# Decision Points Podcast: Season 6

## New Dangers and New Hopes in the Middle East

by David Makovsky **(/experts/david-makovsky)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

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

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**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.**

Season 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 Dagres 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 Dagres** is a senior fellow at the Washington Institute specializing in Iranian society and the curator of "The Iranist," **(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)** . 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.

## What's Next for Hamas, 3 Years After October 7th?

Almost three years after Hamas's October 7, 2023, assault on Israel, the Palestinian jihadist group has been battered but not destroyed. Hamas has consolidated its control over the most densely populated portion of Gaza. Meanwhile, President Trump's 20-point peace plan for Gaza remains stalled, and Israel holds the bulk of the Strip. U.S. presidential envoy Jared Kushner recently met directly with Hamas leaders, even as the new Board of Peace is struggling to make progress toward Hamas's disarmament and Gaza's reconstruction.

Will Hamas really disarm, or is it just stalling? Could Hamas ever transform itself into a widely accepted Palestinian political party, as Turkey and Qatar urge? And is there a way toward a better new chapter for Palestinians in Gaza?

Host David Makovsky sits down with former U.S. and Israeli intelligence officials, Matthew Levitt and Neomi Neumann, to discuss the future of Hamas and Gaza.

**Matthew Levitt** is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and the director of its program on counterterrorism and intelligence. He served in 2005-07 as deputy assistant secretary for intelligence and analysis at the U.S. Department of the Treasury.

**Neomi Neumann** is an adjunct fellow at The Washington Institute. She formerly served as the head of the research unit at Israel's Shin Bet domestic-security agency and with Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## Can Israel Win Back the American People?

Recent polling shows that U.S. public opinion on Israel has plunged to historic lows after the grueling two-year war in Gaza and amid the unpopular U.S.-Israeli war with Iran. Is American public support for Israel undergoing a fundamental shift, or is the current backlash temporary? What role will changing American public attitudes toward Israel play in the midterm elections and in U.S. Middle East policy moving forward?

Host David Makovsky sits down with veteran Democratic pollster Stanley Greenberg and former senior Trump National Security Council official Victoria Coates to go beyond the numbers, understand why so many Americans have soured on today's Israel, and explain what can be done.

**Victoria Coates** served in 2019-20 as deputy national security advisor for the Middle East and North Africa and served earlier in the first Trump administration as senior director for strategic communications at the National Security Council. She is the vice president of the Heritage Foundation's Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy.

**Stanley Greenberg** is a *New York Times* best-selling author and a polling adviser to presidents, prime ministers, and

CEOs worldwide. He was the senior pollster for President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore, as well as for British Prime Minister Tony Blair, South African President Nelson Mandela, and Israeli Prime Minster Ehud Barak.

## Israel's Most Consequential Election?

In this special episode, recorded live as a Washington Institute Policy Forum, host David Makovsky sits down with leading Israeli experts Tamar Hermann, Yaakov Katz, and Amit Segal to discuss the stakes in Israel's first election since Hamas's October 7th attacks, the Gaza war, and the start of the 2026 Iran war. What are Israeli voters' main priorities? What will drive the wrangling over forming a new governing coalition? And what will the showdown between Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and opposition leader Gadi Eisenkot mean for Israel's democracy, its relationships with its regional neighbors and Europe, and the U.S.-Israel special relationship?

Prof. **Tamar Hermann** is one of Israel's leading pollsters. She is a senior research fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute and the academic director of its Viterbi Family Center for Public Opinion and Policy Research.

**Yaakov Katz** is an Israeli-American author and journalist, a senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute, and the co-founder of the Middle East-America Dialogue. He is a former editor-in-chief of *The Jerusalem Post*, where he is now a columnist.

**Amit Segal** is chief political analyst for Israel's Channel 12 News, the anchor of Channel 12's "Meet the Press" show, and a columnist for the Israeli daily newspaper *Israel Hayom*.

## Where Does Israel Go After Its Rollercoaster Election?

In this special episode, recorded live on October 28 as a Washington Institute panel, moderator Felicia Schwartz sits down with analysts Gili Cohen, David Makovsky, and Dennis Ross to understand the results and the policy implications of Israel's first election since Hamas's October 7, 2023, assault.

Is the bloc led by incumbent Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu or opposition leader Gadi Eisenkot better positioned to form a viable governing coalition? What drove the historic surge in voting by Arab citizens of Israel, and will they play an expanded role in Israeli politics? What are the implications of a possible renewed round of U.S. or Israeli bombing of Iran? Will the elections change anything in Gaza or spur Israel to rein in extremist settler violence in the West Bank? And what could a caretaker Netanyahu government, an Eisenkot-led coalition, or a national-unity government mean for waning American public support for Israel and the future of the U.S.-Israel relationship?

**Gili Cohen** is the diplomatic correspondent for Kan, Israel's public broadcaster.

**David Makovsky** is a former State Department official, the director of the Washington Institute's project on Arab-

Israel relations, and the host of *Decision Points*.

Ambassador **Dennis Ross**, the Washington Institute's counselor, served as the chief U.S. Middle East peace negotiator during the Clinton administration and as the top Middle East official on the National Security Council in the Obama administration.

Moderator: **Felicia Schwartz** is a national security reporter at MS NOW, and she formerly covered Israel and the Palestinian territories for *The Wall Street Journal*.

# A Palestinian View of Israel's Elections

After Hamas's October 7th attack and the Gaza war, Palestinians are closely watching whether Israel's recent elections will produce a government led by Gadi Eisenkot or keep longtime Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu in power. As Eisenkot weighs whether to include the surging parties dominated by Israel's Arab citizens in his potential coalition, Palestinians next door in the West Bank and Gaza wonder how much might change under a new Israeli government. Will Israel clamp down on attacks by extremist Israeli settlers on Palestinian civilians in the West Bank? How might Israel's fraught relationship with the Palestinian Authority shift? And is there any hope for a brighter future for Palestinians in Gaza, who fear a renewed humanitarian crisis as winter looms?

Host David Makovsky sits down with Ibrahim Dalalsha, a leading analyst of Palestinian politics, to discuss what Israel's elections may mean for Palestinian interests and aspirations.

**Ibrahim Dalalsha** is the founder of the Horizon Center for Political Studies and Media Outreach, based in Ramallah. He served for two decades as senior political advisor at the U.S. Consulate General in Jerusalem. He worked previously as an officer with the U.N. Refugee and Works Agency and as a program officer for the National Democratic Institute. ❖

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