

Background Press Call on Broad Middle East Regional Year-End Discussion

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Briefing Room

• Press Briefings

(Via Teleconference)

11:09 A.M. EST

MODERATOR: Thank you, Carolyn and everyone. Good morning. Thanks for joining us for today's broad Middle East regional year-end discussion. Today's briefing is on background and attributable to a senior administration official. The briefing is embargoed until the conclusion.

For your awareness, our senior administration official is [senior administration official], but for the purposes of the remainder of this call, he will be referred to as a "senior administration official."

We'll have a little more time because we started a little later, so I just wanted to let you know that at the top as well.

With that, I'll turn it over to our senior administration official for opening remarks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks. And thanks, everybody, for joining us.

We thought what we would do towards the end of the year here is just kind of give a broad overview of President Biden's policy in the Middle East and — region of Middle East and North Africa. And it's not always at the top of the headlines these days, which is fine for those of us working on it, with the exception, of course, of issues like Iran and Iran's nuclear program, which I can also address.

But I really just wanted to step back and kind of what is President's Biden's charge to us and what we've been working to do here over these past 10 months.

And I think, after some hard lessons learned over the last 20 years — and I think it's fair to say a kind of singular focus of American foreign policy on the Middle East region in particular — but also, since the attacks of 9/11, across the last three administrations, setting, really, maximalist and quite grandiose goals in this most volatile region of the world: regional transformation; democratization through nation building; regime changes — really, multiple regime changes. You can kind of go down the list of the objectives and the end states that were identified.

And we really just kind of concluded that, you know, setting these types of objectives, the ends totally outstrip the means.

And so, President Biden's charge to us, being a practical-minded leader in particular, and recognizing global powers, global responsibilities, but that this region also is tied up with vital interests for the United States, which are not going away. And we need to remain deeply committed.

So what we've been trying to do is really just get back — back to basics. And what I mean by that are the basics of sound strategy and statecraft: So, setting goals after a careful study of facts on the grounds; some consultation with partners, being very cognizant that we want to make sure that ends and means align; focusing on our comparative advantage of alliance building, alliance maintenance, and alliance strengthening; using diplomacy — being ambitious in the use of diplomacy to de-escalate tensions wherever we can, and to further integrate different countries in this region, many of whom have not had ties before.

So, just with that, a kind of topper, if you can indulge me, I'll just go through, you know, issue by issue on what we deal with.

And I'll start with Israel. And again, back to basics. And a basic, fundamental principle, to President Biden — as he often says: If Israel did not exist, we would have to invent it. And the security of Israel is first and foremost in his mind and ours.

And I think you can see that from his personal hands-on engagement during the 11-day Gaza conflict earlier this year, a conflict that had all the ingredients to go on for — the last Hamas-Israel war that went on for almost 57 days — I think that had all the ingredients this time around as well. But with a lot of — a lot of very quiet diplomacy and very hands-on diplomacy from the President, the war ended in 11 days.

And then, subsequently, I think has not gotten enough — or as much attention is the work we've done since, particularly with Egypt, which has been a critical partner in trying to ensure that we sustain the peace in Gaza.

And President Biden has had two calls with President Sisi, Jake Sullivan was in Cairo a couple of months ago, and we're in regular contact with our partners in Cairo and in Israel to make sure that we were able to sustain the peace coming out of that conflict.

I think we've also restored American contact with the Palestinians, which had basically been severed, and looking to build on that foundation as we look towards the future. And President Biden remains committed — very committed — to a two-state solution.

So — but Israel is central to and the security of Israel is central to, obviously, our policies across the Middle East region, and Iran plays into that, which I will come to later.

In the Gulf: I think when we came in, we had a situation of pretty heightened tensions across the Gulf. I think it's fair to say now, the rift between Gulf States is pretty much healed. We saw — we just saw a pretty successful GCC Summit in Saudi Arabia. And it's

because of our web of relations in the Gulf that we were able to evacuate 120,000 Afghans out of Afghanistan in August. And without those partnerships and those platforms, that just really could not have been done.

We've looked, you know, pretty closely and have tried, as best we can, to encourage de-escalatory trends, not only in the Gulf, but outside. Channels of communication have opened up between Saudi Arabia and Iran; I think we're very realistic about that process. But we do think it's better to have open channels of communication than not. It can reduce risk of miscalculation — similarly between the UAE and other Gulf states and Iran. But also, I think, these countries are making clear to Iran that the only way, really, to have any sort of normalized trade, normalized relations is if Iran returns to the nuclear deal, because that's the only way that U.S. sanctions will come off.

President Biden, of course, has spoken with King Salman; he's spoken with the Crown Prince of UAE twice; spoken with the Emir of Kuwait, the Emir of Qatar; and has been quite involved throughout this process.

And, of course, human rights is central to all of these conversations, many of them quiet conversations. But, you know, our values are really front and center here in our relations with our Gulf partners, but also — and we make clear to this publicly and privately — very committed to the defense of our Gulf partners.

I think Saudi Arabia in particular, we have helped the Saudis quite a bit. When we came in, in January, the ability to defeat particularly unmanned aerial vehicles that were being fired from Yemen; we were having some difficulty with that. We put an awful lot of effort into that, and the Saudis are now defeating 9 out of 10 of those attacks. And we, of course, want to make sure that reaches 10 of 10. And that's an awful, awful lot of our work, day to day.

Just turning north, in Iraq: We've focused, really, since January on investing in Iraq's institutions and their electoral process through the United Nations. We had a successful unanimous vote in the U.N. Security Council to support an international monitoring mission for Iraq's election that was held in October.

That election, by all accounts, by the observers from the U.N. and also from the EU, was one of Iraq's most successful elections. There's really no serious question about its integrity. And the Iraqis are now in the process, of course, of certifying the results, and then they'll get on with government formation. But that took a lot of effort to ensure that those elections came off, and they came off — they came off well.

Also focused on — I talked about integration early on — integrating Iraq into the neighborhood. And there was a Baghdad summit earlier this year, about two months ago, which brought nearly the entire region and heads of state from the Gulf, from Egypt, from Jordan, and the Foreign Minister of Iran, as well, together with the President of France, for a summit — just making clear the importance of the stability in Iraq to the broader region, something we're very committed to.

We also inherited a situation in Iraq that really flowed from the military strike against Qasem Soleimani in January of 2020, in which attacks against U.S. facilities and personnel just dramatically accelerated. We're sometimes told that, you know, after that attack, the Iranians stood down and attacks against us stopped. That's just not what the facts show.

The strike against Soleimani was on January 3rd. In March, two American soldiers were killed, plus a British soldier, a member of our coalition. And those attacks kind of continued all the way through the beginning of the Biden administration.

In December of 2020, we had rounds falling on our embassy compound. We were flying B-52 bombers from North Dakota to the Gulf in a show of deterrence. And this is what we walked into. And so these attacks were continuing as we came in. And we've used a combination of deterrence, including two rounds of airstrikes, and also a lot of diplomacy to both deter and also de-escalate some of these tensions.

So, since July, we've had about five months of calm — so, the longest period of calm we've had in Iraq, I think, really in three years. And we're looking for that to continue. But, of course, we very much anticipate — heading into the first part of next year, there's just a number of — there's the anniversary of the Soleimani strike, there's Iraq's government formation process, and a few other milestones that some of these attacks might start up again. But we'll, of course, be very ready for that and prepared.

In Syria, next door, another hotspot: Syria, in the last year, has seen — what I think is fair to say — one of the quietest years since the beginning of the civil war, over a decade ago. And that's something that we want to make sure that that civil war violence, which has just convulsed the country year after year — it was in a de-escalatory trend as we came in, and we've tried to lock that in with a lot of very quiet diplomacy to achieve commitments to ceasefires across the country.

And so, the civil war violence in the country, I think, is at, again, one of the lowest points in 10 years. And we want to maintain that.

We're also committed to maintaining our military presence in Syria because ISIS remains a serious problem, and the risk of resurgence of ISIS is there.

We have prison facilities in Northeast Syria with tens of thousands of people, including thousands of ISIS fighters and foreign fighters, and so that remains a very important objective.

The humanitarian situation in Syria: As civil war violence is down to one of the slowest points, the humanitarian situation is quite serious. We worked to secure unanimous U.N. Security Council resolution — first time there was unanimous resolution on this — to maintain cross-border access into Northwest Syria. There used to be three or four of these. Unfortunately, in 2020, the renewal closed ~~two~~ [three] of those access points. And the Russians were threatening to veto [the final one] as we walked in the door in January.

And so, we worked very close — hard — very hard with France and other partners and, of course, directly with the Russians, coming out of President Biden's summit in Geneva with President Putin, to secure that unanimous cross-border resolution.

We — finally, we have not lifted or waived any sanctions on the Assad regime. In fact, we've added sanctions on the Assad regime for human rights violations twice. But we have also clarified through our Treasury Department that our sanctions do not cover the kind of daily activities of life for Syrians — humanitarian activities, but also what we call early recovery activities.

It doesn't make sense, if we heard from the ICRC and others, that they can deliver water bottles to communities in Syria but they're prohibited, because of the chilling effects of our sanctions, from maintaining a water treatment plant, for example.

So, we've made clear that our sanctions do not cover those activities. Our sanctions are designed to pressure the Assad regime itself, not the Syrian people. And we've worked quite hard to clarify that.

Just across North Africa, I mentioned Egypt has a critical role in the Gaza conflict and to the security of Israel. We think our relations between Egypt and Israel are really at a high point.

We've also been, of course, very focused on the human rights dialogue with Egyptians. We had a strategic dialogue here between Tony Blinken and Egypt's foreign minister about a month ago. And for the first time, our administration did not issue a human rights waiver for \$130 million in FMF funding for Egypt.

Across North Africa: In Tunisia, we have seen some Democratic backsliding, but we've been working with President Saied and other members of the Tunisian political establishment to at least now get in place a roadmap for a full return to democratic normalcy.

In Libya, we have invested in the electoral process with an election that is scheduled for later this year. And it may slip a bit as they're still finalizing about 70 candidates on the list for presidents. A few of them are quite controversial. And they're still finalizing that.

And we have Stephanie Williams now in place as the Secretary General's representative on the ground, a former U.S. diplomat now representing the U.N. on the ground. She's doing great job. She just got out there a couple of days ago to try to work the political process and keep the electoral process on track, which we think is quite important.

And Vice President Harris represented our administration in Paris a month ago at a summit on the Libya political process.

Finally, on Morocco and Algeria and the conflict in Western Sahara: We now have a U.N. Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, one of the world's most experienced diplomats. We worked closely with the parties and with the Moroccans to ensure Staffan was appointed to

that post. And he is now hard at work, which we think is quite important for keeping that conflict in check and trying to find a political resolution.

Lebanon: One thing we want to try to make sure is that we don't have any more failed states in the Middle East region. Failed states open vacuums, and those vacuums are not filled by moderates, they're filled by extremist actors on all sides and become kind of proxy fights by regional powers.

Lebanon had all the signs of a potential failing — a potential failed state. We worked quite hard, quite quietly, but Dorothy Shea, our ambassador in Beirut, and working with France and others, and to — plus putting sanctions on particularly corrupt individuals of Lebanon's political system, because we're making clear that the only people that can save Lebanon are the Lebanese and particularly the Lebanese political leaders who have to make hard choices to save their country. So, a combination of carrots and sticks.

Lebanon has a new government now led by Prime Minister Mikati. We are in close touch with him. Our Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Victoria Nuland, has traveled to Beirut. Our Senior Advisor on Energy at the State Department, Amos Hochstein, has traveled to Beirut, working on very important Egypt-Lebanon — a gas deal with backing for the World Bank, which is getting underway and we think quite important for maintaining — maintaining stability and trying to get Lebanon out of the crisis that it's in.

So, an awful lot of work is going on behind the scenes on Lebanon as we move forward.

Nearby, in Jordan, we had King Abdullah here visiting President Biden this summer. U.S. relations with Jordan, for reasons that are hard to understand, were quite strained over the last three years. We think that has been restored, and we feel very confident in our partnership with Jordan. We're doing an awful lot, of course, to help Jordan's stability, just given that it has been beset by crises, starting with the Iraq War and then the Syrian civil war, and over a million Syrian refugees that it has to house and care for.

And so we're very focused on our partnership with Jordan and making sure that it can maintain its stability as it faces these challenges.

And the relationship with Israel and Jordan also, we think, is reaching a high point, particularly with the new government of Prime Minister Bennett. And that's something also that we are continuing to encourage.

Across the region, the Abraham Accords: We've made clear from beginning — I think when the UAE announced its Abraham Accord with Israel, President Biden was a candidate and issued a statement right away, noting his — the importance of that event and his support for those new connections across the region. And we've worked to strengthen the existing Abraham Accords, and we are working quietly but quite assiduously to expand the Abraham Accords. And so, these things take some time, but they're very much a focus of ours.

Kind of stepping back — and then I'll turn to Iran to end. But stepping back, this is a region beset by other problems: borderless problems, climate change, pandemics, migration. So, we're really focused on trying to encourage regional integration wherever we can and cooperation across borders. The Abraham Accords are a part of that, and a number of other initiatives are a part of that as well.

One thing we have worked on and is now starting to manifest itself is the initiative of Build Back Better World. With over a trillion dollars of investment in our own infrastructure at home, we're also focused on winning the future: investments in rare earth minerals, essential medicines, energy renewables, semiconductors, et cetera; ports across Africa, precious resources, health, climate, technology.

And our Deputy National Security Advisor for International Economic Affairs, Daleep Singh, and Amos Hochstein, our Senior Advisor for Energy at the State Department, and Don Graves, our Deputy Secretary of Commerce were recently in the Middle East talking about partnerships for the Build Back Better World Initiative, which I think will be a real theme as we head into 2022.

I'll finally — I'll conclude with Iran, because Iran is a perennial challenge that has vexed multiple presidencies. In this case, we inherited a situation in which the United States of America was isolated when it came to the Iran challenge. And we had a theory of the case.

First of all, we believed that getting out of the JCPOA without any plan for what comes next led to exactly what I think would have been predicted: a rapidly escalating Iranian nuclear program; Iranian regional behavior that is even more aggressive than it was before, particularly in 2019, with a direct state-on-state attack between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and with no discernible U.S. response.

So, we wanted to rebuild the united diplomatic front, particularly with the P5+1 negotiating partners. And that took some effort, because to do that, we also had to demonstrate that we were prepared to return to compliance with our side of the deal.

And over the spring and summer, we did that. And we had about six rounds of talks in Vienna. And I think the Iranians, particularly now, are the isolated party. It's pretty clear that in return for its nuclear compliance with the JCPOA, we are prepared to return to compliance with our side. But the Iranians, to date, have not agreed to take the steps that it would need to take on the nuclear side, which is why we've been stuck.

The last two rounds with the new Iranian government — I think the Iranians were surprised, two weeks ago, when they met what really was the united diplomatic front, not just the E3 and the United States, but also Russia and China. They went back to Tehran. We're in the middle of another round now in Vienna, which is probably going to take a pause after today. And I'll be getting a report from our Vienna team shortly.

But the bottom line is: Iran's nuclear program is rapidly accelerating. And I'm repeating myself here, but this should not have been a surprise to anybody that knows Iranian behavior and would have predicted exactly what would have happened if the United

States just unilaterally left the deal without any plan or conception of what would come next.

So, we've been working diplomatically to get this problem back in a box, to return Iran to nuclear compliance with the deal. And we think we have very strong support in that regard, not just from the three, but also from Russia, in particular, and even China. So, we have a united front in Vienna, for the most part. And our partners around the world are also making clear to the Iranians that the only way for Iran to get out of the economic straightjacket that it's in is through a return to commitments of the nuclear deal.

So this is obviously a story that will play out over the first quarter of 2022 and perhaps beyond. And it is, I think, a central focus of ours, as we focus on this region.

So, with that, [senior administration official], I'll turn it over to you for any questions.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much.

Operator, please remind everyone of the instructions to ask questions, and then we will take our first question.

Q Thank you. Thanks. I had a couple of really brief questions, mostly about the Gulf. You spoke about how relations have improved, both among countries in the region and with the United States. On the F-35 sales to the UAE: The UAE has been pretty clear that it sees roadblocks in completing that sale because, by its account, the United States has not agreed to certain technological add-ons to the planes that it feels are necessary. Could you talk about where those negotiations are now?

And with — you mentioned the recent GCC conference, which was chaired by MBS. He said, at the end of those talks, that he felt like the Gulf region had been excluded from the Iran negotiations and that Saudi Arabia, in particular, deserved a seat at the table for it to continue. I wonder if you could address both those questions.

And finally, on Syria: I may be wrong, but I think the access renewal that was voted on at the U.N. technically expires this month. And what's required in order to make sure it continues? And have you presented the required report, and is it possible to make that public? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks, Karen. On the UAE and the F-35, again, I think we are — we remain very much committed to that sale. This is a very complicated sale. Few partners around the world have the F-35 technology, and we're — we feel proud that UAE can be one of those countries. But, of course, to conclude that, we have to conclude some arrangements.

I think there's some things that the UAE has asked for that were answered by the last administration. And so, we've been working through this with them. And we also have some concerns that have to be worked out.

So, you know, some of these sales — UAE just concluded a sale of 80 Rafale fighters with France. I think that was negotiated over almost a decade to replace their Mirage fleet. The UAE has an excellent fleet of F-16s, and the F-35, of course, will give them just a second-to-none capability.

So, we're working through those issues. The UAE had a military delegation in town, two days ago, for meetings at the Pentagon that I think were quite constructive, and so we continue to work on that.

On the GCC, I didn't see those particular comments, but I would say: You know, we have been very clear — and this is coming from a charge we have from President Biden — we're not negotiating behind the backs of anyone.

And so everything we were doing is with full transparency to our partners in the Middle East region. In fact, Rob Malley and our negotiating team were in Saudi Arabia — I think about two and a half, three weeks ago — and met with the entire GCC, and they issued united statements on the path that we're on.

And also, I think there's recognition in the Gulf that getting back in the deal, given where we are, is probably the best course of action.

On Syria, the U.N. Security Council resolution, while it has to — the Secretary-General issues a report about humanitarian access in the country generally. And after that report, I think the resolution continues through next summer.

Q Thank you so much for doing this. I hope you do more; we have so many questions about the Middle East. So, brief, Iran has doubled the IRGC budget for this — for 2022, this year — next year — to reach \$22 billion, and also, it's increased its conventional military budget to \$8 billion. Do you see this as an escalation towards the region and more money to the proxies to cause more havoc?

On Iraq, you said that the election was a success. Do you see that the pro-Iran militias are trying to prevent the certification of the election results, and this will prevent a new government from being formed?

And finally, on Libya, you just mentioned that there was some controversial candidates. Do you encourage the election to be held — held on time? Or do you think that it's better to have a better system that will allow the election to be more transparent and be delayed? Thank you so much.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks, Nadia. And I will — I will commit to doing more of these — and [moderator] is on and hears me — as we head into next year, because I think these are really important and complicated issues. And obviously, with everything going on in the world sometimes, it might not get the attention.

But I — the one thing I will say: You know, the Middle East remains just a central focus of ours, just given the — how it's so wrapped up with U.S.'s interest. I mean, I think, at least every day in the PDB, there's at least one or two items from this region. And this

President reads the PDB every day. And so it's a — it's a central feature of our foreign policy. Even as a global power, we're focused on issues all around the world.

Yeah, so the Iranians are coming out with their new budget. I think it takes a 20 percent hit from last year. So, I don't know — it doesn't — it is not signal that the Iranians are in great economic shape.

Of course, after the first round of Vienna, their currency collapsed to a record low. And I would say we have kept, you know, all the sanctions on.

What I think is different is that the last administration had sanctions on in pursuit of no clear, discernible objectives, whereas we have a very clear objective: Iran needs to return to nuclear compliance. And at least that set of sanctions that were tied to the JCPOA, we return to compliance as well.

You know, their investment in proxies — the State Department has put out figures over the years — they spend about \$2 billion a year on proxies. This is not a problem — when it comes to Iran's regional behavior — that sanctions alone are going to address.

So, I have not delved into the new Iranian budget and the line items, but I know it's almost a 20 percent hit from last year.

But, of course, they will continue to invest in proxies and IRGC and others. And, of course, we will continue to use tools that we can to deter and de-escalate. I mean, the themes of deterrence, integration, and de-escalation, I think, are pretty consistent across our approach to the region, particularly when it comes to Iran.

On Iraq — yeah, so they had an election. [Redacted]. I was just in Iraq last week. And I think the vote will be certified by the Supreme Court at some point over the coming weeks. And then the Iraqis will get on with forming a government. I think that process often takes time. It sometimes leads to volatility.

We support Iraq's institutions, and we're very clear about that. And so, I think we'd leave it to the Iraqis to sort out the precise makeup of the — of the next government.

What was most important to us with this election was — it had the integrity and the — met international standards, which it clearly did. And I think that was not a sure thing, if you go back to the spring and where things were headed.

But I think with a vote in the U.N. Security Council, the U.N. monitors, international monitors, and the work of the international — the Iraqi Electoral Commission did together with the U.N. to set up a system that was almost fraud-proof I think is a real testament to the Iraqis and, frankly, their commitment to democracy, which is why they were a prominent invitee to the President's Summit on Democracy. And Prime Minister Kadhimi addressed that summit with the President on the first day.

Libya — kind of similar. They had an election set for December 24th. It might slip a little bit. It is really an issue right now — the final candidate list.

And here, too, I think there's great international support for this process. But what is most important are that Libyans have really led this. I mean, the registration for this election has been — set by historical standards — matches, I think, almost any country you can point to, with 2.5 million Libyans registered for this election.

And the Libyans have made clear they want this election to happen. And so, they're working out some final details, particularly on the candidate list.

Stephanie Williams is on the ground. Dick Norland, our ambassador, is doing a great job in coordinating with, you know, everybody in North Africa, our European partners, to try to do what we can to encourage and facilitate. But it's really ultimately up to the Libyans.

Over.

Q Hi, thanks so much for doing this. I was hoping I was going to get a question per country, but I'm going to follow the lead of my colleagues and just stick to two.

I want to ask you about Syria first, in particular where things stand with efforts to find solutions with the Russians. You talked about "very quiet diplomacy." I think you were speaking mainly about Syrian parties, but I wanted to talk about maybe the Russian element too, you know, sort of outside of your world in the Middle East.

Obviously, there's the situation in Ukraine right now, and the administration is obviously looking for areas where they can work with the Russians and find diplomatic, you know, kind of alternatives to what's happening there. And so, I was wondering if there's going to be greater emphasis on talks to have cooperation in Syria. That's my first question.

My second one is with regard to Yemen. You know, obviously, the President had committed to bringing peace to Yemen in his first year, and we're far from that. Efforts have been frustrating and frustrated, on the administration side, with regard to getting the Houthis to scale back attacks, but also the Saudis continue their airstrikes.

And so, you know, can you just kind of update us on where the talks stand there and whether or not you see any potential for breakthrough anytime soon? And what does the U.S. do? What's plan B if there is no breakthrough? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks, Vivian. On Syria, it's not so much looking for areas to cooperate with Russia; it's just — I think going back to the theme of kind of the practical realities and dealing with them: The Russians are in Syria. They're a player in Syria. Our military is in Syria, in close proximity to Russia's military.

So, we have to have channels of communication with the Russians on Syria. And it was a topic — agenda topic with President Biden and President Putin in Geneva. And it's really out of that meeting that led to some pretty constructive diplomacy between our diplomats and the Russians, which led to that unanimous U.N. Security Council resolution.

I will also say: I think we have reduced the tensions between the U.S. and Russia in Syria. That's something that is good, because we do not want the U.S. troops and Russian forces, you know, bumping into each other. We need to have channels of deconfliction, which we have, and also, you know, just some understandable rules of the road between us. So, that's quite important.

We also, of course, do support the U.N. Security Council process in Syria — 2254. And while I think that process — for anyone who's followed the Syria conflict — has some ways to go. I'll put it there. And I was part of the group that put together 2254 some years ago.

We have worked, through the Russians and others, to try to get that process moving. And for the first time ever, the head of the Constitutional Committee of the opposition and the regime met face-to-face in Geneva. And we support Geir Pedersen's process.

But again, with the reality and the — that — again, that process is not going to lead to an outcome anytime soon. It's going to take an awful lot of work.

Yemen, too. I think we're very realistic about the Yemen conflict. The Yemen conflict right now is focused on one town in North Central Yemen — Marib. The Houthis are determined to take it. And the Yemeni government is determined to hold it. And that battle has been going on for about six months. And every diplomatic initiative has basically run into the buzzsaw of the Marib Battle.

Most of the airstrikes are in that area. They are focused on military targets. But that has really been the focus.

With Tim Lenderking on our team, and Hans Grundberg, the new U.N. envoy, there's an awful lot of diplomatic activity through the Omanis and others — first, to try to make sure the war is contained on that front, and also to ensure that humanitarian aid is reaching the Yemeni people.

And so, I'm not going to predict any diplomatic outcomes, but it remains a central focus of ours, even as we continue to work with the Saudis to ensure that they could protect their territory.

I'm told I have to run to the West Wing very quick, so maybe I can take one more?

MODERATOR: And this will be the final question.

Q Hey, thank you. Thanks very much. You said the Iran nuclear program is escalating rapidly. What is the current estimate of the breakout time for an Iranian nuclear weapon?

Secondly, what have you told the UAE in terms of skirting sanctions on Iran? And what did you tell the UAE to convince them not to let the Chinese build that military port? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So, I don't want to get into precise calculations of breakout time. This is — there's kind of a science to this, and I'm not — I'm not the expert, and I defer to our proliferation experts.

But it is — it's really short; I'd just put it that way, Steve, and it's unacceptably short.

And, you know, the Iranians made the decision when the U.S. got out of the nuclear deal — they held back for a little while, but then starting in 2019, they just unleashed their nuclear program. And that has just continued apace. And for every day they spin centrifuges and for every day they stockpile uranium, the breakout time continues to shrink.

So, that's the whole reason we did a nuclear deal back in 2015, 2016. It is a very, very serious problem, and it's an international problem. And we have sought to keep that focus.

This is an international problem. It's not just a problem for the United States of America. It's not just a problem for Israel. This is an international problem.

It was a topic of the conversation between President Putin and President Biden just two weeks ago. Of course, Ukraine was a central topic, but Iran and the talks in Vienna was very much on the agenda.

So, I can't give you a precise timeframe on breakout, but it is — it is alarming.

On UAE, I don't think I'll get too much into that, Steve. I'm sorry, but the China — the China challenge, of course, intersects in the Middle East. We recognize that China is going to be the largest trading partner with many of the Gulf countries in particular. But there are certain areas of Chinese activity that would impinge upon our ability to continue particular activities in these countries and longstanding partnerships.

I think we have had a very, very good and very constructive discussion. My counterpart here in the NSC, [redacted], is [senior administration official]. I think our teams really work interchangeably about the conversation of China and telling the countries in my part of the world exactly what we're seeing and what to be careful of. And I think that's been a very fruitful endeavor and I think something unique thus far to the Biden administration.

On UAE and sanctions, it's not so much the UAE government, it is kind of private companies, many of which will change their names to facilitate a sanctions evasion.

Our Director of OFAC, Andrea Gacki, was just in UAE and really focused meetings in Dubai with private industry to make clear that sanctions are in place, we're prepared to enforce sanctions further, and that, you know, if you're evading sanctions, the U.S. will have its eye very much on you. There will be consequences.

So, I think Andrea's trip there was very important. But it's really a conversation focused particularly on the — kind of the private companies and industry that are in the sanctions evasion game.

So, with that, I apologize; I could go on for some time. I hope this was constructive, because there's a lot of issues in the Middle East region that are worth — that are worth the focus. And I'm happy to address your questions. But I have to run across the street,

which I think exemplifies the fact that this region takes a great deal of our time, but mindful — to go back to my first — my opening — back to basics.

We're not trying to achieve the unachievable; we're not trying to transform the Middle East. We're focused on the interests that impact Americans and our national security, and the national security of our friends. And we think those are achievable aims with deterrence, de-escalation, integration being three themes we're pursuing.

So, with that, I thank you very much. I hope to do it again soon.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Also, thank you all for participating this morning with our senior administration official. As our SAO has said, we will work to do more of these in the coming year in order to get to more of your questions.

With that, the call is now over and the embargo has lifted. Thank you.

11:51 A.M. EST

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