FDD Media Call: Settler Violence, A New Israeli Government, and Return to U.S.-Israel-Iran War

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Featuring Jonathan Schanzer and Lt. Col. (Ret.) Jonathan Conricus
Moderated by Joe Dougherty

DOUGHERTY: Greetings, and thank you for joining us for today's FDD media call, "Settler Violence, Prospects for Formation of a New Israeli Government, and the Possibility of a Return to the US-Israel-Iran War." My name is Joe Dougherty, I'm Senior Director of Comms here at FDD. Thank you for joining us. We've got a lot to go over, so we're going to get right to it.

Our experts today, Jonathan Schanzer is FDD's Executive Director and a Middle East scholar who oversees the work of FDD's experts and scholars. He previously worked as a terrorism finance analyst at the Treasury Department, where he followed and froze the funding of Hamas and Al-Qaeda. Jonathan is the author of several books on the region, including Gaza Conflict 2021: Hamas, Israel, and 11 Days of War, as well as State of Failure: Yasser Arafat, Mahmoud Abbas, and the Unmaking of the Palestinian State.

Jonathan Conricus is an FDD Senior Fellow focused on the Middle East. Jonathan served in the Israel Defense Forces for 24 years as a combat commander in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. He also served as a military diplomat, foreign relations expert, and international spokesperson. He recently retired as a lieutenant colonel.

This conversation is on the record. We will have time for Q&A after the opening remarks, and we will provide a transcript and a link to the video after the call, as soon as both are ready. We'll get right to it. Jonathan Conricus, over to you to get us underway.

CONRICUS: Okay. Thank you, Joe, and shalom to everybody from Israel. A few short remarks, reflections, which may or may not be news, but I'll go through what I think are the main takeaways that really are important, and I'll try to give a short assessment of how this matters and where things will go from here. Obviously, focusing mostly on security related issues. I'm no political commentator, have no desire to be so either.

My first takeaway would be that I don't see any winners. The coalition led by Netanyahu lost roughly 10 seats compared to its current situation. Yet despite losing 10 seats in what was a pretty clear statement by the general Israeli public, they have not lost the government, and it isn't clear who, if any, of the blocs will be able to form a government. So I see losers in the sense of the change bloc led by Eisenkot with Bennett, Lieberman, and Yair Golan, actually doing what appeared to be a good job of working together crossing Ts and dotting Is in terms of deals and campaigning, getting Israelis from around the world to come back home and vote. Around 70,000 ish people did that, and that's about half a mandate. And generally running what most people described as a pretty good campaign, yet still falling short.

And the current balance, according to 86% of the votes, real results, are that Netanyahu's bloc, which is Likud, and Smotrich, Ben-Gvir, and three different ultra-Orthodox parties, have 53 mandates together. And the bloc led by Eisenkot has 48. And then currently, Arab parties, and that's action item number three, have 19 seats, unprecedented high amount of Arab seats in the Israeli Knesset. The counting is assessed to continue for about a day-ish, a day and a half. Now they're counting something called double envelopes, soldiers and others that have voted before in special locations. And yes, those final few hundred thousand votes may shift the situation a little bit, a mandate or two in each direction possibly, or it could remain the same. It still remains to be seen. But that looks like the situation, and the situation is a tie between the two blocs, obviously understanding that the birth or the majority Jewish population or the Jewish politicians are not inclined and have promised their constituents not to form a government based on Arab party supporters.

Even though I said I'm not a political campaigner, but as someone who deals in communications, I have to say that Bibi's campaign of basically hiding almost all of the ministers and everybody else in Likud, and actually focusing efforts within his bloc in taking, stealing, or consuming the votes internally at the expense of his coalition members looks to have paid off. And Likud is still the largest party, with probably 27 mandates to 21 of Eisenkot. And Bibi's campaign was all about Bibi, and for me, it looks very similar to what we saw in '22 and the elections before that. That's what he did then, and that's what he did now. And I think he has gotten a pretty decent return on that investment, in the sense that he didn't really lose the elections.

Third action item: Arab turnout, massive, unprecedented, unforeseen. I would say that one of the main reasons why Arabs got out in such unprecedented numbers, we're talking above 80% turnout of Arab citizens of the State of Israel who are roughly about two million in total. Of course, less than that have voting capability, but we're talking about historically high. One of the reasons may very well be related to Itamar Ben-Gvir and how he has enticed and marginalized Arab society. How he as the minister who was allegedly responsible for domestic security or internal security, national security, which is the police, presided over some of the worst and bloodiest years of criminality in Arab society. So, a lot of people believe that the Arab participation probably isn't hoping to define national strategy and perhaps form government, but at least making sure that the extremists like Ben-Gvir do not remain in power, and it looks as if that has been achieved.

Going a little bit into the woods here, but I think important, we see significant losers in terms of Shas, the ultra Orthodox Sephardic Party, diminishing in size, and maybe that'll have consequences. They have been strong supporters of Netanyahu, but we've seen them diminish. Ben-Gvir, who hoped to grow but actually contracted, and so has Smotrich now.

There's many of course other takeaways, but I will focus on two other issues before I turn it over to Jonathan Schanzer. One is, what are the options here? And even though I'm sure you've heard seasoned political commentators speak about it by now, I'll keep it very short. The way I see it and understand it, we have a few options. One would be for either Eisenkot, or most likely Eisenkot, to fundamentally violate campaign promises and to seek to create a minority government leaning on or even with the active participation of one or two, depending on the amount of votes that he currently has, of the Arab parties.

And I'll remind all of us here that that has been done, that Rubicon has been crossed in the past by an Israeli politician, after Bennett been did it in order to form his government in '22. And that turned out to be a very difficult thing that he paid politically for, and I think still continues to be labeled as someone who did something that was an extreme violation of campaign promises. So it's still an option, but I think the chances of that happening, especially with the numbers looking 48 for Eisenkot and 53 for Netanyahu, chances of that happening are slim. They're not impossible, but they would come with the heavy consequences.

Another option, and the irony here is of course quite tremendous, it might be that the rise of Arab participation in Israeli democracy will lead to Jewish unity. And that we'll see left, right, center with the small differences but most importantly, the ego differences in between, will decide to come together, not out of love for each other, but out of a common distrust of the Arab parties. And that is a scenario that currently also looks limited in terms of the scope and the political viability, but it may happen.

Another option which also is questionable is that even though a major campaign item from the change bloc under Eisenkot was enlistment for all, military service for all, and it's a hot issue in Israel, he may decide that placating the ultra Orthodox parties, one or two of them in order to get tacit or active support, will be important enough in order to form a government and unseat Netanyahu. That'll of course have difficulties and challenges within the change bloc, and therefore I think it is not an easy swing for Eisenkot to do. It also would mean a basic violation of a significant campaign promise, not unheard of by politicians and not unheard of for Israeli politicians either.

And then what it brings us to, which I think sadly for us is the most realistic scenario, one that we have unfortunately been through in the not so distant past, and that is new elections. If Eisenkot, let's say theoretically, he is tasked by the President to try to form a government first, he will have 60 days, most likely will not succeed for the reasons that I just stipulated. Then perhaps Netanyahu will be tasked and maybe he, despite being a political grand master, probably will not be able to form a government with the size of the Arab parties, and that will trigger new elections in about... Well, the decision will be made in about three months' time, and then the actual elections will be in about five months' time, give or take.

Bringing this to a conclusion, my first comments would be that how this will influence from a security perspective, is this catches Israel at a sensitive time. And of course, none of the threats that we face, whether it is the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon, what's left of Hamas in Gaza, Palestinian terrorists in Judea and Samaria, and other threats that we face, none of them are taking a break and waiting for us to get our act together. And they, I think, will be eager to look for vulnerabilities, lack of strategy, lack of leadership, lack of clarity in terms of priorities. And I'm sure that they are pretty content with the results, and that there isn't a clear majority government, and that there won't be that stability that Israel so very much needs.

And bottom line, I think that the chances of elevated friction and instability with regards to the Islamic Republic of Iran rises as a result of the Israeli elections and how things are right now. I think the chances of Israel under Netanyahu, being more interested in promoting activity against the Islamic Republic of Iran, I think the chances of that are higher. And I also think that the chances of actual progress in finishing business with Hezbollah or Hamas in Lebanon, that diminishes. I think Israel will try to deescalate and we probably won't see significant movement on those fronts. And last but not least, we will probably continue to see instability, lawlessness, violence, and what many around the world refer to as settler violence in Judea and Samaria, for the simple reason that the political environment will continue to be conducive for that type of unlawful and unbecoming behavior by Israelis in Judea and Samaria.

So, those are my main takeaways. Jonathan.

SCHANZER: All right. Thank you, Jonathan. Always great to hear from you, and interesting days in Israel.

I'm going to pick up where Jonathan Conricus just left off. I fully agree that I think we're likely headed to an inconclusive result from these elections. There are ways forward, of course, the Arab parties can support a government from the outside. There could be a unity government, which I think would actually be beneficial. And also, not without precedent as it relates to Israel during wartime. And in the past, we actually have seen effective unity governments formed. The difference, of course, here being that Gadi Eisenkot has promised not to join forces with Benjamin Netanyahu. If he goes back on his promise, well, I don't think anybody in Israel would be particularly unhappy about this, given the results of the election and given the fact that nobody wants to go back again after another four or five months and do it again. We've seen this before. It is not a stable situation for Israel if we witness that country going back multiple times, multiple elections without having any major changes. This is the one thing that I think everybody certainly wants to avoid.

Having that kind of inconclusive government though, that caretaker government, I think to Jonathan's point, not healthy -- not from the perspective of Israel's national security. Yes, I think the Iranians will try to take advantage of this, so will Hamas, so will Hezbollah. The idea that you have a caretaker government that does not have the full power to make those executive decisions, those military decisions, that is a challenge, and Israel could find itself a little bit hamstrung. Also, the appropriation of funds for the military and for other key government services also will be hindered by a period of instability and an inconclusive government. And so, all of this I think is at this point well known.

But I really want to pick up on that last point that Jonathan made, this question of what's been happening in Judea and Samaria, also known as the West Bank. We have seen, of course, a resurgence in extremism in this disputed territory. It's a longstanding problem. I have to say it's also been a limited problem as someone who studied this now for actually going on almost 30 years. This is not new. Right now there are of course 500,000 or so Israeli citizens living in the West Bank. A few hundred of them have been taking law into their own hands.

I think for me, what's most interesting right now to watch is that historically the Shin Bet, the Israeli internal security services, they've been able to thwart attacks by infiltrating radical groups that have been formed in these territories and inside Israel. And the Shin Bet has been remarkably effective.

I would argue that in the wake of the October 7th attacks, the Shin Bet has really, at least early on, had little choice but to surge its human assets to the fight in Gaza and to prevent Palestinian extremist attacks in the West Bank. And the shift in resources has, I think, given space for the extremists to emerge as more of a threat.

This has been made worse by Itamar Ben-Gvir taking over as the minister of internal security inside of Israel, where I think he has probably blocked some of those funds and resources from going back in the direction where they have historically as the war has evolved.

I would say that looking forward, Israel really does need to rebalance those resources back toward policing Israeli settlers in the wake of some of the more recent violence that we've seen. And I don't think that the current impasse politically is going to lead us in that direction.

In other words, I think we're probably going to see more of the same of what we've seen over the last several months and not a whole lot of change. I think that is really not going to redound to the benefit of Israelis as they battle for stability in that territory. And it is certainly made worse by the fact that there is ongoing Palestinian militancy.

I think there's been a huge focus on the settler violence, or actually we don't even know if all of them are settlers. A lot of the Israelis are saying that these are anarchists that may not even be living in the West Bank, but this is all happening against the backdrop of sustained Palestinian militancy. I mean, looking back to the months before October 7th, Israel's security system was blinking red. There were multiple indicators of a new wave of West Bank violence. This was the only thing that folks wanted to talk about.

Now, there are a lot of theories out there that Yahya Sinwar engineered this, that he wanted the Israelis to be looking at the West Bank and to be diverting resources from the Gaza Strip. But I have to say that what we've seen since October 7th is a regular steady presence of the IDF going in and finding weapons, arresting top Hamas leaders and Palestinian Islamic jihad leaders, finding caches of weapons.

It has been an enormous undertaking and it has been almost nightly what we've seen, this kind of activity. And of course, West Bank extremism on the Palestinian side is a longstanding challenge. I mean, I remember when I was getting my master's degree at Hebrew University and the second Intifada had erupted, there were dozens of suicide bombers that are entering Israel from the West Bank. This of course prompted Israel to build that barrier that limited access to Israeli territory.

This has always been a problematic area, but since October 7th after Hamas attacked the Israelis, the IDF has, as I mentioned, they've arrested thousands of operatives in the West Bank that were planning follow-on attacks, making explosives, smuggling weapons and coordinating with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The threat is not receded. Hamas continues to direct West Bank operatives from abroad and Iran continues to arm cells through a very porous border with Jordan and the arrests have not let up either.

Security forces just broke up a major Hamas cell in Nablus and a network of more than 30 suspects that were planning attacks across the West Bank in Jerusalem. We see the Turks involved in all of this. It is a combustible situation and I think it is absolutely not lost on the Israeli right that this is an ongoing concern. And here comes, I think, the important role of Israeli politics. This has been exploited by the far right. The politics of Israel loom large in all of this.

The far-right politicians have stoked West Bank tensions with an eye towards the elections that were just held. Figures like Itamar Ben-Gvir and to a lesser degree, Bezalel Smotrich have been giving tacit approval for some of the unrest. The populism here is undeniable. What's really interesting to me is, and Jonathan made mention of this, they've lost seats. Now, some of this may be because some of the Israeli right wanted to put more votes into the pocket of Benjamin Netanyahu and his Likud Party, but it is undeniable here that Smotrich and Ben-Gvir have less leverage themselves now having only 13 seats. I think it was versus 15 or 16, if I'm not mistaken, and Jonathan can correct me if I'm wrong.

The question really to my mind right now is Netanyahu's response. As the caretaker prime minister, he's going to have to get a handle on this. He has condemned the violence. After more than 100 Israeli settlers attacked the village of Jalud on September 29th, he called for rioters to be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. There were arrests that were made.

A month earlier, he had called for the curbing of other criminal acts of violence and noted that they were harming Israel's standing in the world. But look, condemnation is not enforcement. There have not been enough suspects arrested and Israel's high court has actually rebuked authorities for the failure to act. So we, I think, are sort of arriving at a moment of truth with Bibi very likely maintaining this role of caretaker prime minister. It will be on him and him alone.

And I think to some extent we could argue that the fact that we are in a caretaker government, it means that Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir may have less leverage with him moving forward. So the election could be the event that prompts a decline in violence, but I do worry that inconclusive elections could really spur right-wing extremists to continue to, well, exploit this moment and to try to use this as a way to catapult their agenda in this disputed territory.

Last thing that I'll just note is there, of course, there's a lot of pressure on the Israelis coming from the Europeans in particular and possibly from a new Congress coming in Washington. We're expecting at least a change in the House and maybe the Senate as well. The world is not going to wait for Israel to crack down on the extremist problem. Britain, France, Canada announced coordinated sanctions on West Bank entities. Other Western countries have said that they're going to do the same. You got sharpened rhetoric from the Brits and from the French even today.

So the Israelis, I think, understand that they need to do more here. The good news is that a shift in resources can in fact change some of this. And I do think that that is something that is in Bibi's hands. The last thing that I'll just note is I think that there are often... We see commentary about extremists in the West Bank and the implication of course is that everybody who lives there is extremist. I would contest that significantly, the work that I've done in this space. You have people that simply want to live in a territory that is historic and meaningful to the Jewish people. Their desire to live there, they may at some point have to decide whether they want to live under a Palestinian government, but we're nowhere near that right now.

The question I think that we need to ask is, are they abiding by Israeli laws? I think that is the thing that we hear most about right now is that Israel is a country of laws and that even those that live in the disputed territories, they still have to abide by them. These are the things that Bibi is going to have to focus on moving forward and we will see as the horse-trading continues and the politics begin to show themselves, we'll see exactly how Benjamin Netanyahu and his caretaker government, how they move forward. I'll leave it there and I'll pass it back to Joe, but obviously Jonathan, if you have comments, we'd love to hear them as well.

DOUGHERTY: Jonathan and Jonathan, thank you both for that terrific analysis. I know we had a couple journalists that joined the call a little bit late. This call is on the record. We are recording it. We'll have a transcript and a link to the video and audio to you as soon as both are ready.

We're going to move now to the question-and-answer portion of the call. If you'd like to ask a question, you can use the raise hand feature and you can ask the question directly. You can also drop your question in the Q&A section and I will be happy to ask that question for you.

I will get things started, underway. This one, back to John Schanzer, and you've alluded to it a bit, but you studied in Israel under the foremost scholar of right-wing extremism. What did you learn working under him and can you flesh out those thoughts given today's latest developments?

SCHANZER: Yeah, so I studied under a guy named Ehud Sprinzak. He was one of the top scholars of terrorism. And in the mid 1990s, after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by a right-wing extremist, he decided to write a book about this. It's still out there. It's a fascinating read. It's called Brother Against Brother. You can still buy it on Amazon. I don't know if they're publishing new ones, but you can probably get a used copy of it. But it really does look back at everything from the 1946 King David Hotel bombing to the bombing of the Altalena, the ship that the Irgun was trying to bring, where they're trying to bring weapons into Israel before the creation of the state.

He talked about the Messianism that we saw in Israel after the 1967, 6-Day War, the rise of religious Zionism that led to the creation of an organization called Gush Emunim, the "Bloc of the Faithful." And this was a group that was dedicated to opposing territorial compromise. This same group was very active after Israel had agreed to give up the Sinai Peninsula after the Camp David Accords. The same group, we saw them engaging in plots in the 1980s to sabotage buses and attacks on West Bank mayors and attacks against students and even the Dome of the Rock.

The experience of right-wing extremism, as we see in pretty much every Western country, it exists. There's no denying that it's there. The question is, has Israel handled the rise of it over time responsibly? And Israel, as I mentioned before, as a government of laws, as a place that requires law and order from its people, the Shin Bet has done a really, I think, good job of halting the vast majority of these attacks.

Most of these plots have been thwarted. The Shin Bet has traditionally infiltrated these groups and learned quite a bit about them. By the way, the Shin Bet is not loved by the far-right community inside Israel, but you see parties and groups like this all over Europe, you see them in the United States, not abnormal to see this in a Western society. The question is, have the Israelis handled this well? And I think that right now there's a lot of criticism, especially over the last three years, since the war erupted.

I do think that it is truly a question of resources. It always has been, by the way. One of the things that Ehud Sprinzak looked at back when he wrote that book was this question of how much the Shin Bet was willing to infiltrate and how much they were willing to halt these attacks before they got started. Well, I think Israel finds itself at a similar crossroads. They've been here before and it's time to address the question again. And I do think that this is sort of a moment of truth with the international community demanding more from the Israelis.

It will not stop the war in Gaza. It will not stop the war in Lebanon. It will not stop the war against Iran. But for Israel to get its own house in order, I think that's a reasonable request from the international community, and I expect we're going to start to see more.

CONRICUS: I see there are questions from Elliot and Steven. You see those, Joe?

DOUGHERTY: I do see them. And so we will start first with Steven, and then we'll go to Elliot. And then Andrew, I see your question as well. So thank you all for submitting those. Steven Erlanger, New York Times asks, "How would you expect Europeans to respond to this inconclusive election that leaves Bibi in place for months to come and anxiety over new strikes against Tehran?"

CONRICUS: I'm happy to do that.

SCHANZER: Maybe I'll start.

CONRICUS: Okay. Sure.

SCHANZER: I think that you're going to see pressure on Bibi without question, but I also think, and this is something that I don't welcome, but I think you're very likely to see the international community trying to throw its lot behind Eisenkot. I think you're going to see actually more pressure come in. By the way, Donald Trump has done this by endorsing Bibi Netanyahu. Already we have some foreign intervention in this election and then the political process.

I suspect we're going to see more of that, and I think that it's not healthy. I think the Israelis should know, of course, that there is international interest in seeing a coalition get formed. But if there's anything, I think we should probably... I would welcome hearing the international community not say that we want Eisenkot to win or Bibi to win, but rather that the Israeli political process should play out naturally and that there should not be intervention on anybody's side.

The war itself, yes, I understand that there's going to be concern about the resumption of war. I think that is really going to be dictated primarily by Donald Trump. Donald Trump is going to either invite Bibi into this party or he will not, and I don't think elections have much to say about any of that. I think the Israelis have their war aims. They have not changed, and I would actually argue that Eisenkot's war aims are really inseparable from Bibi's. I don't see much of a difference there.

There are questions I think about West Bank extremism and maybe how Gaza is settled with or without collaboration from the international community, but I don't see much as it relates to Iran changing. Jonathan, I'll hand it over to you to weigh in as well.

CONRICUS: Yeah, just quickly, and I agree,

I would add that a question here about how I would expect... my expectations are what Jonathan said, what I would hope is that Europe would find the courage to understand that Israel is fighting Europe's war and Israel is doing Europe a tremendous favor in being willing to confront the Iranians, instead of having the Iranians create a massive ballistic missile arsenal and maybe in the future, nuclear weapons, with which they could also terrorize and blackmail European countries. My real world expectations are along what Jonathan Schanzer said. My hopes would be for a different European posture when it comes to the Islamic Republic of Iran, understanding that that regime is the major destabilizer in the region, a source of instability and violence, and that it really would promote European interests in defeating that regime.

And I would second Jonathan's observation about war aims. I think the only place where we would have seen or will see in the future, it's a theoretical proposition, differences between what Israel is doing now under Netanyahu and what Israel may be doing in the future under Eisenkot, Eisenkot would probably be related to Judea and Samaria, where he would probably reign in and do things differently and not provide a permissive environment to Jewish or Israeli lawlessness, which this current government is doing.

And if I may, Joe, I want to segue to Elliot's question. I think it's a question that I can deal with straightly. What practical steps? And this is an important thing. And if we're honest here, the Israeli side, as Jonathan said, doesn't have its own house in order. And we have a situation where the IDF has ultimate responsibility from an Israeli perspective but has very limited actual capabilities and limited de facto authority to uphold law and order equally. The IDF is geared and focused on fighting Palestinian terrorism, and it does that quite well, suppressing infrastructure of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other organizations, preventing even last minute attacks.

We saw that just last week where two Israeli soldiers were killed at a checkpoint. The two terrorists came from Hebron and probably were intending to, most likely intending to attack civilians on a civilian road, but had to go through a military checkpoint. And that's where the attack happened leading to two dead soldiers and three wounded ones, which serves as a reminder of how important the work of the IDF is. However, I think that the major topic and what needs to change urgently is law enforcement and specifically presence, quantities, and authority of Israeli police in Judea and Samaria. And we cannot say that we take ourselves seriously if we don't arrest people, if we don't indict them, and if they are not prosecuted and eventually convicted in crimes that they perpetrate. And that is something that I think a lot of Israelis are saying loud and clear, this needs to be better. We need to do better.

And I'm actually hopeful that we'll see change now because Netanyahu won't be beholden to -- and Smotrich and Ben-Gvir will have far, far less leverage, if at all, over Netanyahu because he relies on them significantly less. They have nowhere else to go, Smotrich and Ben-Gvir, and have fewer leverages. We may hope for a better situation in Judea and Samaria where there's better law enforcement, better stability, and where the IDF will focus on dealing with Palestinian terrorism, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and others, and where Israeli police will deal with civil disturbances and Israeli violations.

SCHANZER: Yeah, I'll just add, and I fully agree with the way that Jonathan has framed this, but I think it's a question of deterrence at this point. I don't even know if permissive is the right word for this but it certainly has been stoked by Ben-Gvir. There's been a sense that at least some member of the cabinet is nodding with approval or quietly approving what has happened. I think more arrests, more consequences for those that engage in this activity, even if it is, let's just say, mutual attacks on both sides. And we do know that there have been moments where Palestinian extremists have engaged in violence against the Israelis, the Israelis engage back. The goal always is: get the IDF there, get the border police there, get the Israeli police there. It's not about taking all matters into their own hands.

Look, there are of course always going to be moments where... And there was an event the other day where there were two gunmen that were circulating in the West Bank and it required action on the part of the local community. These things will happen but not every one of these events requires that kind of action, sometimes it is about relying on law enforcement and the military. Israel is of course, again, a government of laws. I think this needs to be the thing that is hammered home. And that when you see people taking the law into their own hands in non-emergency situations, and certainly when they are initiating attacks, that the government needs to handle them properly and firmly.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you both. Carolina and Abigail, I do see your questions in the queue there. We will be getting to them quickly. But first we're going to go back to Andrew Bernard who asks, "Settler violence seems like it will be an Israel-related priority if Democrats take the House under Senate. How is that likely to play out in Israel with a caretaker government and a potential second election? Is this just going to be another issue that prompts declining support for Israel among Democrats?"

SCHANZER: Of course, we're nonpartisan here and I don't really want to get into the messy politics of all of this. What I would say is that there are going to be Democrats that are going to condemn settler violence or anarchist violence in Judea and Samaria, and they have every right to. The ones that I think I'm most concerned about, and we've seen some statements and I'm not going to get into who has uttered these statements, but there is a sense among some, the squad or squad-associated figures that are basically saying that it doesn't matter what's going on there, that Israel itself is the problem. And I think those are the folks that I'm watching right now because I think they're going to try to take advantage of the very likely change in power in Washington, in the House, and again, possibly the Senate. And they're going to try to use this moment to drive a wedge between Israel and the United States, regardless of who is in power, regardless of whether Bibi stays or goes, and regardless of whether there is a crackdown on right-wing or anarchist violence in the West Bank.

These are the concerns that I have, that it's not behavior-based and it's not leadership-based. It is about the question of Israel itself and the relationship between the United States and Israel. These are the things that I worry about right now when I see some of the rhetoric. How that begins to shake out in terms of the center of gravity in the Democratic Party remains to be seen but it is certainly something that we're watching with some trepidation. I think it's an extremely unhealthy approach to foreign policy.

DOUGHERTY: Carolina asks, and I think it's a good question that you both may be able to address, "We know that Netanyahu has worked hard to develop his relationship with President Trump. What do we know about Eisenkot's views on the US-Israel relationship and how much did this relationship play into the campaigns for both Eisenkot and Netanyahu?"

CONRICUS: Yeah. On that, Eisenkot was Chief of Staff of the IDF. And when he was chief of staff, he maintained and developed close professional working relations within his American counterparts. I was in the IDF under his command for some of that time and I saw him work very closely with both the commander of CENTCOM but also Joint Chiefs of Staff and others. And I think that what I understand from General Eisenkot, you could call him a traditionalist and more centrist in the sense of an Israeli who is aware of the balance of power between the global superpower and a regional strong country, Israel, appreciative of US support to Israel, and I think understanding of the importance to strategic weight of the relationship, not only counting JDAMs or spare parts but looking at the more larger sum of the relationship, strategic, political, military, financial, et cetera.

And someone who is, I think, more careful in his statements when it comes to relations between the US and Israel as opposed to Netanyahu. Netanyahu has made some very, very extreme, I would say, remarks related to the future of Israel-US relations and related to the future Israeli economy and many other things. And I don't think Eisenkot would think that or make those statements even if he believe that it's true.

One thing, however, is this question I think is a very good one because a lot of people don't know a lot about Eisenkot. And I think one of the mistakes that he and his campaign did running up is that he, despite having probably a lot of automatic support from most international media since he is running against Netanyahu, it's someone that a lot of media institutions and elites around the world would be happy to promote, he had the opportunity to leverage that in terms of building brand and image and I think he and his campaign made bad decisions and didn't do that. And I think he could have done what Netanyahu has done successfully many years ago and continues to do, and that is to leverage international media and his standing reputation around the world for local domestic support and standing and prestige. And Eisenkot didn't do that and I hope he'll learn from that in the future, whatever the results of the political horse-trading will be.

But bottom line, centrist and someone who, of course, was very disappointed with President Trump's repeat endorsement of Netanyahu, but I think he responded in a very statesman-like and mature way, wanting to keep doors open and hopeful about the future. And many Israelis would... I think he represents the kind of mindset that is majority thinking in the Israeli defense establishment, and I would say in most of patriotic Zionist Israel, that the relationship between the US and Israel is a mutually beneficial one where we contribute a lot to US foreign interest, we do a lot of heavy lifting at... Basically, the US is able to outsource a lot of heavy lifting in the Middle East on Israeli shoulders. But of course, understanding that there is an international superpower and a local country, and that's the relationship between the two and not the other way around. And I think a lot of people in the defense establishment in the US, and maybe Jonathan, we want to comment on this, would've wanted to continue to work with an Eisenkot in a senior position. But that, of course, as we said, according to the results, may not happen.

SCHANZER: Yeah. The thing that I would just note right now, look, I don't know what Trump's relationship is with Eisenkot. I can't imagine that it's perfect right now given that Trump endorsed Bibi, and I can imagine that was maybe a source of tension, although you'll never see Eisenkot come out and say it. I think, as Jonathan noted, I think he handled it well. I think that Trump's personal relationships matter quite a bit, this is the way he does retail politics with everybody, and the same holds with foreign leaders as well. He has this longstanding relationship with Netanyahu, it's one that he's invested in. He's got a war plan that he very likely is going to want to pursue with Netanyahu so he's invested. I think that the Trump administration will pivot, of course, if there is the need. And I think that is the important thing. He will work with whoever is the elected leadership in Israel. I personally would love to see a unity government where the Trump administration is working with both, Eisenkot and Bibi. This is, I think, a healthier approach to, well, all of it.

I will say though that Eisenkot has one disadvantage that I'm watching very carefully as it relates to foreign affairs, and that is he does not have terrific English. And it is something to watch here as engagement continues, as we start to see foreign governments trying to push for one thing or another. His ability to communicate clearly will be a factor. I think he has good partners, Naftali Bennett, Yair Lapid, and others within his faction that may be able to do some of the communicating on his behalf, but this is one sort of X factor to watch. It doesn't mean that he's not capable. It doesn't mean that he's not qualified. It does mean though that his ability to communicate with the Europeans, with the United States, well, it may be encumbered by his lack of language skills.

CONRICUS: I would add, and just a bit of inside baseball, Eisenkot has decent working English, even good. I just say that he is self-aware, I think, beyond what's necessary. And since Bibi's campaign made an issue out of it to ridicule his level of English, then I think that has been an effective piece of political warfare by Netanyahu. And it caused, I think, Eisenkot to take a step back and that's a leisure and something that he cannot allow himself to do. He needs to engage, he needs to be out there, he needs to communicate. Yes, he's not going to sound as charismatic or as well-spoken as Netanyahu in English but I think his credibility will resonate, and I think that his messages will fall on more receptive ears than the perhaps perfect statements delivered or very good statements delivered in perfect English by Netanyahu.

DOUGHERTY: Abigail from Financial Times asks, "Bibi wants the US and Israel to launch a comprehensive new military campaign to bring about regime change in Iran. Trump appears unsure of what kind of offensive he wants to launch after midterms, or even if he will. How will the Israeli election results impact Bibi's push for a new and expansive offensive? What are the chances that he would go it alone if Trump remains on the fence? And what role is Israel likely to have in determining or shaping the targeting list for US strikes? That's a lot to unpack there.

SCHANZER: I'll start, and I know Jonathan has thoughts on this too. Bibi is not invited yet, and that is, I think, a source of frustration for him. I know that there are strike packages that have been drawn up. In Israel, there are probably hundreds of targets that probably include top Iranian officials, energy infrastructure, financial infrastructure, of course, military, probably nuclear, all of the things.

The question is whether Israel is invited back into this war. That happens in two ways. One is that the Iranian regime attacks Israel, at which point all bets are off and the Israelis have complete and total freedom of action. But you have this problem right now, which is that Donald Trump has kept the Israelis at bay. There has been a frustration on the part of Bibi. Now, Bibi can certainly decide that Israel is a sovereign country and it can do whatever it wants, but to threaten the US-Israel relationship at this delicate moment I think would be a significant risk for him, and I don't know if he's going to want to take that kind of risk.

Some have said that going it alone would bolster his chances for being able to form a government if there had to be another round of elections that it might change things a bit. I don't know if doing it without the United States and invoking the wrath of Donald Trump would actually help him at the end of the day. I think that maybe some on the extreme right might appreciate it, but I think the average Israeli would probably find that a bit disturbing. So I don't see the Israelis doing this alone. What I do know is that there is constant coordination. We know, of course, that Secretary of War Pete Hegseth was in Israel a week ago. There were reports that there were Emiratis there as well. This has fueled suspicion that there is going to be a resumption of the war on a multilateral basis against the regime, that more than just two Air Forces could be involved in this. And that, I think, would probably be a major shift in the region and probably one that, well, would put significantly more pressure on the regime in Iran.

But this question of success I think is ultimately what's dogging Donald Trump. It's what's dogging Benjamin Netanyahu. At this point, it's clear they need regime change. They need to bring down this regime, and this regime has proven to be resilient. It's taking a beating, but it is still somehow hanging on despite all the economic pressure and the military pressure. They need a different strategy and it's unclear what that strategy is. Maybe it was discussed when Hegseth was at the Ovda Air Base meeting with Bibi just a few days ago. Jonathan?

CONRICUS: Yeah, I think very smart remarks. I would add Netanyahu has shown over many years that he is quite masterful at harnessing national security events to his political benefit. He's done that several times and he's done it masterfully in order to stay in power, in order to galvanize his base, and in order to explain to Israelis or convince Israelis that he is the leader who cares for Israel's future and the ultimate defender of the state of Israel. That's one. Two, success is the, probably, only metric here.

And since success is not guaranteed, I don't think that a lot of military analysts or people who understand the IRGC and the way this dictatorship operates, I don't think that a lot of people would say if the US and Israel unleash unprecedented attacks on Iranian infrastructure and demise the capabilities of the country, I don't think that anybody will say that creates a clear path towards regime change. Nobody knows how long it will take, and there are also chances that it will just continue to harden the resistance or the commitment of the IRGC despite reason stating that it would weaken them.

So since that is the case and since Netanyahu is a very conservative, calculated, careful leader, and since what Jonathan said I very much agree on, he wouldn't risk going at it alone, especially if the reward is uncertain, then this really brings it back to Washington and to the ultimate political and military goals of the US president. And I would suggest a different perspective on the balance on the relationship here. And I actually see Israel, again, as I said before, as more of an outsourcing agent of US foreign policy than a country that has significant influence over decisions that the US make. I think a lot of people around the world work very hard to create this image and maintain it as if Israel, Netanyahu or Israel has some magical influence over decision making in the US.

I see things differently. I see the US getting excellent results, relatively cheap in terms of human life and expenditures, and that Israel is conveniently located for the US in the region in order to promote US standing, force projection, and global power. So this is much more an American decision than it is Israeli. But I will say that since, going back to point number one, since Netanyahu doesn't have a lot of other rabbits to pull out of many other hats in terms of domestic politics, the chances that he will try for something to happen against the Islamic Republic of Iran as a result of his political situation, I think they're there, I think they're valid, but it will ultimately be a very US dominated resolution, even if Netanyahu really, really wants it. I think the chances of Israel going at it alone are slim. And just in closing, I'll add my significant respect for the IDF Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Eyal Zamir, reportedly, and I've done some questions into this as well.

Before the elections, he was told by the government, by the prime minister to take certain military action with regards to Iran, which he felt was questionable and could have jeopardized the Israeli elections. And he decided to stall and delay in such a way that eventually that action was not taken. That may have very real consequences for him and his continued service as chief of staff. In Israel, the system is that a chief of staff is elected for four years and then possible extension for another. Eyal Zamir was appointed by Benjamin Netanyahu less than two years ago. And if Netanyahu forms another government, then a lot of people assess that the loss of trust between the two will lead to him being fired. That is no small thing, and it is an important part of the balance here, but it can show you. And I think a lot of people around the world fail to understand the checks and balances and the level of responsibility that exists in Israel.

And that is of course something that is part of the US-Israeli relationship as well. The professional dialogue between the higher military command in Israel and their counterparts in CENTCOM and in DC, very important, and they're really a good stabilizing factor. And I say that because a lot of people have a tendency to go towards the more fantastic conspiracy-oriented thoughts related to some magic influence of Netanyahu over Trump. Real world I think looks different.

DOUGHERTY: Jonathan Schanzer for our State Department and White House reporters on the call, "What is on your radar that might not be on theirs that they should be looking at, looking forward to?"

SCHANZER: Yeah, look, I think it's ultimately this coordination that we continue to hear about at very high levels about a possible strike coming soon. The thing that I think about right now is Donald Trump has said that he doesn't want a war until after the election on November 3rd. Iran gets a vote, and so what his schedule is may not comport with what the Iran, and especially if the Iranians feel that something is imminent, why they would wait until after the election here in order to carry out or to be able to defend against a war if they could initiate it and potentially gain the upper hand, I would watch for that. I'm also hearing that regional partners are not sure that Donald Trump is going to go ahead with whatever plans he may have been cooking up, that right now there's a lot of talk about a possible war after the election, but how many times have we seen reports that a war is imminent and then Donald Trump has decided that he's going to give peace a chance?

Don't forget that right now the Mecca Pact countries were just in Iran. The Qataris also have been in Iran. They have been trying to implore the Iranian regime to halt their attacks and to engage in some sort of a framework that would bring about calm in the region. So I think there's just a lot more confusion. I do think that there's still a fairly high likelihood that we'll see an attack, but the messages that I'm getting out of the region are muddled at best, that it is mixed. So no guarantees here, but that doesn't make anybody's job easier, I'm sure, as you're trying to navigate this space. So sorry if I'm throwing some more doubt into the calculus as you work on your reports.

DOUGHERTY: Jonathan Schanzer, Jonathan Conricus, thank you both for your insight and analysis today. To the journalists on today's call, thank you for joining us. There's a lot going on, so we're grateful that you've joined us. Friendly reminder that FDD is a nonpartisan research institute focused on national security and foreign policy. You can find all of our research at fdd.org. If you'd like to reach out to schedule a separate interview with our experts here, you can reach us at press@fdd.org and we'll get back to you quickly. Thank you again for joining us. This concludes today's call.