

Decision Points Podcast: Season 6

New Dangers and New Hopes in the Middle East

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



Articles & Testimony

Part of a series: [Decision Points Podcast \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/decision-points-podcast\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/decision-points-podcast)

or see Part 1: [Decision Points Podcast: Season 1 The U.S.-Israel Relationship\(/policy-analysis/decision-points-podcast-season-1-us-israel-relationship\)](/policy-analysis/decision-points-podcast-season-1-us-israel-relationship)

This season of Decision Points tackles the toughest U.S. foreign-policy debates, from the brink of war in Iran to the painful aftermath in Gaza and the new government in Syria.

Seaon Six of the *Decision Points* podcast tackles the toughest U.S. foreign-policy debates, from the brink of war in Iran to the painful aftermath in Gaza and the new government in Syria. In each episode, David Makovsky sits down with top American, Israeli, and Arab policy experts and former officials to clarify the options and understand the stakes. This season asks: Is the Middle East headed for more war and instability? Or could America help the

region move toward greater security and progress?

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Will Trump Go to War with Iran?

The United States and Iran stand on the brink of war. The Pentagon has deployed a huge amount of air power in the Middle East, and President Trump has set a 10-15 day deadline to decide whether to strike.

In the first episode of Season Six, *Decision Points* host David Makovsky is joined by former U.S. national security advisor Jake Sullivan and former Israeli national security advisor Eyal Hulata in a conversation recorded on February 20, 2026. They assess whether the United States and Iran are plunging toward conflict or whether a negotiated outcome is still possible—and explore the risks of both war and diplomacy. Drawing on their experience at the highest levels of government, Sullivan and Hulata explore the lessons that should guide policymakers through this crisis.

What Are America's Objectives in the Iran War?

In this special episode of *Decision Points*, Washington Institute experts Dennis Ross, Dana Stroul, Robert Satloff, and Holly Dagues sit down with the Institute's managing director, Michael Singh, to assess the joint U.S.-Israeli air campaign against Iran and Tehran's intensifying retaliation. They explore President Trump's goals in the conflict, assess the responses from Gulf states targeted by Iran, and discuss the key factors they're watching as the war continues.

Dennis Ross is the former lead U.S. negotiator on Middle East peace and a former top Middle East advisor for both Democratic and Republican administrations.

Dana Stroul is the Washington Institute's research director and served as the Pentagon's top Middle East expert in the Biden administration.

Robert Satloff is the Washington Institute's executive director.

Holly Dagues is a senior fellow at the Washington Institute specializing in Iranian society and the curator of "[The Iranist](https://www.theiranist.com/)," (<https://www.theiranist.com/>) a newsletter on Iran.

This episode is an edited version of the original March 2nd event.

The Iran War's Second Front—Israel vs. Hezbollah

As the Iran war shakes the Middle East, Hezbollah has fired missiles into northern Israel, and Israel has struck Hezbollah-related targets across Lebanon, including in the capital Beirut, leaving hundreds dead and hundreds of thousands of Lebanese civilians displaced. In this episode of *Decision Points*, Washington Institute Senior Fellows Hanin Ghaddar and Assaf Orion join host David Makovsky to explore how Lebanon became the second front in the U.S.-Israeli conflict with Iran. They break down Israeli military objectives in this new round of fighting against Hezbollah and discuss ways to disarm the radical Iran-backed militia.

Hanin Ghaddar is the former managing editor of Lebanon's NOW news website, a former reporter for several Lebanese newspapers, and an expert on Shia politics in the Levant.

Assaf Orion is a former Israeli brigadier general and a fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies, a Tel Aviv-based think tank.

Is the Iran War Bringing Israel and the UAE Closer Together?

As part of Iran's retaliation for the U.S.-Israeli war, Tehran has targeted the United Arab Emirates with more than 2,000 ballistic missiles and drones. Senior Emirati officials warn that their confrontation with Iran won't be fleeting and will strengthen their relationship with Israel, including deeper security coordination. But if Iran's regime emerges from the war intact and vengeful, the Gulf states may have to take a warier stance.

Amir Hayek was Israel's first ambassador to the United Arab Emirates.

Nadim Koteich is a columnist at *Asharq al-Awsat* and the former general manager of Sky News Arabia.

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Who's Calling the Shots in Iran?

After nearly six weeks of war, the U.S. and Iran agreed on April 8 to a fragile two-week ceasefire. But Vice President JD Vance left Pakistan Sunday after 21 hours of high-level talks with the Iranians without making progress toward a

deal to end the war. President Trump then threatened to blockade the Strait of Hormuz, the key oil-shipping route that Iran has throttled. However uncertain the road ahead may be, one thing is increasingly clear: in a postwar Iran, the hard-line Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps looks set to further dominate the regime's complex policymaking structure. Host David Makovsky sits down with two leading Iran experts, Suzanne Maloney and Raz Zimmt, to explore how decisions may be made in Tehran during the ceasefire and beyond.

Dr. Suzanne Maloney is vice president and director of the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution in Washington and a former member of the State Department's Policy Planning staff.

Dr. Raz Zimmt is the director of the Iran and the Shiite axis research program at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, Israel.

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Can Israel and Lebanon Move from War to Diplomacy?

Lebanon and Israel held diplomatic talks for the first time in decades after Israel's months-long campaign against Hezbollah. But the ceasefire is shaky: Israel displaced close to a million Lebanese civilians amid fighting with Hezbollah and northern Israelis, with memories of weeks in bomb shelters, fear returning to normal life with Hezbollah still armed.

Host David Makovsky sits down in back-to-back conversations with Lebanese lawmaker Fouad Makhzoumi, Israeli analyst Sarit Zehavi, and Middle East expert Robert Satloff to unpack what's at stake--and what's possible-- in Lebanon.

Fouad Makhzoumi is a leading Lebanese member of parliament representing many Sunnis in Beirut.

Dr. Robert Satloff is the Segal Executive Director of The Washington Institute, an independent, nonpartisan Middle East policy think tank.

Sarit Zehavi is the founder and president of Alma, an Israeli institute specializing in security challenges along the Lebanese border. She served for 15 years in the Israeli military's Intelligence Corps and later with its Northern Command.

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Will Israel Vote Out Netanyahu?

One of Israel's most important election cycles is underway. Opposition parties see a rare chance to oust Benjamin Netanyahu, the country's longest-serving prime minister, who now heads the most right-wing coalition in Israeli history. Amid the echoes of the wars in Iran, Gaza, and Lebanon, Israeli voters' choices may shape their country—

and the Middle East—for decades to come.

This will be Israel's first election since Hamas's October 7, 2023, assault, Israel's subsequent wars against Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the 2025 and 2026 Iran wars. Netanyahu's supporters say he deserves reelection for leading Israeli successes on several military fronts since October 7th, including fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with the U.S. against Iran. Yet Israelis will vote as their country has become increasingly isolated, including a striking plunge in Israel's standing in U.S. public-opinion polls. Israelis are also arguing about an independent investigation into the failures of October 7th, rising settler violence in the West Bank, drafting ultra-Orthodox Israelis to serve in the country's military, and Netanyahu's ongoing push to slash the power of the Israeli judiciary. Could the 2026 elections be Netanyahu's last stand?

Host David Makovsky sits down with two veteran Israeli journalists, Gili Cohen and David Horovitz, to understand how Israel's looming elections will shape the country's politics and policies.

Gili Cohen covers the Israeli Prime Minister's Office for Kann News, an arm of the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation.

David Horovitz is the founding editor of *The Times of Israel*.

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What the U.S. and Israeli Militaries Have Learned So Far From the Iran War

Conflicting statements from President Trump leave open the question about whether the Iran war is any closer to being over or whether the significant impasse over the nuclear program remains an impediment.

Regardless of the outcome of the conflict, the Iran war has highlighted extraordinary and unprecedented coordination between the U.S. and Israeli militaries even as Iran has throttled the Strait of Hormuz.

What do both US and Israeli militaries learn from this war?

The allies' special relationship is coming under increasing scrutiny from segments of both major American political parties, and leaders from both the U.S. and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu are talking openly about tapering down American military aid to the Jewish state. Are we witnessing the peak of this longstanding military partnership?

To discuss military lessons learned from the war until now, host David Makovsky sits down with Amir Eshel, former head of the IDF air force and Eliot A. Cohen, former Counselor at the Department of State.

Amir Eshel, a major general, is the former commander of the Israeli Air Force, former head of IDF Planning and Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Defense.

Eliot A. Cohen is a military historian, the author of 11 books, and a columnist at *The Atlantic*. He served as Counselor of the State Department during the George W. Bush administration and is a former dean of the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University.

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The AI Race in the Middle East

Artificial intelligence is becoming increasingly central to U.S. strategy in the Middle East. AI has played a pivotal role in the current Iran war, even as the U.S. is deepening its AI investments in the region. Israel and the Gulf are also jockeying to become key partners in the regional AI landscape. Host David Makovsky sits down with two top analysts, former Israeli National Security Council aide Avner Golov and former Pentagon official Grant Rumley, to understand the opportunities and pitfalls that AI poses for American policymaking in the Middle East.

Avner Golov is vice president of research and alliances at MIND Israel, a Tel Aviv-based strategic-advisory firm, and a former senior director for foreign policy on Israel's National Security Council.

Grant Rumley is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, where he directs the [Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/about/research-programs/guilford-glazer-program-great-power-competition-and-middle-east) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/about/research-programs/guilford-glazer-program-great-power-competition-and-middle-east>). From 2018-21, he served on the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy's Middle East team in roles including deputy chief of staff, Israel director, Jordan director, and Syria director.

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The Aftershocks of the Iran War

The conflict may be over, but the shockwaves of the Iran war are still spreading. The United Arab Emirates and other Gulf states endured Iranian drone and missile strikes; Iran withstood weeks of bombardment from the U.S. and Israel, which have perhaps the world's two strongest air forces; and leaders across the region have been left wondering if they can rely on the U.S. for security. Gulf countries face a choice between uniting against Iran or accommodating the increasingly IRGC-dominated regime in postwar Tehran. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu fears that President Trump will blame Israel for the war's shortcomings and constrain Israel's ability to act against Hezbollah in Lebanon. Meanwhile, the Lebanese government will struggle to resist Iran and Hezbollah's efforts to sideline Beirut and scuttle its peace talks with Israel. Host David Makovsky sits down with former top U.S. Middle East diplomat Barbara Leaf and former National Security Council official Kirsten Fontenrose to understand the regional fallout of the war.

Kirsten Fontenrose served in 2018 as senior director for the Gulf at the National Security Council and is now a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council.

Ambassador **Barbara Leaf** served from 2022-25 as assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, from 2014-18 as U.S. ambassador to the United Arab Emirates, and from 2013-14 as deputy assistant secretary of state for the Arabian Peninsula. She is now senior international policy advisor at the law firm Arnold & Porter.



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Ghaith al-Omari

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Jun 22, 2026



Richard Nephew,
Dennis Ross,
Holly Dagues

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June 29, 2026, starting at 12:00 noon EDT (1600 GMT)



Levent Gumrukcu,
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