FDD Media Call: Previewing the Trump-MBS Meeting

November 12, 2025
Featuring Jonathan Schanzer, Edmund Fitton-Brown, and Bradley Bowman
Moderated by Joe Dougherty

This transcript was edited for clarity.

DOUGHERTY: Good afternoon. My name is Joe Dougherty, Senior Director of Communications here at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a nonpartisan research institute focused on national security and foreign policy. Thanks for joining us this afternoon. We're grateful that you've joined us as we preview next week's scheduled meeting between President Trump and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in Washington.

There's a lot to unpack here, so I'm pleased to share that we have three outstanding experts on today's call to help set the table. Jonathan Schanzer is Executive Director of FDD and a Middle East scholar. A former terrorism finance analyst at the Treasury Department, Schanzer specializes in Middle East security issues, U.S. Gulf relations and U.S.-Israeli relations. A frequent visitor to the region, Schanzer is the author of four books on Middle East security issues.

Edmund Fitton-Brown is a Senior Fellow at FDD. He's focused on Arabian Peninsula issues, as well as terrorism and its enablers. He joined the UK Foreign Service in 1984 and served in Finland, Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Italy, and the United Arab Emirates, finishing this phase of his career as British Ambassador to Yemen in 2015 through 2017. He then joined the UN for five years, serving as coordinator of the security council team responsible for sanctions and the threat assessment of ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban.

Bradley Bowman, a Senior Director of FDD's Center on Military and Political Power. He served nearly nine years in the U.S. Senate, including as national security advisor to members of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees. A former Army officer and Black Hawk pilot, Bradley was an assistant professor at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where he taught courses on American politics, foreign policy, and grand strategy.

Okay, some quick housekeeping. Today's conversation is on the record. We'll share the link to the video of today's conversation as soon as it's ready, which should be shortly after the call concludes, and we'll also share the transcript of the call within 24 hours. We'll aim for as quickly as possible, perhaps as early as tomorrow morning.

We will have a Q&A period after opening remarks. To ask a question, you may type it in the chat feature and I'll be happy to read it aloud, or you may use the raised hand feature and you can ask your question directly. Jonathan will get us started, followed by Edmund, and then, Bradley. Okay, let's begin. Jon, over to you.

SCHANZER: All right. Thanks, Joe. Great to be with you. I'm just going to set the table here with a few themes, and I think you'll probably hear that these themes will be touched on by at least two, if not three of us here today. But I'll kick us off and get us started. Look, obviously, the Saudi-U.S. relationship is a strategic one for both countries. We've been through our ups and downs. Thinking back to 9/11, was probably the low point.

There was, I think, a high point, which maybe coincided with the election that took Donald Trump from power. At that point, it really did look like the Saudis were on the five-yard line in terms of normalization. The vision that Donald Trump had for normalization across the Middle East looked like it was right within his grasp, and then, it all began to fall apart.

Now, I think we're seeing the rebuilding of the Saudi relationship after a period of some tough times, I think, with the Biden administration, and I'll get into that momentarily. But I do want to talk about a couple of quick themes. One is the Abqaiq attack of 2019, hugely important from the Saudi perspective, still something that we hear them talk about when we go to the region.

And I don't think this gets a lot of attention, but this occurred during Donald Trump's presidency, and from the Saudi perspective, the U.S. did not respond properly. The U.S. did not swoop into action. As far as they were concerned, an attack on Saudi oil installations was an attack on American interest, and they didn't see the U.S. respond quickly enough. Now, of course, Donald Trump subsequently followed up by attacking Qasem Soleimani, killing him in Iraq. And that was in response to Iranian aggression, and that did, at least in their eyes, kind of check the box in terms of an American response.

But you got to remember, that was months later, and from the Saudi perspective, I don't think they believed that the Iranians saw causation there. They didn't see that direct line between the Abqaiq aggression and ultimately, Donald Trump's response. It was, in fact, more of a response to Shiite militias that had been attacking the United States.

So the Saudis remember that, and really, they look at that as kind of unfinished business, that there needs to be more of a clear defense pact between the Saudis and the United States, which brings me to what's happened since September 9th of this year. Of course, that September 9th was the date that the Israelis attacked Qatar. They struck a building where Hamas operatives were believed to be located. As I understand it, actually, they were located there and just happened to vacate the room minutes before the Israeli munitions arrived. But it was at that moment that I think the Qataris began to understand that they were vulnerable.

I think there are still questions about whether their strategy of supporting terrorist groups while also maintaining an alliance with the United States, whether that's viable. But it was at that moment that the Qataris began to speak very seriously with the Trump administration about a defense pact, one that has started to take shape here. The Saudis are looking on and saying, wait a minute, how did they get this pact and we didn't? And so, I think a lot of this visit right now is about trying to get exactly what the Qataris got, if not more.

Got to remember that the Saudis and the Qataris are traditional rivals in the Gulf, and even though maybe it's not a zero-sum game, the way it might've been during the Gulf rift of 2017, I think the Saudis certainly are eyeing all of this with a bit of jealousy, and certainly, wanting to get as much as they can. They have been pushed out of the negotiations in Gaza. I don't think they love that, but I do think that they see this as an opportunity for MBS and for the Saudi government to be front and center here in Washington, and to perhaps negotiate something along the lines of what the Qataris got.

As we see the dynamic shifting in the region, as now, the Iranians look weaker, having been beat up a bit by the Israelis in that 12-Day War in June, the U.S., of course, putting the exclamation point at the end of that sentence by striking three Iranian nuclear facilities. I do think that a lingering question for me remains, and that is, in the spring of 2023, the Saudis and the Iranians concluded a deal that was brokered by the Chinese Communist Party, by the government of China. It is a deal that has endured to this day, the details of which have not yet been disclosed. It is classified.

I have never seen a draft of it, but that agreement was the basis for the way in which the Saudis and the Iranians have dealt with each other over the course of this war. It just so happened that it was signed only months before the war broke out on October 7th, but it sustained Saudi-Iranian relations in such a way that they continued to abide by non-aggression.

That was a surprise. I think the Iranians were expected, as tensions flared across the region on multiple occasions, I think many would've expected the Iranians to attack Saudi Arabia, to attack Saudi interests, because this is something that the United States would be very sensitive about. It didn't happen. That, to me, is an indication that the agreement still holds.

And then, that raises the question of, what is the U.S. brokering, and if there is some kind of a defense pact that is signed between Saudi Arabia and the United States, does that obviate whatever was signed between Iran and Saudi Arabia and China? I don't know the answers to all these things, but I do think that if you're a journalist covering this space, it might be good questions to ask as we head into this coming week.

The last thing that I'll just briefly note is this question of normalization. As I mentioned, the Saudis were on the five-yard line. Donald Trump believed that he had the Saudis very close to making a deal. As we understand it, according to the sources that we talked to in the region, Saudis are still very much interested in normalization. They see their future as tethered to the technology and the commerce and the innovation that the Israelis have brought to the region, and they certainly see themselves as being part of that as they try to fulfill their vision, Vision 2030, for moving away from oil, moving into more sustainable economic trajectories.

The question is whether the Saudis can move quickly. On that, I think the answer, at least from my perspective right now, is no. I think that as long as the scenes on Saudi television continue to be scenes of devastation and misery in Gaza, I think it's going to be very hard for MBS to move in this direction.

That said, I also believe that there are things that the Saudis can do, as they've done in the past, to advance the process of normalization across the region. I certainly saw Bahrain and the UAE joining the Abraham Accords as a sign that the Saudis were inching closer. In other words, it's almost like they're walking through a minefield and they've got somebody walking in front of them to make sure that they don't step on anything, right? Trying to get a sense of what the Muslim world would say about additional normalization.

We're hearing a lot right now about Indonesia as an upcoming partner. Of course, Kazakhstan just joined, or just announced its intention to join. I'm not saying that the Saudis are pulling all the strings, but I certainly see them as having influence across the Muslim world. As the custodians of the two holy mosques in Mecca and Medina, one does get a sense that they are calling the tune.

And so, I would expect there to be more countries joining in the coming weeks or months, and then, if they go well and we don't see significant stability in those countries, well, then the Saudis may feel more comfortable with joining, so long as the war in Gaza has been brought to a conclusion. So with that, that's my conclusion. I will hand it back over to you, Joe.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, Jon. Edmund, over to you.

FITTON-BROWN: Thanks, Joe and Jon, and thanks everyone for attending. I'm very, very pleased to do this. This is my first opportunity to do this since I joined FDD in September. Inevitably, I'm going to overlap with some of what Jon said. I hope you'll be patient with me on that. I'll try and offer a different spin on it if I can.

The first thing to say is that this is a strong personal relationship between President Trump and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. Trump singled out the Saudis for the compliment of his first official visit, overseas visit in May 2017, and then he repeated the compliment in his second term in May this year. And mirroring this, MBS came to DC in 2018, he's now making his second official visit.

Consultation between the two countries is generally close and cordial, both through official and unofficial channels, and I used to witness that pretty close up when I served twice as a British diplomat based in Saudi Arabia 20 years ago, and then again just under 10 years ago.

I'll just add on the points that Jon made about the quality of the bilateral relationship. It is close, it has had its tensions. The legacy of 9/11's not entirely gone. Still, the victims and the victims' families of 9/11 are picking away at official Saudi responsibility, so that's something that occasionally rears its head. And I have to say that that is also encouraged indirectly by the Qataris, another reflection on the tricky relationship between the Saudis and the Qataris.

The other low point that I want to mention, because it's also relevant to what I'll say later on, Yemen, was the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, which people will remember led directly to the signing of the Stockholm Agreement, where the Saudis effectively accepted that they would not take the port of Hodeidah from the Houthis because of the risk of interrupting humanitarian supplies reaching the Houthi-controlled interior of Yemen.

That was obviously a bad moment in the relationship. It happened during the Trump administration, the first Trump administration. It effectively unbalanced President Trump's strong commitment to Saudi Arabia. There was a sort of brief period, really, when anger in the United States about that assassination or that killing really drove a wedge between the two countries, but that has long since healed over.

It's interesting that this visit by MBS comes hard on the heels of Ahmed al-Sharaa's visit to DC and during continued efforts to move the Gaza plan onto the next phase. And Sudan, we should mention, as well. That has also moved into a new phase of crisis.

And the Saudis, as Jon mentioned as guardians of the holy places in Mecca and Medina, leading global energy producers, hosts of both the Hajj pilgrimage and the organization of Islamic cooperation, are the central key players on all Arab and Islamic issues.

The U.S. and the Saudis both support Syrian stabilization, but the root is unclear and the stakes are high. The Saudi perspective and their advice on handling interim President Sharaa and wider Syrian issues will be important because it doesn't come with the same Islamist ideological baggage as input from Turkey and Qatar does, but that doesn't mean that Saudi advice on Syria will necessarily suit Israel's interests.

The president and the crown prince will want to compare notes on Iran, which continues to give grounds for concern about its military nuclear intentions and attempts to revive its proxy network. Now, Saudi Arabia recently decided a defense agreement with Pakistan, and Pakistan, of course, also has fairly good relations with the United States and difficulties with Iran.

So as Jon said, it's going to be really interesting to see what defense dimension emerges from MBS's visit, and the extent of unity of purpose concerning Iran. Now, unfortunately, based on the evidence of 2025 so far, it's not clear that the United States has drawn the inescapable conclusion that Yemen policy needs to be harmonized with Iran policy.

The Houthis will be a challenge in discussions between MBS and Trump because although the US and the Saudis largely agree about the Houthis in principle, neither side appears to have a coherent plan of action to deal with the unfinished business of terrorism against shipping in international sea lanes. And the Houthis are doubling down. They're not attacking shipping at the moment, but they're building their own liaison, their own collaboration with al-Shabaab in Somalia, which is a really interesting one because of course al-Shabaab are Sunni rather than Shia, but of course they offer yet more potential dimensions to the maritime threat in that part of the world.

Now on that, the Saudis have at times appeared ready to give up on Yemen, even to pay protection money to the Houthis to be left alone on their southern border, but the Red Sea crisis has demonstrated, certainly to my satisfaction, that that is not a stable long-term policy, so I think we have to file that with Jon's unfinished business list of items. Now, the main challenges for the summit to address, I think, apart from issues related to strategic commercial and defense relations, so arms procurement, defense agreements, hydrocarbons, and all of that sort of perennial business that goes on between the US and the Saudis, but a lot of this will revolve, I think, around Israel, Palestine, with Saudi Arabia, the key potential new signatory, as Jon has mentioned to the recently expanded Abraham Accords, as in when it feels that enough has been done on Gaza as and when it feels that signing up to those accords would not cause it undue problems in terms of its Islamic constituency, both domestic and international.

I think the Saudis probably don't relish the Qatari and Turkish influence that they see in Washington, with Qataris and the Turks being very much more agile on this issue than the Saudis have been, but it's difficult to see that in itself being an issue on this visit. The Saudis will want to establish the balance of being US key partners and heavy lifters on issues in their region, but also maintaining independence of action on matters of importance to them. So I think for the Abraham Accords, that probably means not just yet, and the evidence of Sharaa's visit is that President Trump will not force the issue. So we may have to content ourselves with Kazakhstan for now. And with that I'll give the floor to Brad, but we'll be more than happy to try and address any questions or comments later in the call.

BOWMAN: Great. Thank you very much. It's great to join my colleagues, Edmund and Jon, and share some of our thoughts. Thanks to the reporters for joining, I know you're all busy, respect your time. I'm going to focus on some of the military, defense, security elements here if helpful. So let me just run through some of the things I'm thinking real quickly and I hope it's useful. So I start with the following premise, so you just know where I'm coming from: It is my view that Saudi Arabia is an important American security partner, a flawed partner, but an important security partner. And so when you're talking about core American interests in the Middle East, you protect those interests either yourself or you have partners that you work with that help protect those interests. And if we want to do more in the Pacific and more in the Western Hemisphere, and I hope more in Europe, then we need partners in the Middle East to help protect our common interests and counter common adversaries, and Saudi Arabia can be that partner and has at times been such a partner.

There's been important progress in recent years moving toward, in the direction of, a US-Saudi-led regional security architecture, an architecture that focuses on intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, air and missile defense, and maritime security. Of course, maritime security is relevant to what Edmund was just talking about with respect to Iranian weapons shipments going via land and sea. By land I mean through Oman, for example, to Yemen, to helping to equip the Houthis, who as we know have conducted the most significant assault on freedom of navigation that we've seen in decades.

So we've seen this movement toward a regional security architecture and it paid dividends frankly after October 7th. Not a lot of that was covered, not everyone's eager to talk about it, but in terms of the combat between Israel and Iran, let's just say that the Saudis were not unhelpful at times, and some of that was the fruit of previous work moving toward a regional security architecture. As Ryan Brobst, Orde Kittrie, and I wrote in a 2023 FDD report, which if you're looking for it is pinned to my X account, Saudi Arabia has long wanted three main things from the United States, and we heard a lot of this when we were in Saudi Arabia in 2023. That is more expeditious delivery of American weapons, some sort of Article 5 -- North Atlantic Treaty Article 5 security commitment from the United States, and support for a Saudi nuclear energy program. Those are three of the things that they really have been focused on for a long time.

All of those, this is the former nine-year Senate staffer in me talking, all of those will require either congressional approval or congressional acquiescence, and that's where issues related to Khashoggi and other things like that are relevant. But generally speaking, I'm not really interested in the revenue of this or that American defense company, that may be more of a focus for others, but when I look at arm sales, generally speaking, I bring a favorable disposition toward US arm sales because as Ryan Brobst and I argued in our April 2025 Arsenal of Democracy report, US arm sales to allies and partners can help them become more capable militarily, thereby reducing the US military security burden. Arm sales also enable more effective combined US military operations with them, creating favorable balances of power, bolstering deterrence and combat effectiveness, and they can also help us bolster American research and development, defense industry production capacity, and keep all those supply networks healthy so that when Pentagon demand wanes for that particular system, it's still there years later when that Pentagon demand returns. These are the ways arm sales are not just some more money for some defense company, it's actually in the American interest to do this. And so if you combine that with what I was saying earlier, about moving toward a regional security architecture and having countries in the Middle East like Israel and like Saudi Arabia that share common interest and counter common adversaries, then arm sales can be a good thing.

So the crown prince is coming to town. He's got a wish list. On that wish list, according to reporting by Reuters and Axios, for example, is the acquisition of the F-35, America's most advanced fifth-generation fighter jet, the fighter jet that the Navy, the Air Force, the Marine Corps are going to rely on to defend Americans and our interests for decades to come. The very same fighter jet that we refused to give Turkey when it acquired the S-400 air defense system from Russia, and the very same F-35 that the United Arab Emirates wanted but ultimately did not get for a variety of reasons, including, if you believe reporting, concerns about their contract for a Huawei 5G network and Chinese basing and questions whether they were as aligned as they needed to be with us with respect to China.

Maybe some instructive information there for Riyadh, because it was my perception for many years that when you say to the Saudis, "Hey, you know we really want to make sure you're with us when it comes to China." The response was some version of, "Oh, yeah, we're with you. We understand no one can replace America, no one has the military power you do, but we want to do all this business and commercial activity over here." Sounds good when you say it until you listen to what the Chinese Communist Party says about their Military-Civil Fusion policy where they're explicitly trying to break down the wall between the military and the commercial so that they can create national champion companies to put our companies out of business and then funnel technology that you might at first think of as commercial civilian to the People's Liberation Army with the purpose of preparing a Chinese military that they hope can defeat the United States in the Pacific.

So, that is really a point that I tried to emphasize to my Saudi friends, is that you have to be a little bit careful with this idea of a private Chinese company. As I've been saying since 2019, I think there is no such thing as a private Chinese company. It's either already working for the Chinese Communist Party or is one phone call away from doing so. I think that's important context. And just one more comment on Saudi Arabia and China. I'm sure the Crown Prince is going to be talking a good game when it comes to Washington, saying the right things about China, but let me just highlight something from the Saudi Arabia Foreign Ministry.

Saudi Arabia conducted a naval exercise with China last month. It's called Blue Sword-4. If you don't believe me, look at my Twitter account, there's the link to the Saudi Press Agency. And you know what they talked about in their press release? They talked about developing, “strengthen[ing] military cooperation between the two sides.” That is not exactly a good look for a country arguing they should be able to procure America's most advanced fighter jet. Hey, Riyadh, if you want the F-35, maybe you should think twice about conducting military exercises with China.

So, that's one comment, and as I move to close here, a quick comment on QME, three letters that maybe you haven't heard for a while following the Abraham Accords. Well, I for one, have not forgotten about QME and it's not an optional thing that you do when you feel like it. It's actually US law, it's US law. It's specifically section 36(h) of the Arms Export Control Act or 22 U.S. Code § 2776(h) for those taking notes at home.

Let me just highlight a few things about QME that some of us may have forgotten in these years since we last uttered those three letters. It's relevant to any country in the Middle East, that's straight from the statute, I'm reading from the statute right now. And the question is: "Will it adversely affect Israel's qualitative military edge over military threats?" And you have to ask about by statute, and I have on good authority these questions are being asked by the administration, so that's good, it's not a criticism, it's an observation, a reminder to both the administration and to Congress.

It requires the United States to ask questions like a detailed examination of, "Israel's capacity to address the improved capabilities provided by [the] sale or export." Also, you have to look at whether it “alters the strategic and tactical balance in the region.” And then you have to look at “Israel's capacity to respond.” And then you have to look at what capabilities Israel might need to maintain that relative advantage, and it's a relative assessment.

So if you give Saudi Arabia, America's most advanced fighter jet, you can say, "Well, Israel still has better." Well, that's not the question, it's a relative assessment. Have they closed the gap with that? Therefore, to maintain that gap, that relative gap, you need to increase here. And one last comment on QME, it's very clear in subsection three that it's not a consideration about any one individual state, it's a coalition of states. So when one is assessing Israel's QME, it's not just Israel compared to Saudi Arabia, Israel compared to that country, it's any “possible coalition of states.”

Now if you are following what Turkey is doing, that's probably a country that should be in the mix. The statute does say Middle East, so we'd have to consider that, but if one's concerned about Israel's security and what a coalition of states might do, you have to be looking at Turkey as in the mix given some of their hostile rhetoric and actions that are coming out of it.

And then I'll conclude with two last thoughts. Normalization. I'll say it this way. I think the F-35 can provide Donald Trump extraordinary leverage to encourage Saudi Arabia to move toward normalization with Israel. I agree with Jon that that will be tough until things develop in Gaza. But I can't imagine, in light of what I just said about QME, providing America's most advanced fighter jet to a country that refuses to make formal peace with Israel. I just can't imagine that. So that would be something I'd look to before it's actually delivered.

And then lastly, as we talked about in our Saudi Arabia report in 2023, I would not be surprised if you see some discussion of Major Defense Partner status for Saudi Arabia. As you may or may not know, this was something we first gave to India and then was given to the UAE, but Saudi Arabia is not yet a Major Defense Partner. What is a Major Defense Partner? Why is that significant? We talked about it in our report. There's also Major Non-NATO Ally status that could be in there. You could also look at basing, I realize this administration has a particular disposition toward Qatar right now, but if I'm looking at a blank piece of paper and saying, "Where do you want to put your CENTCOM forward headquarters and some of your major military assets in the region?" You don't put it in Qatar where it's most vulnerable to counter-attack, the kinds of attacks like we saw during the 12-Day War. You might want to put that further away from the adversary you'll be fighting, a.k.a. on the other side of Saudi Arabia. And so you could look at some basing arrangements that would be in the American interest and would also be welcomed by Saudi Arabia, understanding some of the sensitivities based on where you're talking about.

And then lastly, very lastly, I mean it this time, the adversary is not static. Iran is learning from the 12-Day War. They got their tails kicked, they got humbled, Israel demonstrated it could blow up anything they want on the surface. America demonstrated that we could do the roundhouse kick. It stopped too soon, the job was not finished, the nuclear program was severely degraded but not destroyed, and Iran is not idle. They're learning lessons, pay attention to what China's doing with precursor chemicals, helping Iran's ballistic missile program, pay attention to potential delivery of the Su-35aircraft, air defense systems, and Russia's work with Iran's nuclear program. The sources of conflict in the Middle East, the number one source of conflict, the Islamic Republic of Iran and its terror network remains. It is not stepping away from its ballistic missile program, it is not stepping away from its interest in nuclear weapons, and this all could get trickier in the future as this Axis of Aggressors works together to help their leading asset in the Middle East, and that is Iran. Back to you, Joe. Thanks.

DOUGHERTY: Brad, Edmund, Jon, thank you very much. We're going to get right into the Q&A as we have some journalists with questions. We're going to start with Aamer at AP. He's got a question for Jon and Edmund, feel free to jump in as well, and also one for Brad. I'm going to read them both so you can jump right into them.

For Jon, "Trump's also expressed optimism on the Saudis and Abraham Accords. That said, the Saudis, as well as Indonesia have repeatedly stated that the pathway to Palestinian statehood must first be established, something Netanyahu's government strongly opposes. How do you square that circle? Why is Trump optimistic that the Saudis can be brought along with that major obstacle in the way?"

Brad, I'm going to throw this to you and then Jon can go straight to you. Brad, "This also comes as USS Ford has been moved from the Middle East to the Caribbean. Do you expect MBS or others in the Saudi delegation to express concerns about Trump losing sight or putting progress made in the Middle East at risk by throwing attention toward Venezuela?" Jon, over to you.

SCHANZER: Sure. Aamer, great to hear from you. It's funny, I've been asked this question a lot over the last couple of days. You're not alone in sort of scratching your head and wondering about how one can square the circle. This is how I would describe it. You have countries like Saudi Arabia and Indonesia talking about establishing a path to statehood, not declaring statehood, not guaranteeing statehood, but rather putting in place a process that gives the Palestinians a sense of the possible. In other words, this is an incremental, pragmatic process. I don't think anybody believes that we should flip, other than maybe Emmanuel Macron, who's now in the process of drafting a Palestinian constitution incredibly prematurely with a man who's now 20 years into a four-year term. It's really remarkable. You've got the Europeans way ahead of, I think even where the Arabs are.

The Arabs right now are saying, "Look, you need to put in some infrastructure. You need to give a sense to the Palestinians that if they follow a path, that such an eventuality is possible." I think that's where they're willing to leave it for the time being. It's not to say that they're going to give up on a Palestinian state once an airport is established or a seaport in Gaza or, I don't know, ceding certain land to the Palestinians for their national project. All these things I think are certainly going to be part of the discussion in the weeks and months ahead.

What they're looking though from Israel's perspective is not to shut it down, to give the Palestinians a sense that they have something to work toward, to have a sense of optimism in the region, especially after the war that the Middle East has just endured for the last two years. Again, I would put the focus on the pathway, not the eventuality. I think the Saudis, when I've had conversations with some senior people over there, they have actually indicated that that's where they are. It's not to say that they don't want to eventually see a state, but I think they're realistic and they're taking this step by step.

FITTON-BROWN: Can I just add to that? I agree with Jon. I think it's about the pathway in a sense. 7th October 2023 enabled Hamas to sort of derail strategic intent of major states like the US, like Saudi Arabia. The Saudis are not going to want to be in a situation where Hamas has a veto over what it does with its foreign policy. I think you've got the Trump plan, which gives you phase one is moving along at the moment, there is an aspiration to move to phase two. If Hamas prevents the plan from moving forward. I don't think Saudi Arabia will want that to be a veto on their ability to pursue their foreign policy with Israel, if that's what they want.

BOWMAN: Yeah. Thanks Aamer. On the question for the Ford Carrier Strike Group, just some quick details on that. The Ford Carrier Strike Group, when it was ordered to the US Southern Command area of responsibility, was actually in the Mediterranean. So it was technically in the European Command area of responsibility. It did go conduct an exercise in the far north and then came back to the Mediterranean. It did have two of its destroyer escorts operating independently in the Red and Arabian seas, so that's relevant to your point about a reduced US naval force posture in the Middle East.

I would be surprised, to answer your question directly, that the crown prince would bring that up. He might. But the response from the Pentagon, and I believe the defense minister has been in the Pentagon, the Saudi defense minister, if reporting is accurate. He may have brought that up, but I guarantee you the response from the Pentagon would be: "Oh, Riyadh, please remember, and please note what the United States of America demonstrated during the Juniper Oak exercises and during the 12-Day War, is that we don't have to have everything there in the Middle East to wield decisive combat power. We can flow it in very, very quickly." That would be the Pentagon response.

Of course, you know and I know that there is value of forward position forces, both in terms of signaling, deterrence, and responsiveness to crises, but that would be the Pentagon response. This is relevant to what I said earlier, right? If I'm starting with a blank piece of paper, you don't put your CENTCOM forward headquarters in Qatar. So Saudi Arabia undoubtedly would welcome additional American basing. I would be very, very surprised if the defense minister was not discussing with the Pentagon some basing opportunities in Saudi Arabia. It's clear what Saudi Arabia's goals are there, but actually some of that, depending where you put it and what you put there, might actually be in the American interest.

For example, if there are capabilities at Al Udeid that are the only ones that we have in the region, it would be wise, as I have published and argued for years, to replicate those elsewhere in the Middle East from an operational security and force protection standpoint, and also to reduce the potential leverage that Doha can place on the United States. We know that Doha has undertaken a strategic campaign where it has invited American universities to come into Qatar and they have welcomed CENTCOM forward headquarters and Al Udeid base. We view them as assets. Doha views them as assets to try to shape policy and decisions in Washington and mitigate criticisms of them. We can deprive Doha of that tool by eventually making clear that we have alternatives for basing, and some of those alternatives could be in Saudi Arabia.

DOUGHERTY: Aamer, thanks for your questions. Let's move over to Abigail at FT. Abigail asks, "Could you tell us about Israel's view of this visit, particularly in light of MBS's hardened public stance on the Palestinian issue and the expected US-Saudi security pact via EO? Does Israel see this as damaging to the goal of normalization? How does Israel feel about a close US-Saudi relationship in general?"

Jon, we'll start with you.

SCHANZER: Sorry. First day on Zoom. Look, I think the Israelis are not threatened by the prospect of the Saudis coming to the United States. I think they welcome a closer Saudi-US relationship, I think that portends stability in the region. The Israelis have thrown their lot with the pragmatic moderate Sunni states, and here we're talking of course, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and perhaps a handful of others. So no threat there. I think as Brad indicated quite correctly, they're keeping an eye on QME, so they're going to be careful about those F-35s and they're going to probably want to weigh in on those. Although as I've noted to other reporters, I think Saudi F-35s are the least of Israel's problems right now when you look across the region. When you look at Iran and the Turks and a bunch of other bad actors that are looking to destabilize the region, the idea of the Saudis getting their hands on these, not really Israel's top problem or priority.

That said, I think there is a concern that a lot of the warming ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel hinge upon the perspective of one man. In other words, it's all MBS. The system of Saudi Arabia doesn't exist as such, so there is no relationship between Israel and the broader Saudi system. That's something that I think they're keeping an eye on. So I think what they'd like to do is to see things move incrementally and slowly. But the last thing to just note here, at least from my perspective, is any major concessions that the United States grants to the Saudis from the Israeli perspective, this should be bundled in with a normalization agreement. I think that's what you're going to hear the Israelis advocating for quietly. You're not going to see them try to get in the way of anything that the Saudis view as part of their interest.

Some people have said, "Well, this is going to get in the way of normalization." This is the part where I remind you normalization is a process, not an event. The process of normalization is way into deeper ends of the pool here. They have been normalizing for the last seven, eight years, and things are going quite well from my vantage point. What we want to see ultimately is that handshake on the White House lawn, and that comes by something that is granted by the United States in exchange for normalization. I think that is still something that is on the table. Maybe not right now, but at some point soon.

DOUGHERTY: Edmund, Brad?

FITTON-BROWN: I don't think I have anything. I think Jon covered it.

BOWMAN: I would just quickly say I agree with everything Jon said. Just as I heard myself talking earlier about the QME, I could hear someone saying, "Really. Are you predicting a Saudi attack on Israel? Give me a break." So I recognize that that is probably not on the top 10 of my Bingo card for something that's likely to happen. But let me just reiterate that that doesn't matter according to the law. The law makes no mention of the political disposition of the respective government. I actually think that's wise because we know in world history and in Middle East regional politics, things can change quickly. And if it's all one man, one man may or may not be there in one, five, ten, 20 years. So I think we're wise to focus on military capability and hardware, which takes time to develop, but personalities can change quickly. That's why I think the statute is designed in the way that it is and why I think that's a sound consideration.

DOUGHERTY: Some great questions today. Abigail, we will be getting to your follow-up as well in just a moment, but let me first go to Andrew at JNS. He asks, "The 20-point peace plan includes references to the Palestinian Authority, reforming and eventually taking control of Gaza. Do the Saudis have the influence and appetite to help do that, and would the Israelis want to help?"

SCHANZER: Yeah. Look, I don't know how much influence the Saudis have right now over the PA. I think their position as one Saudi I talked to a few years ago put it and really nailed it, it was kind of benign neglect as it related to the Palestinian Authority itself. They just don't see this government as one that is willing to follow through on much of anything at this point. I think right now, if you ask me, it looks like the PA is trying to take some shortcuts. There are these fig leaf attempts to fight corruption and to talk about a renewed constitution, a boss naming a successor. All of this stuff, it looks like Kabuki theater, and I think it's not lost on the Saudis, it's not lost on the Israelis.

I don't see a lot of appetite across the region for the empowerment of the PA as it relates to the future governance of Gaza. I think they're really trying to create something that might have elements of the PA in it, but that is distinct from the PA. In other words, I heard a regional diplomat tell me about this last week, that it may be that rather than trying to shoehorn the Palestinian Authority into Gaza and have it extend its reach, the thinking right now is that maybe whatever comes out of Gaza in terms of governance, ends up being the thing that kind of takes over the Palestinian Authority. In other words, a reverse of what I think was initially articulated.

I think it's all being discussed right now. I don't think anybody has any solid sense of where we are. If you ask me, we need to get through phase one, which means getting the last four hostages out of Gaza, and figuring out how Hamas may be dismantled militarily. Neither one of these things are foregone conclusions, both are challenges. Then after that, I think we can start to talk about the makeup of the Gaza Strip governance as well as whatever force we plan on putting in that's supposed to keep order there. All of these are big questions. None of them easy to answer.

DOUGHERTY: Thanks Jon, just a reminder that to ask your question, you can use the chat feature or raise your hand feature, and we will certainly get to it. Following up Abigail's follow-up question. Reframing Aamer's question, "Assuming the Saudis are okay with a path to statehood, something less than what the Europeans and PA are pushing for, why do you think Trump is optimistic that he can give them that?"

SCHANZER: Edmund, you want to take a swing at that one?

FITTON-BROWN: Sorry, I think I need to hear it again.

DOUGHERTY: Sure. "Assuming the Saudis are okay with a path to statehood, something less than what the Europeans and the PA are pushing for, why do you think Trump is optimistic that he can give them that?" Is he optimistic he can give them that?

FITTON-BROWN: Yeah. I'm not sure that we know that he is optimistic in that respect. As we said earlier, we are talking about a process, and it's a process that could fail because of contradictions on the Palestinian side. Now, that can either be Hamas refusing to play ball with any of phase two of the plan, or it can be just a hopeless failure of the Palestinian Authority to show any signs of reform. I was very struck by what Jon said a minute ago, about the fact that if you were able to produce something meaningful in Gaza, you might be able to replicate it in the West Bank. Because one of the things that is very clear in Palestine is that you've got a false dichotomy between Hamas and its allied groups and the Palestinian Authority. And what has been missing, although I know that the US diplomacy has done some of these hard yards, it's been hard work on the various other Palestinian constituencies that are not aligned with Hamas and are also disillusioned with the Palestinian Authority.

So you've got various clans and you've also got various city elites and other regional families, clans, and worthies, and work needs to be done to sort of mobilize that. That is very much part of part two or stage two of the Trump plan, and that ultimately has to happen before you're going to have any meaningful path to statehood. So I think that's where we are. The fact is that the Saudis have backed the Trump plan. They don't see serious faults in it. I think they are probably more enthusiastically for it than either Turkey or Qatar is. I think that hence, if there is optimism, it's optimism that it's enough for the Saudis to work with. But I would also go back to what Jon said earlier, that the Saudis will be cautious on this. They won't want to be way out in front of people on normalization. So I would expect to see the Kazakh initiative and the Indonesians and possibly others play through before the Saudis are ready to take that risk.

BOWMAN: Hey Joe, if I can just bring some former Army military officer skepticism here just in terms of rubber meets the road stuff, agreeing with everything my colleagues just said, but as we're all talking about some version of trying to peer into the future, and as I look into my foggy crystal ball, one thing I do see somewhat clearly is the need for Hamas to disarm. And my assumption is that they are not going to be like the British at the surrender of Yorktown and file out and put their weapons in neat piles -- that someone's going to have to do that. And I don't see a lot of countries tripping over each other to go in and disarm Hamas. Lots of interest in serving in the Civil-Military Coordination Center in Israel. Lots of maybe interest in that big base that the Navy just put out a request for information on that'll be in Israel to support the International Stabilization Force, but not a lot... and hey, maybe this or that military might be able to go do things in there and be a peacekeeping force. But you know what comes before peacekeeping?: The disarmament of Hamas. Disarmament of Hamas, where? Not in some desert or field -- in a destroyed urban terrain among the most difficult things that any any military can be asked to do. So we're talking about, well, Saudis think this, this rather than that. That's all good, but holy blank, we have this massive hurdle sitting in front of us and I don't see an easy way to navigate it anytime soon. That's what I see in my foggy crystal ball.

DOUGHERTY: I do have one question I would like to ask. What is the interplay between the U.S. relationships with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Israel, and the new Syrian leadership? And in particular, Turkey I think jumps out because I know, Jon, you and colleagues have looked closely at the Turkey-U.S. relationship and Turkey's recent actions in the region.

SCHANZER: Yeah, I mean it's a great question, Joe. Look, the way I would put it right now is this -- there's a tug of war that is happening for the soul of the new Syria. You've got the Turks and the Qataris on one side trying to turn the new Syria into some sort of, I don't know, Muslim Brotherhood-like entity, something that would be more aligned with the Qatari and Turkish outlooks. It's interesting also because they're cracking down on the Muslim Brotherhood, they don't want the activists. But the end result that they're looking for is a state that's more aligned with Muslim Brotherhood interests around the region. And then you've got the Saudis and the Emiratis also trying to buy foreign influence in this country. And I do think that, I think it was Edmund that noted this earlier, that MBS coming on the heels of Ahmed al-Sharaa is significant.

I mean, I think he's still trying to demonstrate a certain amount ownership, if you will, of Syria. And he's trying to have an influence. And of course, when Donald Trump was in Saudi Arabia, that's where he announced that he was going to be lifting sanctions on the new Syria. And you got a sense that that was sort of part of the broader picture that the Saudis had gotten this done. But at the same time, I think it's important to note, and I've heard this from credible sources in the region, that there are increasingly Turkish military assets, serious pieces of military hardware that are moving into Syria right now that are threatening Israel, MİT assets, intelligence assets from Turkey that are also on Israel's borders, and they're there to collect on Israeli troop movements and Israeli communications.

So there is this continued tug of war. I actually see this dynamic of the pragmatic Sunni states, the Islamist Bloc, and Syria as this very dynamic and fluid situation that is yet to be settled. I think personally that the Saudis, Emiratis, Qataris, Turks, they all think they're winning, they're all leaning into Donald Trump trying to get him to do what they want him to do. I don't know if he's made decisions yet about any of it other than he's going to give Syria a chance at greatness, as I think how he put it the other day, which means relieving sanctions on the new Syria and giving them a chance to be pragmatic. What pragmatic means in the end of the day will depend on which of these patrons ultimately emerge strongest.

DOUGHERTY: Edmund, Brad?

FITTON-BROWN: Can I just add a related point? Because again, completely agree with what Jon's just said. He's referred once or twice to the pragmatic Sunni states, and it is important to remember that sort of alignment if you like, with Saudi Arabia, UAE, and they're like-minded on one side, Qatar and Turkey on the other side. This does also play into the Palestinian issue and coming back to what Brad said about the fact that we face this gigantic roadblock in terms of whether Hamas can be disarmed. And I think he's absolutely right. I think the point I would make is that there is a distinction between what the Saudis need optically in order to make various moves in international affairs, including the possible normalization with Israel and what they actually really care about.

Now, I would remind people that when the Iraqis invaded Kuwait, long time ago now, but the Saudis have not forgotten and nor have their allies in the region forgotten, that the Palestinians celebrated almost to a man and woman, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. And the view of Palestinians in the Arabian Peninsula has never recovered from that. So the Saudis do not love the Palestinians, they don't care about the Palestinians, but they need the optics to be right.

DOUGHERTY: Brad, I know that you have had some concerns when it comes to Turkey and also the F-35 since we talked about that earlier.

BOWMAN: Yeah, Sinan Ciddi, our FDD colleague and I published an op-ed in Breaking Defense several months ago, and I was an early person arguing in Washington that if Turkey acquired the S-400 air defense system from Russia, that it should be evicted from the F-35 program. And I know for a fact that Turkey was warned not to do it. There was a legitimate offer on the table for them to acquire an American system and they rejected that offer and they chose to buy an air defense system from the leading threat. As a member of NATO, Turkey chose to buy an air defense system from the leading threat to the alliance, Russia. That is an ally in name not acting like an ally. They knew full well what they're doing. They made their choice and they suffered the consequences of eviction from the F-35 program.

It would be a huge mistake for the United States of America to readmit Turkey into the F-35 program at a minimum before the S-400 is out of that country. Because if you have the co-location of the S-400 and F-35 operating in regular daily, weekly iterations next to each other, you would give the S-400 practice, rehearsals if you will, detecting and practicing targeting, shooting those down. And that information, we have to assume, prudence requires us to assume, that those Russians that'll be there maintaining that system from time to time will gain access to that information. And when Russia has access to what it takes for an S-400 to detect and rehearse shooting down an F-35, we can expect that information to find its way to Iran and China.

So you heard me say earlier, we're going to be relying as Americans and the 20-some other countries that are associated already with F-35 program, including Israel, including many of our best allies in Europe, we're going to be relying on that aircraft for decades to come. So that was implicit in what I was saying earlier. We shouldn't just give that aircraft to just anyone. There are reasonable expectations we should be able to make because the lives of our service members and the security of our country depend, in part, on it.

DOUGHERTY: We're coming to the end of today's call. I will ask each of our experts here today to provide a 30-second summary of their comments. But before we do that, special thanks to Ellie Bufkin for your smooth work in the background, the behind-the-scenes support. And thanks to the rest of the comms team here at FDD for your great work. In closing, a reminder that the FDD is a nonpartisan research institute focused on national security and foreign policy. You'll find all of our research at FDD.org. If you would like to set up a separate interview with one of our experts here, please email me at press@fdd.org and we will make that happen. Okay, gentlemen, over to you for your final thoughts. We'll start with Jon, then Edmund, and conclude with Brad.

SCHANZER: Yeah, so I'll just reiterate the four key points that I think really any analysis needs to include when we talk about what's happening this week. Number one, getting over the Abqaiq, the lack of defense or the lack of response. That's something that is still very much on the minds of Saudis. Six years later, you're still going to hear them talk about it. It's still a major concern that the U.S. didn't act quickly enough.

The agreement that exists currently between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and China, still no visibility into it, haven't yet heard anybody explain exactly what the Saudis gave and what they got as part of that agreement. That is a big black box as far as I'm concerned. And any other agreement that comes after that, we need to understand -- was this agreement that was signed back in 2023, is it dissolved? As we get into some new agreement with the United States, I don't think that a deal with China and a deal with the United States relating to Saudi security, I'm not sure that Donald Trump's going to want to be okay with that. And I'm not sure that a lot of other actors would be. So it's something to keep an eye on and certainly to ask questions about.

The Saudis looking for their defense pact. This is absolutely a response to what the Qataris got. "Whatever they got, we should be able to get better." That is the mentality of the Gulf, this sort of zero-sum game, this competition that they have amongst each other. I would expect the Saudis to be pushing for more than what the Qataris got.

And then last but not least, normalization. I still think the Saudis are close but not close enough. There'll be others that come before it. Now the question is, who do they push out in front of them to make sure that the minefield is clear?

DOUGHERTY: Over to you, Edmund.

FITTON-BROWN: Yeah, I think the only point that I want to underline is that this visit by Mohammed bin Salman to see Donald Trump is not a threat to Israel. I don't think Israel will see it as such. And I think that rather the question is, how close is the U.S. and Saudi understanding about common threats in the region and primarily about Iran? And on that, I want to add, just to underline what I said earlier about Yemen and the Houthis, the issue of the Houthis in Yemen, the issue of the threat that they posed to Saudi Arabia, the issue of safety, of navigation of the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. This is unfinished business. I fear that at the moment, neither the U.S. nor the Saudis have worked out what they're going to do about the Houthis. But I think this is an integral part of the enduring threat from Iran. And therefore, I think whatever defense understanding comes out of this visit between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia needs to factor in Yemen to the Iranian part of the equation.

DOUGHERTY: Brad, over to you.

BOWMAN: I think one of the most significant features of the current geostrategic environment is growing cooperation among America's adversaries, which we've been calling here at FDD for a long time an "Axis of Aggressors" consisting of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. We've seen the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff talk about unprecedented coordination among them. We've been conducting a study here at FDD across all three of our major centers looking at the cooperation of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. In our center alone, we've identified over 800 instances of security cooperation among those four adversaries across five categories since 2019. And so what do you do with all that? Well, I think the first thing you say is that our adversaries understand the value of partners. We should too. We have an extraordinary partner in the Middle East. It's Israel. We also have a good partner in the Middle East, and that is Saudi Arabia.

I am a proponent for deepening security cooperation with Saudi Arabia. I believe a regional security architecture that is led by the U.S. and Saudi Arabia that integrates Israel over time would be good for us, good for Saudi Arabia, good for Israel, good for the region, and a nightmare for the Islamic Republic of Iran, making it more difficult for them to successfully attack their neighbors, which they've been so prone to do since 1979. I'm just saying as we move toward these laudable goals, the F-35 might be part of the picture, but this is not something we give away lightly. We have expectations, and among those expectations should be a proper policy in Riyadh toward China, and that should not include, I'm sorry, military exercises with China.

It should be respect for the law, a.k.a. QME, and it should be, before the first F-35 is delivered, normalization with Israel. That is what I'm saying. And if any of the reporters want to talk about the security assurances that the administration provided Qatar and may be providing to Saudi Arabia, I'm happy to talk about it. Compare that to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty -- sure looks like a treaty. And last time I checked, Article 2, Section 2, Clause 2 of the Constitution says that should be approved by the U.S. Senate. Thank you.

DOUGHERTY: Brad, Edmund, Jon, thank you very much. Thank you to all of you who joined us today. This concludes today's call.