

The Iran Crisis, #2: Bill Quandt on Trump's crazy decisionmaking, Gulf Arab politics, and more

Transcript of the conversation Helena Cobban had with Bill Quandt on 2/26/2026. The video is [here](#).

[Helena Cobban]

Hi, everybody. I'm Helena Cobban, President of Just World Educational. Welcome to episode two of our special series on the Iran conflict.

Today, I'm super delighted to have as my guest Bill Quandt, who is a well-known specialist on both on US national security decision-making and on the affairs of West Asia, including the Gulf region. So, Bill, it's great to have you with us.

[Bill Quandt]

Nice to be with you.

[Helena Cobban]

So, leaping right in here, Bill Quandt, you have worked inside the White House for presidents of both parties and have studied national security decision-making for many years. What do you make of the apparent chaos with which President Trump conducts even the most momentous parts of his foreign policy, like the current confrontation with Iran?

[Bill Quandt]

Well, to say the least, it's a distinctive style of foreign policy. Most American presidents have taken foreign policy quite seriously, really, from World War II onwards. The United States has had a huge role to play in international affairs, and most presidents have taken it seriously and have tried to surround themselves with fairly serious secretaries of state and national security advisors to help them deal with really difficult problems in the world.

And they haven't always done very well. I mean, we've had a lot of bad decisions made, Vietnam War and other things. But Trump is distinctive in that he seems to have, first, very little real knowledge about international affairs.

He mentions things anecdotally, but his depth of knowledge seems to be extremely thin. And he hasn't tried to compensate for that. There have been other presidents who haven't known a great deal when they came to office about foreign affairs, but they then usually try to at least appoint some fairly serious advisors, secretaries of state, national security advisors, to help them, because it is a serious matter for the United States, how it conducts its relations with allies and with adversaries.

This president doesn't seem to think that way. He thinks he can improvise and, in some sense, fake his way through so many of the international issues that confront him. And he doesn't take seriously the need to even be very attentive to what you just called the factual world.

He says things that are manifestly untrue and doesn't seem to pay much of a price for it. And it's part of his style. He's a TV personality from beginning to end.

And that almost precludes him making any room for serious advisors who might stand up to him, tell him he's on the wrong track. And he doesn't want to be told that. You can see he has a very fragile ego in some ways.

And therefore, he doesn't want strong advisors around him who might make him look less competent than they are. So it's kind of a, I don't know, a shit show of sorts. You know, you just have somebody at the top and the people advising him who are either ignorant or intimidated by him.

And therefore, what I think maybe the exceptions would be the Defense Department, which has big responsibilities for managing things, has to be a little bit more coherent in the way they advise him and probably the intelligence services.

[Helena Cobban]

So if you look at the Defense Department, which now is called the War Department, but I won't use that term. Yeah, but there's a clear distinction, both in my view and in operational terms between the Secretary of Defense, who is Pete Hegseth, who is one of the arch sycophants of President Trump. And then there's the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Brigadier General Dan Caine, who apparently last week on Wednesday of last week, that would have been about February the 18th, actually, by all reports, told the President that it was not a shoo-in to attack Iran, and that there was a real possibility of casualties.

And of course, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is the person who has to take responsibility, in essence, for any casualties. He is the one who has to send the officers to the homes of the deceased or of the wounded and explain that your son or daughter got killed. Pete Hegseth doesn't seem to take any responsibility for that at all.

But it was kind of reassuring at one level that apparently General Caine stood up to the President. Have I gotten that wrong?

[Bill Quandt]

No, I don't think so. I mean, I don't have any inside knowledge on this. But whatever has been leaked about the advice from the professional military seems to be what you would hope you would be hearing, that this is not going to be a cakewalk the way the Operation Venezuela turned out to be.

It's a much more complicated task, and probably with some explanation of what could go wrong and what might very well be ill advised in this case. I mean, we're in a very, very different strategic setting, talking about the Persian Gulf, which is, you know, filled with

ships and oil shipments and gas shipments, and where Iran, after all, is a much larger country. It's much more difficult for the United States to operate militarily in that vicinity.

I think for years, the American military has been very averse to the idea of getting deeply involved militarily with Iran.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, and that resonates very deeply in Trump's own MAGA base with, you know, their slogan of America First is also built on the experience of having had, you know, scores of thousands of young men and women returned from foreign engagements, whether in Iraq or Afghanistan or wherever, either, you know, in body boxes, either in coffins or very badly damaged, both physically and mentally. So, you know, those are people from his MAGA base. And I would hope he would listen to them, but he's obviously, he's got other voices whispering in his ear.

Notably, Prime Minister Netanyahu, how do you actually see Israel's influence on Trump in the current crisis? Do you see any differences between them?

[Bill Quandt]

Yes, I think that there are differences. I mean, a year ago, almost a year ago, when we had the 12-day war, it was clear that the Israelis were delighted to draw the United States into doing the part of the military operation in Iran that was beyond their capabilities. They could start confrontation with Iran, and they could probably hit some of the targets that with American help that were important to them, but they couldn't damage the nuclear facilities on their own.

So they wanted to draw the United States in at a minimum for doing that part of the job, and hoping that would also lead to regime change. I think for the Israelis, getting rid of the regime government in Iran has been a high priority that they can't do on their own. And so they have, I would say, a maximalist approach to getting the United States as involved as deeply as possible to do the parts of the job that they can't do.

They have intelligence capabilities, they have some military capabilities, but they cannot do the regime removal and assuredly destroy the nuclear potential that Iran has. So in that instance, it was pretty clear that the United States was not going to go for regime change. It was a quick one-off operation to take advantage of the opening for American aircraft to go in and bomb very precise targets without very much collateral damage as far as we know.

And that's kind of what I think Trump sees as the good kind of intervention. Quick in, quick out, decisive. No American casualties.

[Helena Cobban]

And declare victory! Don't forget that.

[Bill Quandt]

Declare victory. Say, we've done it. We destroyed...

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, we obliterated.

[Bill Quandt]

We obliterated it. Now we're less than a year later and he's talking about doing it all over again, in which case, what happened the first time? So I think there is a significant difference.

The Israelis have a big agenda. We have a more performative one. But there are people who are talking about regime change, including the president.

This is a case where you can begin to see some differences in the administration. Vice President Vance said, I think yesterday or recently, that we weren't in the business of regime change. We were interested in making sure that they never acquired a nuclear weapon.

And almost immediately, Trump said it wouldn't be a bad thing to have the regime change as well.

[Helena Cobban]

Yes. If we just pause on that regime change agenda for a moment, there are different possibilities. One is regime change and the replacement of the Islamic Republic with a more pro-Western or allegedly more democratic government, but still a functioning government.

There's a possibility of regime toppling and the whole of Iran just collapses into chaos. And then there's the possibility of regime co-optation, which in a sense was what happened or seems to be happening in Venezuela. And the Iranians are putting out some intriguing feelers through their economics ministry and obviously also their foreign ministry, not exactly regime co-optation, but that they could do a deal with Trump on oil and gas and economics, this and that.

So, I mean, there are nuances in this idea of regime change, where I think there would also be differences between Netanyahu and Washington. What do you think?

[Bill Quandt]

Well, I think that's true. I mean, the United States has had mostly very troubled relations with Iran since the Iranian revolution and the ouster of the Shah, but there have been exceptions. For example, at the end of the Carter administration, it's pretty clear that the incoming Reagan administration had been in touch with the Iranian regime and to some extent was able to take advantage of Carter's unpopularity with the Iranians because of the whole hostage affair and the way that had been handled.

And at the beginning, almost on day one of the Reagan administration, they were sending military equipment and spare parts for the F-4 aircraft.

[Helena Cobban]

So, that was the Iran-Contra deal?

[Bill Quandt]

That was the Iran-Contra deal.

[Helena Cobban]

And yes, absolutely. And even before Carter's, even before Reagan's inauguration, they had got the deal in place because the Iranian government at that time was saying they would not release the hostages to Carter because they were so angry at Carter for having given some kind of refuge to the Shah. But they would give the hostages to Reagan and that was the Iran-Contra deal.

So, yes, you could describe it as a kind of a cynical warming of relations.

[Bill Quandt]

We also, after Saddam Hussein had intervened and basically annexed Kuwait, Iran actually was quite cooperative with the United States. It let American aircraft that had to land for emergency purposes, they were allowed to land in Iran. Pilots who had to bail out could land there.

And they made it very clear that they wanted the United States to defeat Saddam or at least weaken him, if not oust him altogether. So, interestingly, from 1990 to about 2000 or so, when the United States was preoccupied with Saddam and Iraq, Iran was kind of a de facto partner in containing Iraq. And then, of course, after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, one of the first questions was what's the impact going to be on the balance of power in the region?

And not surprisingly, Iran emerged as a more powerful regional player. And the United States all of a sudden found that it had problems with Iran that it hadn't had in the previous period.

[Helena Cobban]

So, it hasn't been a-- If we could just back up a little bit there, worth remembering that during the preparations for the invasion of Iraq in the lead-up to March 2003, Ahmad Chalabi, who was the main US figurehead, puppet, whatever, for that regime change operation, he was in Iran. And the Iranians were very much in favor of toppling Saddam Hussein because, and people need to remember this, because of the eight-year war that Saddam had waged against the Islamic Republic back in the 1980s.

[Bill Quandt]

With American support.

[Helena Cobban]

With Donald Rumsfeld giving them chemical weapons and all kinds of support. Yeah. So, it's kind of a complicated diplomatic history, geopolitical history in that region that you know very well, that clearly Donald Trump doesn't have a clue about any of this, I would imagine.

[Bill Quandt]

I think that's true.

[Helena Cobban]

So, who is advising him? We don't know. But if we could just get back to, well, it's good to look at that long, it's a decades-long history of US-Iran relations.

Right now, do you think there's a possibility that Donald Trump might be tempted by deals on economics? And obviously, the Iranians are also prepared to offer something serious in terms of controlling their nuclear enrichment capacity, possibly even diluting the already highly enriched supplies that they have or exporting them elsewhere, some tight controls. They're not prepared, as I understand it, to give up their nuclear research programs altogether, but they are prepared to bring them under tight supervision.

And now they're also putting out these intriguing feelers about potential economic deals. From what you know, do you think Trump might be tempted by that or that the Israelis whispering in his ear and saying, no, no, no, you know, you should go for broke? How do you think he's going to make his mind up?

[Bill Quandt]

He might as well flip a coin. I have no idea. I think he could go either way.

I mean, it's happening as we speak that they're having to weigh these alternatives. My impression is that the Iranians are putting their best face forward in the negotiations. They've said explicitly, we do not intend to have nuclear weapons.

We will commit to that. We'll allow inspections. They're at least hinting that they can, if not give up the right to enrichment, at least keep at a very low level, primarily for medical research and things like that, and that that can be monitored.

If that can be pinned down, those are quite big concessions. And frankly, if I were advising President, I would say, try to get it as explicitly pinned down. And then you'll be back to about where the Obama administration was with the JCPOA, which, if it had any weaknesses, it was going to expire earlier than necessary.

And basically, if Trump would achieve what he has almost on offer, he would be going back into something like the JCPOA with a longer time horizon and probably tighter inspections. Now, can he claim that as a victory? He can do anything he wants with it.

The alternative is much riskier, in my view. He would get plaudits in the United States if he were to get this. The Democrats are not going to criticize him for going back to what is essentially the Obama policy.

And most of our international allies, certainly the Europeans, but also others in the world, are going to breathe a big sigh of relief that we don't have a crisis, a military crisis about to break out between the United States and Iran with Israeli intervention, because that puts everybody in the region, the Iraqis, the Saudis, the UAE, Pakistan, they're all going to be nervous if a big war starts.

And I think Trump doesn't want big wars. He wants quick, decisive military action or deals. And this is a deal waiting to be made.

If he's a good dealmaker, this is his chance to show it.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, I mean, I've written a couple of times that the way for the Iranians or, you know, supporters of a deal to sell this to Trump would be to allow him to put his name on it so that instead of being the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, it would be the Trump Comprehensive Plan of Action.

[Bill Quandt]

Well, he'll do that anyway.

[Helena Cobban]

And applaud it. And it would be the TCPOA and, you know, end of conflict. I wish somebody I hope somebody has proposed that to him because he loves to put his name on things.

But you mentioned the dilemma that the Gulf Arab rulers find themselves in. That is mainly the Saudis and the UAE and Qatar, Kuwait, maybe less because Kuwait has lived with a great degree of uncertainty for a long time. But how would you characterize the fears and hopes of the Gulf Arab rulers and where that might drive them?

I mean, they have some of them or all of them said that they don't want to be a direct party to or implicated in any US Israeli attack on Iran. But is that a tenable position? Is that is that going to save their their skins?

[Bill Quandt]

It's hard to say my my sense is that the Saudis in the last couple of years have gone from being very edgy about Iran's power and influence in the region and have thought that detente with Iran was a wiser policy and they've actually improved their own bilateral

relationship. UAE, I'm not quite so sure that they have gone as far in terms of adjusting their policy. But of course, Qatar is quite ready to be a mediator and is eager to avoid conflicts because they have really no capabilities of defending themselves and they're quite vulnerable.

The other thing to remember is that if Iran is really pushed to the wall by the United States and Israel militarily, it has several ways of lashing back. One, there's navigation in the Gulf region itself, which will hurt the Gulf exporters of oil and gas, and the international trade traders who rely upon oil and gas from the Gulf. And that's a very sensitive area, a Strait of Hormuz can be blocked, at least for short periods of time without too much difficulty.

So I think the Gulf states also worry that if Iran is really pushed back against the wall, the most vulnerable targets for them to hit, the easiest ones to hit are the oil and gas production facilities in Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar. They're just sitting out there, very, very difficult to defend. Now, it would be an extreme act on Iran's part to do that, but it would be extraordinarily disruptive.

I mean, you can rebuild facilities, but it could mean a year or two in which oil from the Gulf was very difficult to access and the price of oil could double from what it is today. That has world consequences that every single American family would feel almost overnight.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah. Just remembering that it was in 2019 that the Iranians allies in Yemen, the Ansarullah, the Houthis attacked the Saudi oil field. And I think that was probably a wake up call.

It was a wake up call for the Saudis. And then regarding Qatar, Qatar is fascinating to me, because it has this very strongly anti-Israeli rhetoric at the governmental level and a lot of support for Hamas. And actually informed by, as I understand it, deep Muslim Brotherhood roots amongst the ruling family in Qatar.

And they're, well, it's a very small society. But they also host the largest American military base in the region. I have no idea how they managed to strike that balance.

So they have twice been the subject of notable, although limited military attacks. Once was during, well, at the end, right after the 12 day war of last June, when the Iranians said, we have to do something to hit back after this big US attack. And they kind of signaled it to both the Qataris and the Americans, we will attack, launch a very limited attack on some target in the American military base in Qatar.

And so the Americans, you know, duly evacuated that and the Qataris and the Americans all stood aside and there was a small symbolic attack. And then that was it, you know, the end.

[Bill Quandt]

Well, I think it's important.

[Helena Cobban]

And then we had what happened in September, which was much more shocking for the Qataris, which was when the whole of the Hamas leadership, as far as I recall, was meeting in a villa, a house in the center of or near the center of downtown Doha to consider the latest American, the then latest American ceasefire proposal. And the Israelis targeted that house and tried to kill the entirety of the Hamas leadership. For Qatar, that was extremely shocking.

So, I mean, it's good to understand why various Gulf states are kind of edgy about confrontation because they have many different kinds of vulnerabilities. And then they are also concerned about Israel's influence in the region. How, you know, if there's a Trump deal of some kind with Tehran, will the Israelis just stand by?

[Bill Quandt]

You know, there's a limit to how much they can do to prevent at least a detente. If Trump doesn't want to go to war and he wants to accept the equivalent of a new JCPOA agreement on Iran's nuclear facilities, and if they do come under inspection again, the Israelis may not like it, but they can't undo it. And I think they have to be careful because they don't have a unqualified support in the United States any longer, if they ever did.

It's increasingly apparent that their support has been eroding. It's still important in Congress in certain areas. But if Trump were to make what seemed to be a good deal with Iran, I think most Americans would support it and support it with real hope that this puts paid to the idea that, you know, there's going to be a big war in the Middle East that just, once again, attracts all of our energy and attention and doesn't end up resolving any problems.

We've had that with Iraq. We've had it with, you know, the ongoing crises over Gaza. I think people in this country are fed up with Middle East wars.

Most people don't have much knowledge or interest in the Middle East, but they know it's been the source of a lot of trouble and anxiety. And so if Trump could pull off a detente with Iran, I think he would get a lot of credit. And I think there's a part of him that knows that, but he does have to worry that it could fail.

Khamenei is not a cuddly, easy figure to embrace. He's got a pretty stern atmosphere. But I must say, Iranian diplomacy, if you talk to people who deal with Iranian diplomats, they talk about them as being very sophisticated, usually well informed.

They usually, well, for example, the president of Iran these days and his foreign minister both speak English. They speak several other languages. They have developed a pretty sophisticated foreign affairs professional team.

That's not the same thing as the Revolutionary Guards and things like that, which are the tough guys in the regime. But I think that if you deal with Iran diplomatically, there is a deal to be made. And that will test our ability to explain to our public that yesterday we were talking about regime change.

Today, we're talking about making an agreement that is good for them and good for us. Can it be done? Well, if anybody can do it, Trump can because what he says yesterday doesn't bind him for what happens today.

But we're right at the tipping point. I can't say, I think it could go either way. But if it does happen to go in the direction of an agreement, I think the American public would breathe across party lines a sigh of relief that we're not going to see the next months consumed by a crisis with Iran.

And frankly, I think for Trump, I don't want him to have an easy time with the midterms. But frankly, he's thinking about midterms already. He doesn't want to see the Republicans lose control of the House or the Senate.

I think if he gets blamed for a crisis, an unnecessary crisis with Iran that results in higher oil and gas prices and disruption of relations with any number of countries in the region, it's not going to help him in electoral politics. And he wants to be an effective president until the last day he's in office. Now, that's probably unrealistic.

He's on the slide, the glide path already, but he doesn't want to accelerate it by doing something that will not be well received by the American public. And I don't think a crisis with Iran will end up looking like the recent crisis with Venezuela, where two weeks later, people say, no, that didn't go so badly after all. This one will go badly if it takes a turn for the worse.

[Helena Cobban]

So, wow. As you and I are sitting here talking...

[Bill Quandt]

It's happening, probably.

[Helena Cobban]

The Iranians and Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner are talking, and I hope that we've been able to project some of your wisdom in their direction. I want to thank you, Bill Quandt, and doubtless, you and I will continue talking about these matters in many...

[Bill Quandt]

I suspect so.

[Helena Cobban]

I just want to remind everybody watching and listening to this that this is the second episode in our Iran conflict project, which is part of our Gaza and the World project, because of course, the two issues are very closely tied to each other. I want you to listen in or watch at the same time tomorrow when I'll have Ray McGovern as my guest, and then also at 1pm Eastern, we'll be releasing new conversations on Monday with Trita Parsi and on

Wednesday of next week with Ambassador Chas Freeman and more to come. Go to our website, www.justworldeducational.org, to where you can find the details, because we're putting on new episodes in this series by the day at this point, because it's such an important issue. Obviously, if you're capable of donating to support our projects, that would be great.

Once again, thank you, Bill Quandt, for giving us your wisdom. Bye then.

[Bill Quandt]

Bye. See you soon.