and that the administration would be wise to prepare itself for engaging on in the right fashion?

Schenker: I can't even predict the past, so it's going to be hard for me to predict the future. But I think that you're going to see in the next six months a spike in demonstrations in the region. I don't know if this could be a redux of the Arab Spring, but I would anticipate that you're going to see large numbers of people come out complaining about the economy. This time around it's going to be a revolution of the hungry. Economic conditions that persisted in 2011 persist today. Nothing has changed. COVID-19 has made matters worse, and we're going to see people come out, and the Biden administration is going to have to handle that one way or the other. For the Obama administration, it was "damned if they do, damned if they don't" on demonstrations. They're very hard to manage. I think that's one issue that's going to present itself.

I also wouldn't be surprised six months down the road if the Houthis try to attack Israel. Lord knows they're feeling their oats right now. Backed by Iran, they have growing capabilities.

I also think we could be headed for difficulties with the U.S.-Egypt relationship. It was already troubled in many ways, but in the readout of Secretary Blinken's phone call with Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, Blinken said that human rights will be "at the center" of our bilateral relationship with Egypt. That's a recipe for conflict. Or a crisis could be sparked by Egypt purchasing advanced Su-35 Russian fighter jets and triggering the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). There are a whole bunch of crises that I see before us. And so, you're right—we can try to get out of the Middle East, but we will be drawn back in one way or another.

Satloff: Dave Schenker, just completing service as assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, back now as my colleague and senior

fellow at The Washington Institute. Thank you so much for this revealing discussion on your experience. And I can only hope that people inside the new administration are listening, because I think there's an awful lot of wisdom in what you have to say. So to our friends online through Zoom and other platforms, thank you for joining us for this special Washington Institute event, and I look forward to seeing you again.

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