

Keynote Address by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan

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Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [2023 Soref Symposium \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/2023-soref-symposium\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/2023-soref-symposium)

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Watch video or read a transcript of a new Biden administration speech on U.S. policy in the Middle East, delivered at The Washington Institute's 2023 Soref Symposium.

The following is an edited transcript of remarks delivered on May 4 by Jake Sullivan, the national security advisor to President Biden. His opening speech is followed by a Q&A with executive director Robert Satloff. The event also included [a separate expert panel \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/node/18094\)](#) analyzing the administration's approach to Middle East affairs.

Opening Remarks by Jake Sullivan

Shelly [Kassen], thank you so much for that kind introduction. And I want to thank you and Jay [Bernstein] and Dennis [Ross] and the Board of Trustees for bringing us together tonight, and thank the Institute for extraordinary work that you just reminded us of over many years.

I also want to say a special thanks and congratulations to Rob [Satloff]. It's thirty-eight years total at The Washington Institute and thirty years as the executive director. That is quite remarkable, and we thank you for your service.

And I think it's fair to say that before me today are some of the sharpest Middle East thinkers in the world, many of whom I'm privileged to call friends

and colleagues, and many of whom probably would give a better speech than I will tonight. So please do not judge me too harshly I say to many of you out there. Thank you all for giving me this opportunity.

I'd actually like to take a minute to start with the global picture before zooming in on how the Middle East region fits into the administration's broader national security strategy. As many of you have heard, President Biden often talks about how the world is at an inflection point. And the National Security Strategy that we released last October points out that we are in the early years of a decisive decade—unseen perhaps since the end of the Second World War—where the terms of competition with great powers will be set and the window to deal with shared challenges will narrow dramatically even as the intensity of those challenges grows. Simply put, the decisions we make in the next two, three, four years will have reverberations through the next two, three, four decades, as President Biden likes to point out. So under the leadership of the president, we're seizing this moment to help set the rules, shape the strategic environment, and advance the values and norms that will define the world we want to live in.

A hallmark of this approach has been the integration of foreign policy and domestic policy, recognizing that our strength and influence abroad is in large measure directed and defined by the investments in the core foundations of our strength and the reservoirs of our power here at home. So we're pursuing a modern industrial and innovation strategy to invest in our economic strength and technological edge here in the United States. And over the course of the past two years, we have delivered.

And mostly we have delivered in a fundamentally bipartisan way. In 2021, the president signed the bipartisan infrastructure law, a generational investment in U.S. infrastructure that sets a foundation for stronger and more durable growth with all kinds of attendant benefits to our national security. We passed the CHIPS and Science Act, which positions the United States to compete in manufacturing today and to lead the industries of tomorrow, from artificial intelligence to quantum computing to nanotechnology and beyond. The technology competition will be a defining competition, and we are now positioned to win that competition in the twenty-first century as we did in the twentieth.

We've also passed the Inflation Reduction Act, a historic law that is the largest investment ever anywhere in the world in history in clean energy technologies, positioning the United States to lead in both confronting the climate crisis and managing the energy transition—a transition of no small amount of interest to our partners in the Middle East.

So as we make these investments at home, we have thought about how the strategic position that that helps produce—the foundation of strength that that helps generate—then allows us to project that strength and to engage from a position of strength everywhere around the world, including in the Middle East and North Africa. Let me stay clearly up front what President Biden has said himself: our commitment to the Middle East region is unshakable because the region is vitally important to our shared future and deeply interwoven with American interests and those of our allies and partners.

So taking a step back to where we were on day one of this administration, Shelly mentioned that I've been serving since day one—and since national security advisor years are dog years, I've actually been serving for fourteen years as national security advisor. In one of our first national security meetings, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley, stressed that we were looking at what he called an overly pressurized region. Significantly escalating tensions in the Middle East, that was our inheritance. U.S. troops and diplomats were under regular attack. In late 2020, our embassy in Baghdad had experienced one of the largest rocket attacks in over a decade. A few months prior to that attack, the last administration had to go out and publicly threaten to close the embassy in Baghdad in what would have been a major setback for U.S. interests not just in Iraq, but in the broader region.

Just weeks after his inauguration, as we continued to face attacks, President Biden ordered a round of airstrikes against Iranian-backed militias. And since then, we've pursued a campaign of deterrence and diplomacy, working with the Iraqis and other partners in the region to strengthen our position and reduce the risks. As of today, attacks in Iraq have dramatically slowed, and we're working closely with the new Iraqi government on a broad agenda to strengthen the country's independence and to integrate Baghdad into the broader region.

This is just an example, it's not a description of the totality of our policy. But it's a through line of how we've had to contend with and confront risks and then try to put together a strategy built on these twin pillars of deterrence and diplomacy to improve the fundamental position of the United States and to protect our people. Along the way, we've had a clear-eyed view of defending our interests, of preventing terrorist threats, of trying to de-escalate tensions, of trying to reduce risks of new conflicts, and of trying to end existing ones.

Now I'm not pulling out the victory flag on Iraq or any other country because the attacks could renew, they could restart just as they've abated, and we're prepared to respond to that. But that is the arc that we have seen over the course of the past two years. And over those past two years, I think we've seen a number of other significant results that I want to briefly touch upon:

A historic maritime boundary deal between Israel and Lebanon—the first-ever understanding reached between Israel and Lebanon in the history of Israel.

The now fourteen-month-long truce in Yemen—the longest period of relative calm there since the war began nearly a decade ago.

Ending a war in Gaza in eleven days, then working to keep the peace even as it's punctuated by periods of heightened tension, as we've just seen in the last few days.

The rapprochement between Turkey and the UAE, Turkey and Israel, Qatar and Bahrain, the UAE and Qatar—the rivalries that have polarized the Middle East region for so many years, now being bridged by diplomacy and mutual interests.

And even the recent diplomacy between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which we've stayed in close touch with the Saudis on all the way through from Baghdad to Oman and ultimately to the deal reached. This too is in line with the fundamental direction and trend of de-escalation that we have supported and

encouraged even while we maintain pressure on Iran through sanctions and other means.

And taking top terrorists off the battlefield with precision, including the emir of ISIS and other significant terrorist figures across the Middle East region, protecting our nation and our allies against these enduring threats.

At the same time, we try to get creative. We've worked to deepen the Abraham Accords and forge new coalitions like I2U2—which I can't decide is a great acronym or terrible acronym, but it certainly can be memorable. If you remember nothing else from my speech, remember I2U2, because you will be hearing more about it as we go forward. This is a partnership with India, Israel, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates, and the fundamental notion is to connect South Asia to the Middle East to the United States in ways that advance our economic technology and diplomacy. And we've already got a number of projects underway and some new exciting steps that we're looking forward to undertaking in the months ahead.

The Negev Forum, which last year brought together the largest gathering of Israelis and Arab officials in decades to discuss cooperation on issues from security to climate change to commerce to education.

We forged an important deal to remove multinational observer forces from the Red Sea island forty years after Camp David, with new security arrangements to keep the peace. And this is not just about the island and the peacekeepers, it is about moving forward down the path of greater integration and normalization among parties that were fundamentally at odds and even at war some decades ago.

We've unlocked Saudi and Omani airspace for civilian flights to and from Israel and Asia—one step along the road toward what we hope will become a full normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Everything I've discussed so far did not happen as a one-off. This is the result of what we have tried to lay down as a comprehensive policy framework that President Biden enunciated during his visit to the region last year and that has been incorporated into the National Security Strategy I spoke about at the top of my remarks, in a few short pages in that document in October of 2021. And really from the beginning until now, we have tried to follow this basic template for how we engage in the region.

The template, the strategy, is realistic and pragmatic, incorporating hard lessons learned to eschew grand designs or unrealistic promises of transformational change. But it is also ambitious and optimistic about [what] the United States and our allies can achieve together over time. It recognizes that enduring progress often comes through a series of practical steps, and that laying the foundation over months and years for greater stability, prosperity, and opportunity for the people of the region and for the American people is the best course of action for American policy.

This new framework for U.S. engagement in the Middle East is built on five basic elements: partnerships, deterrence, diplomacy and de-escalation, integration, and values. And I want to walk through each of them and describe what we have in mind and how they fit together.

I'll start first with partnerships. Over the last two years the U.S. has looked to strengthen relations with longstanding partners in the region, from Morocco to Egypt to Jordan, Iraq, the GCC, and of course Israel. Together we've led strategic dialogues, high-level visits—including two presidential visits—exchanges, and over 200 military exercises, all while continuing our constant consultations and engagements to help ensure that our partners are being able to communicate what they need from us. We're also building these new partnerships I described—I2U2 and the Negev Forum—and looking at really practical solutions to the practical problems that are top of mind for the people of the region: water, space, health, food security, climate change, and regional security.

In fact, this weekend I'll be in Saudi Arabia for meetings with its leadership, and my UAE and Indian counterparts will come to Saudi Arabia as well for meetings so that we can discuss new areas of cooperation between New Delhi and the Gulf as well as the United States and the rest of the region, fueled in part by the comprehensive economic partnership signed last year between India and the UAE. And this can help us carry forward some very tangible initiatives that we think will be unlike anything that we have seen in the region in recent years.

Similarly, last June President Biden and other G7 leaders launched the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment—PGII, another maybe not-so-great acronym—to address enormous infrastructure needs in low- and middle-income countries and to meet the challenge of securing and diversifying global supply chains. Many of our Middle East partners, particularly in the Gulf, have now pledged multi-billion-dollar projects to PGII aimed to advance strategic projects—from ports to rail to electricity lines to essential minerals—from Africa to Asia to the Middle East region.

So when you look at things like I2U2 and PGII and a lot of the practical challenges I've discussed, I've reached a point in this speech where the emphasis on these kinds of elements from a national security advisor is a different kind of take on the role of the region in the world, the role of the region in advancing U.S. interests, and the role of the United States in working with partners in this region on these challenges. But in the world I described at the outset of my speech—in a world of great power competition, in a world of accelerating transnational challenges—we have to increasingly look to the region as a source of the kinds of partnerships that will help us solve the significant problems of the period that lies ahead:

- Countries that can help us with diversified and resilient supply chains so that we're not dependent on any other country.
- Countries that can help us make the clean energy transition successful, both in terms of the stable supply of current energy and in terms of the rapid and expansive deployment of new clean energy.
- Solutions on everything from food security to water security that become so central not just to problem solving around the world, but to the demand signal from countries that are getting entreaties from some of our great power competitors.

So this partnership's piece of the strategy in the Middle East from my perspective is part of the answer to the question of why the Middle East still really matters. It doesn't necessarily matter based on the nature of things in 2003, but rather the nature of things in 2023. And these partnerships are aimed at that in an effort to help tangibly advance the interests of the United States, but also the broader common interest at the same time

Second pillar: deterrence. The United States will proactively deter threats, defend our people and our interests, and support the defense of our partners in the region, period, full stop. I mentioned our deterrence posture in Iraq, and the same principle applies throughout the region, where we have maintained a military presence together with coalition and regional partners designed to keep the peace.

In Syria, on March 23, we experienced another attack that tragically saw the first American contractor killed, the first such casualty in this region since we entered office, and other U.S. personnel injured. The president ordered an immediate response, and within hours we turned around a strike against a facility in Syria used by groups affiliated with the IRGC. We've now seen at least for the moment a decrease in threats against our personnel in Syria, but we are ready and prepared to respond should Iran or any adversary threaten our personnel in Syria or Iraq or anywhere else.

Meanwhile, as I mentioned, we've kept relentless pressure on ISIS and al-Qaeda, including a strike just earlier this week in Syria that removed a senior al-Qaeda leader, and the Special Forces raid last year that killed ISIS's so-called "caliph."

We've also worked with our partners to share warnings of imminent threats, such as last November, when Iran was preparing for an attack against Saudi Arabia. In the face of close security cooperation between Saudi Arabia and the United States, that attack did not take place.

Examples of this cooperation extend across the Middle East. Earlier this year in the Eastern Mediterranean, the United States and Israel held the largest joint military exercise ever in the history of our two countries. There can be no doubt that we are walking the walk and not just talking the talk when we say that our commitment to Israel's security is ironclad. That exercise was followed by one of the largest naval military exercises in the region's history, with more than fifty international partners—including Israeli and Gulf partner navies—working side by side one another.

We are also engaging Iran diplomatically regarding its nuclear program, and we continue to believe that it was a tragic mistake to leave the deal with nothing at all to replace it. But we have made clear to Iran that it can never be permitted to obtain a nuclear weapon. As President Biden has repeatedly reaffirmed, he will take the actions that are necessary to stand by this statement, including by recognizing Israel's freedom of action.

Now deterrence is not an end in itself, which brings me to the third element: diplomacy and de-escalation. Deterrence and the strength of our partners can help set the conditions for that, is a necessary companion to that, but diplomacy and de-escalation is also an important element of an effective and sustainable strategy. And every day, we are plugging away at proactive and creative diplomacy across the Middle East region.

Part of it has been the litany of things I talked about earlier in the speech, including the healing of the unnecessary Gulf rift, with the GCC now more unified than it has been in a long time; facilitating for the first time in history an agreed maritime boundary between Israel and Lebanon; [and] engaging proactively with Israelis and Palestinians, including in the run-up to this most recent Ramadan and Passover period, the first direct meetings between Israeli and Palestinian officials at a political level in nearly ten years. We've restored unity of purpose between the United States and Europe and much of the world against Iranian provocations: nuclear activities, brutal treatment of its own people, proliferation of weapons from Yemen to Ukraine. We've worked to de-escalate the civil conflict in Libya, setting conditions for power-sharing arrangements and ultimately UN-backed elections. And in perhaps the area of most focus for us when it comes to diplomacy and de-escalation, we have worked to enable the sustained de-escalation of the war in Yemen.

I want to pause for a moment on Yemen because it's where the strategy of deterrence and diplomacy interact and mutually reinforce one another in I think the clearest way of the last couple of years. In 2020 before we took office, Yemen was a red-hot conflict. The country was in a famine, diplomacy was stalled, the humanitarian crisis was real, and the violence was significant—not just in Yemen, but across the border into Saudi Arabia and beyond.

So in one of his very first days in office, President Biden went over to the State Department, gave a speech, and pledged to help end the war. He appointed an envoy, he implemented policy changes in arms sales, he made the hard decision to lift the FTO designation of the Houthis to prevent an even more dire humanitarian disaster, and he instructed me and my team to pursue an integrated approach to de-escalate and ultimately end this terrible conflict.

From day one, we've worked diplomatically to set the conditions for a UN-mediated truce, encouraging direct talks while also maintaining sanctions pressure on both the Houthis and their Iranian backers. We've worked to help Saudi Arabia and the UAE defend themselves against threats from Yemen and elsewhere while also refraining from support to offensive operations, while also increasing our interdiction posture against illicit cargoes heading for Yemen.

The outlines of the truce came into focus in late 2021 and then went into effect in March of 2022, to the skepticism of many—maybe even to the skepticism of me—because none of us really thought that we could be on the brink of a sustained period of calm and a de-escalation of violence and an alleviation of the humanitarian suffering, as we saw over the course of the next fourteen months up until this period. And as I mentioned, we are in now the most sustained period of peace since the war began nearly a decade ago. Humanitarian aid and fuel are flowing through Yemen's ports, the civilian airport in Sanaa has reopened, and the parties are actively in discussions on a roadmap to ultimately bring this war to an end.

Now, I would be the last person having worked this file over the course of the past couple of years to declare mission accomplished. We still have work to do. Our envoy is in the region banging away at this. It will be a significant topic of conversation when I am in Saudi Arabia this weekend. But it's worth reflecting on where this conflict stood three years ago compared to where it is now. And really the fundamental gumshoe diplomacy of hard work and activity from the United States and other close partners has been a critical part of that, and part of a broader notion that diplomacy and de-escalation is fundamentally in the interest of a more stable region and in the interest of the United States.

The fourth key element of our strategy is integration. A more integrated, interconnected Middle East empowers our allies and partners, advances regional peace and prosperity, and reduces the resource demands on the United States in this region over the long term without sacrificing our fundamental interests or our involvement in the region.

So we're actively building an integrated air and maritime defense architecture in the region. This is something that's been talked about for a long time, but it's now happening through innovative partnerships and through technology.

Some of you have visited the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain and seen this effort firsthand, including Task Force 59, which is using artificial intelligence in ways that are truly mind-blowing to secure the region's vital waterways. I give tremendous credit to Gen. [Michael] Kurilla and his team at CENTCOM as they continue to think creatively with partners throughout the region to protect and advance our shared interests in ways that really weren't even within contemplation just a few years ago.

We're enabling new energy and electricity connections through Iraq, the Gulf, and Jordan, and encouraging the largest international investment in Iraq's energy infrastructure in years.

We're supporting new trade deals between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain, between the UAE and India.

We're building trusted technology ecosystems through new Open RAN network technologies, and forging new investments in clean energy through partnerships with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

And we are working to strengthen and expand the Abraham Accords, supporting Israel's ultimate, final, complete integration into the Middle East region and the world. And this will be an area of continuing emphasis and focus for us over the coming period as we look to add more countries and to bring Israel even more deeply into the web of relationships in the Middle East and beyond.

All of this is key to a theory of achieving a more integrated, more prosperous, more stable region that serves the interests of our partners and the United States over the long term.

Finally: values. The values enshrined in the UN Charter and in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights cannot be separated from our interests. Just as we always strive to perfect our own democracy at home, we will always raise concerns regarding human rights and fundamental freedoms in our engagements around the world, including in the Middle East. That's exactly what President Biden did during his visits last year. It's exactly what he, I, and the entire national security team will continue to do.

Because as President Biden has said before, the future will be won by populations that unleash the full potential of their populations. That means women enjoying equal rights so they can fully contribute to their societies and economies. It means citizens having the right to question and criticize their leaders without fear of reprisals so [that] governments are actually accountable for delivering for their people. It means religious tolerance and protection of all minorities.

We have at various points in our history, I believe, been naive about what is possible to achieve in terms of transforming societies by force or by diktat. We are clear-eyed today, but that doesn't mean we have abandoned our values in this region. Where actors are not operating in ways consistent with our values—where they are not aligned with our vision for a good and just society on the basis of universal values as outlined in the UN Charter, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—we will speak out and we will do more than that. We will pursue change in a way we believe is far more likely to actually achieve results, and do so in a way that also will serve our long-term interests, because those interests are deeply connected to our values.

This includes making sure that we are pressing and pushing and continually reminding our partners that they signed up to the UN Charter. And nearly every U.S. partner in the region, I would point out, has voted twice in the UN General Assembly to condemn Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine.

It also means on a humanitarian basis we need to stay engaged and continue to provide the resources to the region to help people live better lives. We've remained the largest bilateral donor of humanitarian aid and support in the region, including in Yemen and in Syria. In fact, in Yemen we're not only working to end the war, we've also led a global effort to salvage the *Safer*, a tanker that threatens environmental disaster. On an urgent basis, that is a challenge that needs to be resolved.

Let me close today where I began in the discussion of our strategy—with partnerships. It's really the first principle for the Biden approach, both strengthening those we already have and developing new ones to address the fundamental set of challenges that occupy our minds in every region we encounter: food and health security, nuclear proliferation, climate change, secure supply chains, trusted technology ecosystems, and a stable basis upon which people can work to build a better life.

Because as the work of The Washington Institute exemplifies, the future of the United States is going to be defined as much by the energy transition, technological change, [and] demographic changes as it will by traditional security matters that have tended to dominate both U.S. policy and the discussions of a region that is now more dynamic and more capable of contributing to the larger solutions that are so necessary at this hinge point in history.

And in all of these areas, the United States is determined to be and to remain an essential partner of choice for the countries of this region. It is a comparative advantage of ours, and it's one of the ways in which we are determined to strengthen that advantage over the coming months as we increase our resilience at home and work to forge a more peaceful, integrated, and prosperous Middle East while we work with the countries of the region on this broader set of challenges.

So that's what we're trying to do. It is not without its challenges—Iran's nuclear program, continuing a need to finally bring an end to the war in Yemen, the continuing terrorist threat, continuing abuses of human rights. There are a number of ways in which there are challenges in this region that need to be contended with and dealt with head-on and straightforwardly in the realm of the traditional crisis diplomacy that all of us have had to deal with in working on this region—as the president did in Gaza, as we've had to do in Yemen and in other places. But the picture I'm trying to paint through these remarks today, and the future we're trying to build in partnership with a number of countries and other stakeholders in the region, is one that lifts our head up above the smoke of those crises and sees out to a genuine possibility at this moment of geopolitical competition and profound transnational

challenges, where we need partners to help us solve problems and where we need a Middle East that's fundamentally integrated from east to west into the wider world.

This is the set of tools that we're trying to bring to bear to produce that outcome. We think we have made progress on this, we think we have a long way to go, but we are going to keep at it every single day. And the next step on that is getting up at 5 a.m. on Saturday morning and getting on a plane and flying to Saudi Arabia, so that's what I will do.

I thank you very much for giving me the time to speak tonight.

Q&A with Robert Satloff

Satloff: Thank you very much for that tour de raison and comprehensive discussion of American policy in the Middle East. I'm very grateful, and I know everyone in this room is grateful, and trying to sift through what the meaning is behind some of your comments, what's the reading between the lines, and what we should take away from this very important talk.

So you're very kind to agree to take three questions from me. So I'm going to focus on three different themes that you just referred to: deterrence, integration, and partnership

So the first question I'm going to ask you is about deterrence. Now as you just reaffirmed, the president has committed himself like other presidents before him to ensuring that Iran does not achieve a nuclear weapon. And you affirmed as well that the preferred method to achieve this is diplomacy, but there are other means if necessary, if forced to. And we've heard from senior American officials recently as well that Iran may be as little as ten or twelve days away from a military-grade level of enrichment. And today the Israeli defense minister said in Greece that he believes Iran already has five bombs' worth of 60 percent enriched material.

So let me ask you: in your view, is our deterrent strategy working? And if we're short on that, what is the missing ingredient to strengthen our deterrence?

Sullivan: So let me start by saying as I did in my speech that the best way to stop Iran from getting a nuclear weapon is an effective agreement that stops them from getting a nuclear weapon. And I regard the decision to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal, the JCPOA, without anything to replace it or any strategy to deal with it other than the imposition of sanctions—which we have continued and added to actually—is not necessarily a pathway to a clear and straightforward answer to your question.

Because in my view, before the JCPOA, Iran was also sitting on multiple bombs' worth of lower-enriched-grade uranium, and the JCPOA forced them to basically get rid of all of that. And we should get back to a deal in which—whether it's five bombs or whatever it may be of 60 percent—that that also goes by the board.

So from my perspective we are back in a position that we were in before—where Iran is enriching, is advancing—and that this nuclear program poses a genuine challenge to our fundamental nonproliferation goals, and we remain determined to ensure that that challenge does not cross the line to Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon. And yes, we will take the necessary action to ensure that Iran does not acquire a nuclear weapon. At the end of the day, that's the fundamental test: Iran cannot have a nuclear weapon. They do not today, and they cannot have one.

Now, you know, some part of me is sort of like, "They're accumulating enriched uranium; they would not be accumulating enriched uranium if we were still in the deal; they are because we're not in the deal." So it's a kind of strange position for me to be in to kind of defend a strategy of being out of the deal when, you know, I was one of the people who helped kind of pave the way for it in the first place.

But what I will simply say is that on the deterrence side, working with our partners—including working very closely with Israel, including through that military exercise that I described before, but also through intensive sessions that I have personally participated in with everyone from the prime minister to the national security advisor to the minister of defense—we will continue to send a clear message about the costs and consequences of going too far, while at the same time continuing to seek the possibility of a diplomatically brokered outcome that puts Iran's nuclear program back in the box.

That is what we think is ultimately the best way to achieve the outcome we are looking for. And we think the best way to do that also is to do it flanked by allies and partners who are fundamentally bought into our strategy. And that includes our European allies and partners who have joined us on both the deterrence side and the diplomacy side.

So this is an issue that occupies the president's attention, my attention, on a daily basis. Iran's program has advanced considerably. It is a genuine danger to regional security and to global security, and, indeed, to the United States of America. And we are going to continue to take action to, yes, deter Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, and then to seek a diplomatic solution that puts this on a long-term pathway of stability.

Satloff: Thank you very much. Let me move to another one of your themes, which was integration. I think it's fair to say that the pot of gold at the end of the regional integration rainbow is a Saudi-Israeli agreement on peace and normalization. In a moment of shameless self-promotion, I have [this new study \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saudi-normalization-israel-domestic-transformation-and-us-policy\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saudi-normalization-israel-domestic-transformation-and-us-policy) out (I can do this after thirty years, and I'm paying for dinner), the basic argument of which is that ultimately the key variable in achieving a Saudi-Israeli normalization deal is Washington, is our willingness to engage with both parties, put assets on the table, and negotiate concessions and benefits for all sides—like occurred in previous normalization deals and peace agreements that go back to Camp David; this is not such a brilliant insight.

But my question to you is, we've had a roller coaster relationship between Washington and Riyadh. Is it your view that this administration has both the interest and bandwidth to invest in that sort of agreement?

Sullivan: The straightforward answer is yes and yes, we have the interest and bandwidth to promote normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

And in fact it's this administration that has produced the first tangible step of these two countries coming close together with the opening of the airspace over Saudi Arabia for civilian flights from Israel. But ultimately getting to full normalization is a declared national security interest of the United States, we have been clear about that.

Now as a sign of my seriousness about how much we are focused on this and how seriously we are taking this, I'm not going to say anything further lest I upset the efforts we are undertaking on this issue.

Satloff: Okay, thank you. The last question I want to ask is on one of your other themes, the theme of partnership. To his great credit, President Biden is one of the rare American politicians who is proud to call himself a Zionist and has worn that mantle for decades. Recently, he has sent sort of tremors through the Israeli political system by noting that the current prime minister—someone he has said he “loves”—is not at the moment being invited to Washington. Could you tell us a bit about under what circumstances we can expect to see a visit by the prime minister of Israel to Washington?

Sullivan: I'll just say when we've got a visit to announce, we'll announce it. There's not some set of conditions or circumstances. You know the president has had a very long relationship with Prime Minister Netanyahu, and we remain deeply engaged with the Israeli government day by day, so a lot of the sturm und drang in the media I think has been very much overblown.

I would just say yesterday I had a secure video conference with my counterpart the national security advisor, and the prime minister dropped in on the video conference to have a discussion. So this notion that, you know, somehow we're trying to send some signal—our basic view is, you know, when the time is right, and when we have a visit to announce, we'll announce it. And until then, I think kind of speculating or describing or trying to set any conditions around it just doesn't comport with the way Joe Biden does business, and never has done business anywhere, especially with a country he loves like Israel and with prime ministers he's dealt with for a very long time. So I'll just leave it at that.

Satloff: Very good. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in thanking National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan.

The Soref Symposium is The Washington Institute's premier annual meeting, bringing together members from across the United States for in-depth discussions on Middle East policy with Institute scholars as well as officials from the United States and abroad. ❖

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[2023 Soref Symposium Post-Keynote Panel](/policy-analysis/2023-soref-symposium-post-keynote-panel)

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May 4, 2023

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Sabina Henneberg,
Sarah Yerkes

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April 28, 2023



Andrew J. Tabler

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