

## Jason Greenblatt | Understanding Today's Changed Middle East

- [Wendy] So, Jason Greenblatt served as the White House special envoy to the Middle East. He was a chief architect of the Trump administration Peace to Prosperity Plan between Israel and the Palestinians, and Israel's Arab Abraham Accords. Jason is the host of the podcast "The Diplomat" on Newsweek, and is the author of the new book "In The Path of Abraham," which is available on Amazon and other book sellers, a book that takes a deep dive into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the US-Israel relationship, the road to the Abraham Accords, and today's changed Middle East. Thank you very, very much. I'm now going to hand over to Carly and to Jason.

- [Carly] Thank you, Wendy. Jason, it's great to see you again. I think you are trying to outdo me for who can fly the most number of miles in a year, fresh off the plane to Korea a month since our trip to Saudi together. And we have you joining us live from Jerusalem. So thank you for taking the time this evening. So there's obviously an awful lot of ground to cover, but we're going to use your new book as the backdrop. So before we dig into the Abraham Accords itself, how did you find yourself named as the representative for international negotiations for President Trump in the start of his administration in late 2016?

- [Jason Greenblatt] Well, thank you, first of all. Thank you Wendy for the warm introduction. And thank you Carly as well. And for being here, I'm very excited. I worked for President Trump for about 20 years in the private sector, working on most of his large transactions. And when he was running for office, he decided to hire, so to speak, or engage two people who he knew well, myself and my friend, Ambassador David Friedman, because he wanted advice from people who love Israel. So that then morphed into separate roles for David and I, which overlapped. But for me, it was very much about trying to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also trying to solve the Israeli-Arab conflict and trying to improve the US relationship both with Israel and the Arab countries. So I was a trusted person, somebody who worked on many, many large transactions for him, somebody who he felt would be willing to listen and learn and see what could be done.

- [Carly] So when President Trump invited you into this role, how did he describe it? You know, the Abraham Accords in whatever way you would've described them then, I think if you told people in December 2016 that this was one of the goals of the Trump administration, they would've promptly sent you for a medical test. So how did he describe to you at that stage what your role would look like?

- [Jason] So to start, it was about Israel. He felt that Israel was mistreated by the prior administration. He wanted to right that

injustice, if you will, try to repair the relationship as he saw it. He is also a deal junkie. He had always heard about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and wanted to know whether it was at all possible that we could solve that. But there were already people talking to him about something called the "outside-in" approach. So, you're right, the Abraham Accords were nowhere, way too far from anybody's mind, perhaps a figment of an imagination. But people were saying that the time might be ripe to make some progress between Israel and its Arab neighbours. You know, along the way, and I might be jumping ahead a bit, but along the way there were some wins that seemed so big. Us having Israeli journalists end up in Bahrain at a conference, you know, seeing his Jewish things in a Emirati museum, having the Hatikvah sung at a sports event in the Emirates and in Qatar. So all these things just seemed remarkable at the time, but now they seem so small. So you're right, he had no idea, we had no idea, but it was very much exploratory to see what could be done.

- [Carly] So one of my favourite proverbs, and, I now know, one you like as well, is the Yiddish proverb that "man plans and God laughs." And many men had tried planning with the Middle East, and you could argue there'd been a lot of laughing and a lot of trauma on both sides. So how did the initial ingredients come together to even start some of these discussions? And even think, as you say, that there was a new approach on the horizon? Because you really challenged the previous paradigms about, you know, it had to be deal with the Israeli Palestinian conflict first and that's where you had to start.

- [Jason] So for me, it was very much learning, being a listener. I mean, I'm an attorney by profession, retired from practising law at the moment. But it's always an issue of let me understand everybody's thoughts on this or anybody who has knowledge. And that included, of course, the Israeli leadership, the Palestinian leadership, my colleagues in the State Department and the National Security Council who had worked on this for so many years, diplomats around the world. And everybody does have an opinion. And, as I say in the book, everybody does have a plan. But it really was very much trying to put together all the pieces and see what makes sense, what doesn't make sense, what made sense a year or five years ago, but no longer makes sense perhaps. And a lot of probing. I once used this expression with a reporter who seemed surprised and the State Department said I should stop using it, but I said, "I think it's the truth, so I'm going to keep using it." It's a little bit like a dentist, right? You put the tool in the mouth and you probe the tooth and you see what's solid and what's weak and what needs repair. I did a lot of that dental work throughout the Middle East and I think that's what helped us understand the possibilities.

- [Carly] And do you think some of that dental work was asking a different set of questions? You know, there's a review that's come out on your book today in Al-Abi, which in and of itself is not something

you'd have seen happen five years ago. But there's a line in there that I thought was interesting, which is, "While Arab sympathy for the Palestinians and support for them to achieve a state of their own remains strong, Greenblatt found widespread Arab impatience with the Palestinian leadership in both Ramala and Gaza and an unwillingness to continue vetoing them over forging ties benefiting Israel." Now, do you think you were the first to go one stage further in those questions? Or actually, it was the right moment for them to start answering it differently?

- [Jason] It's both of those, but let me take a step back. I think the success that we had was definitely built on the shoulders of many people who came before us. So it wasn't as if this idea came out of the blue. We happened to catch the right time. We happened to catch leaders who were very courageous. We happened to catch an Iran scenario. And I'm sure we'll go through many of these items during the course of the next time, you know, during this time period. But there were Israeli diplomats and Arab diplomats talking over the years. But we definitely, to your point, probed harder than many. From the moment I met the first leaders in the Arab world, I said, "Would you like me to talk to you like I talk to President Trump?" I've known him for 20 years, I've worked for him for 20 years, I'm not afraid of him. I could say what I want and either he'll listen to me or he won't listen to me, but he wants my actual honest answers. He doesn't want me to just say yes or just talk and have no meaning. And without exception, every one of them said, "No, please, talk to me straight, we'll talk to you straight," which is why in my book you'll see no secrets. I promised them that if I were to ever write a book, I would never say that MBS said this, or Bibi Netanyahu said that. But we definitely had very raw, honest, smart, difficult, challenging conversations. And I think that's, I believe, I wasn't in the room in the prior negotiator's work, but I believe that was not only a breath of fresh air for them, but it allowed them to really explore this road in a way they maybe never did before.

- [Carly] So once you'd done your initial listening tour, and although I obviously know you'd spent a lot of time in Israel before this role, I presume you hadn't spent a lot of time in some of the countries that would then join the Abraham Accords. But how did you go about those early days of looking to build trust and looking to start, to assess the challenge and then actually look at the way forwards?

- [Jason] Most of 2017 actually was listening and building trust, not just with Israel, but with the Palestinians and with all the Arab countries. We were trying to figure out who among the Arab countries did want to go in a new direction, who we could trust, who was willing to roll up their sleeves and help. And by the way, that did include Ramala. I did spend a great deal of time with the Palestinians until they ended up cutting us off after President Trump's Jerusalem recognition. But a lot of time was spent trying to build trust and not

just among the leaders. What was very important to me was also getting to know the societies, certainly among Israelis and Palestinians and, where I could, among the Arab countries. But that was a little bit more difficult. But it was as important to me to meet ordinary Palestinians and ordinary Israelis because at the end of the day, even if we were lucky enough to create a peace concept, a peace plan that perhaps the leadership might be interested in negotiating, we wanted to hear the ideas from the ordinary people. "How does this affect you?" I said many times during the time I was at the White House I wanted to design a plan that families could sit around the kitchen table, mothers, fathers, parents, siblings, and ask themselves, you know, "Can we agree to this? Is it worth it? What are we giving up, what are we gaining?" And that wouldn't come from a one page sort of aspirational talking point chart, which I think worked in the past in terms of trying to get people excited but never reached anything. We wanted to go to a level of detail that people would really understand what it means to achieve peace.

- [Carly] So it's a very interesting point because often people refer to the Abraham Accords as "warm peace" and perhaps the piece that happened previously between Israel and Egypt or Israel and Jordan as more of a "cold peace." And when you dig in on that, what they really mean is did the population actually absorb this this step? Or is it real people to people engagement? Now, from the camera angle, people cannot see that you are wearing a kippah but you are an Orthodox Jew. There you go. And it's something that's very much a part of who you are. And in 2017, I was also doing travel in that part of the world. I do not look nearly as Jewish as you do, although I keep kosher. It's not the start of every conversation. So during that listening tour, how were you finding those conversations? Because you were presumably challenging a lot of narratives, both the Israel discussion, but also the Orthodox Jew travelling in parts of the world where that's probably not such a familiar site.

- [Jason] So from the media perspective, it was very often cynical, you know, "What does this Orthodox Jew know about bringing peace between Israel and the Palestinians, or Israel and the Arabs?" But from the Arab side and the Palestinian side, I actually received nothing but total respect. I was warmly welcomed. We are much closer in terms of our beliefs and our family values than anyone could imagine. I actually felt very comfortable going to the Middle East as an observant Jew. My first major meeting with the Palestinians after President Abbas was with a large group of government officials and they had a beautiful festive meal, which I couldn't partake in, but they knew that I couldn't eat it and they had brought in kosher food from Israel in order to make me feel comfortable. And not just like a sandwich, meaning they went out of their way to bring appropriate kosher food. So I was always welcome. Some of my fondest memories were having, for example, Palestinians at our Shabbat table. We had an apartment in Jerusalem that we had rented, and they came to our

apartment for Shabbat. And these were where we had difficult, tense, real conversations, but friendly. And we would leave the table disagreeing, but disagreeing agreeably, which is something that is completely missing from so many societies today. You're not American born, you live in America now, but I'm sure you see it in America. We have a very, very big problem with not being able to disagree without very strong rhetoric. So that never happened in any of my time dealing with this. The only two times I think I got scolded were actually Orthodox Jews who either misunderstood something or didn't like something I said. But the rest of the time, you name the country and I've had people come up to me to say, let's say a woman from Lebanon who would say, "Jason, I don't agree with your politics at all, I don't agree with the peace plan you're putting out, but I have to say it's refreshing how honest you are and how open you are. And I think we could have a dialogue because of that."

- [Carly] Well, it doesn't surprise me that the most grip you got was from the American Jewish community. But in terms of those moments in the early days after the listening tour in 2017, what were the first foundations or building blocks that that made you think, "Hold on a minute, maybe we actually have the start of a plan here."

- [Jason] So I never gave up on the Palestinian plan until they just, you know, they started calling it, they started saying they hope it would be born dead before they even saw it. And even then I was hopeful that once they saw it and read it, they would actually come back to the table and say, "Hey, we don't agree with a lot, but it's a good basis for us to start talking." So let's separate the Palestinian side from the rest of the Arab side. The Palestinian side was difficult because they refused to engage in any way. On the Arab side, every conversation I had with their leadership, with their diplomats was so different than I had been led to believe when I started and was briefed by many US government officials and others. And I don't blame them, you know, they were briefing me honestly. That was their experience prior to 2017. But something had changed whether in 2017 or beyond where the conversation started to be, you know, "Let's talk about it. Let's see if we could come up with some writing." But it took several years before we actually got there. Every time I would push, I got a very kind, warm engagement, but that doesn't mean anything until you actually get to the finish line. And the finish line finally happened, but it was a very, very long road. I'll give you one example. Calling up the Emirates to get Israel a booth at their expo, the Dubai Expo, easy conversation. First of all, when Israel asked me to do that, they had already been in touch with the Emirates. The Emirates was working on it. It's not like the Emirates did it for me in the White House. They were already pretty much there. I think they were working on some security details. But that conversation is one of many where I realised something has totally changed. They're talking to Israel about a booth at the Dubai Expo. They're not arguing with me. They're telling me that they're working

through some issues. And then they did it. And that was one of those achievements by the way, that we thought, "Wow, the world is changing," until you get to the Abraham Accords. But that's exactly the point. It's each one of those feelings that the world is changing that eventually added up and then boom, the leaders decide they're going to do it.

- [Carly] So let's dig in a little on the boom part. So, you were obviously the person putting the miles in, but you were a member of a team and this was particularly championed by Jared Kushner and his close role with his father-in-law that this was something that the administration therefore were paying particular attention to. So what did the rest of the makeup of that team look like and was it always something that was a priority for the administration, or was it once we saw some opportunities and embers that it became a more significant effort?

- [Jason] So on the team, it was led by Jared and I believe Jared gets, you know, the Abraham Accords has many parents, right? But certainly Jared is one of the key parents. He led the team incredibly optimistic, developed some very, very strong relationships, not only in Israel but throughout the Arab world in particular, in the Gulf. We had Ambassador David Friedman, who was on the ground in Israel, very much important to helping us establish what we were trying to accomplish within Israel. And the three of us worked on a very tight circle. We didn't bring a lot of people in because, as you know, governments are very leaky. Our White House was perhaps, I don't know about prior White Houses, but we certainly were a very leaky White House. So we kept a very, very close hold. Part of my job was to liaise with the State Department and the National Security Council to get the information that we needed out of them, but without them for a very, very long time seeing the peace plan that we were putting together, not because we didn't trust any of them, because certainly many of them would be trustworthy, but we just don't know where the person is. You know, who's this person who wants to just make a name for themselves and leak or undermine something because they disagree with the policy. Later on, Avi Berkowitz took over my role. So he became an important member of the team. And then there's a host of supporting people once they started to open up the team wider and wider to get to the finish line that included our diplomats in all the missions throughout the Arab countries as well as many people from State and from the National Security Council and I'm sure many, many others. But at the beginning it really was just Jared, David, and myself trying to push through these issues.

- [Carly] And in terms of, you know, this obviously was not plain sailing, I'm sure there were many disheartening moments along the way. What were a few that perhaps when you thought, you know, it doesn't matter that it seems those winds have changed, we're not going to get this over the line. What were the most difficult moments in the

process?

- [Jason] Well, I'll give an example with the Palestinians. This is way before they cut us off, it was probably mid-year. I had been to meet with Prime Minister Netanyahu and it was around the time that Mobileye was sold for a fortune of money. He was understandably very proud of it. He was talking a lot about it. That same day I went to, I can't remember which part, maybe Ramala, maybe it was Bethlehem, and I met a group of young Palestinian entrepreneurs and one of them came up to me, maybe he was 25 years old, and he said, "Jason, help us build our own Mobileye." And I took that to heart because certainly that's a very Trump thing. He is a businessman, he is an entrepreneur. I knew that would resonate with him. And I gathered together two large US tech companies who were willing to put together a TED-type conference, which we hadn't decided where it would be, it would either be in Israel, possibly Jordan, where we would bring together Israeli entrepreneurs, Israeli innovators, young Palestinians or older. It didn't matter. But it was the young people who seemed to be the most interested so they could learn from it. I tried to get some Gulf countries involved, but it was a little bit too soon for them. I thought that would've been a great addition to it, especially because they could have potentially provided investment for these young Palestinian companies. But the leadership in Ramala flatly turned me down. They said, "We're just not interested in improving lives. We're not interested in doing business with Israel." They even came up with some ridiculous comments like "Israel wants to do this because they could get cheap labour out of the Palestinians." And I explained to them that this was my idea. And it's not that Israel wasn't going to do it. Israel is going to do it because I asked them to do it, but they didn't knock on my door. I had to knock on their door and I had to convince them to do it. And by the way, Israel has plenty, you know, this is before Covid when labour is now incredibly scarce, but back then I said they had plenty of cheap labour in Eastern Europe, they don't need the Palestinian labour. It's just sheer nonsense. Believe it or not, it took two weeks for me to change their mind. And you know what I got after the two weeks? A closed door session with no more than 10 Palestinians and five to seven Israelis, no press, no discussion outside. And I had to cancel the event because there was no way these tech companies were interested in just having a fake meeting. So something like that was terribly disheartening. Other disheartening points, you know, when I was briefed many times by my colleagues, they were very focused on the two-state solution. And after a couple of weeks of being briefed and getting to know the file better, I asked them, you know, "I hear you, but let me ask you a question. If, in a perfect world, we got President Abbas and Bibi Netanyahu in a room together and put down a plan, and they both scratch their heads and say, 'Oh, very interesting. Let's see if we can get to the finish line here.' What happens to Gaza? What happens to the 2 million Palestinians in Gaza and Hamas?" And you know what I got? "Shh, don't talk about that." Like, "You're right, but we don't

like to talk about that. Let's really just talk about the two-state solution." So you realise that while people hope to solve this and they fall on certain talking points, many people are unwilling to focus on the reality of the situation. And the reality of the situation is incredibly complicated, but you can't solve the problem unless you're willing to be honest about the complication. So those are two sort of really good examples. I can probably think of 12 others if we had more time, maybe 20 others.

- [Carly] So obviously, the challenge of the dynamic with the Israelis and the Palestinians is well known. But if we turn to the Arab countries, and as you say, there were moments before this was showing the winds of change and it's the worst kept secret that Israel and the UAE have had security dialogue for years and there's been white-labeled Israeli tech making its way over to the Gulf and you know, there was these steps. But obviously it took for one leader to be prepared to take that first step and to really lead the way. When did you identify who you thought might be that first leader and what do you think it was that made MBZ or what was the right ingredients that that gave him that opportunity?

- [Jason] I'm not sure it was one leader at one time. I really think it was countless conversations and not only with those that signed the Abraham Accords, you know, Saudi Arabia is not yet, I like to say they're not yet a signatory to the Abraham Accords, but they were equally interested in being engaged. It's a much more complicated country, it's a much bigger society. You know, the Emirates is a small country compared to the Saudis, especially in terms of population. So I think there's no doubt that MBZ was key to this, but I want to stress that many of the Arab leaders in the region really were part of this. Whether they signed it or didn't sign it, whether they're willing to sign it now or not, I think it was essential to get some sort of buy-in for many of them in order for it to proceed. Though there's no question that MBZ from the UAE and the King of Bahrain and of course the King of Morocco were the courageous ones who leaped forward and did this.

- [Carly] And in terms of domestic US politics, there was an awful lot of other competing ties on President Trump's administration. The Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is seen as the third rail, you know, touch it and die. And it's never one where people have won a lot of pundits. Now, obviously you said that Trump loves a good deal, but obviously the risk of failure here was huge and the potential to cause problems in his other plans and other aims for his administration, you know, was there a time where you felt that President Trump was pulling away from this or concerned about its chances of success?

- [Jason] Well, chances of success for sure on the Israeli-Palestinian front, there's no question it was a low chance of success, though we



were optimistic in 2017. President Abbas definitely gave us an indication that maybe he might be flexible. It turned out he wouldn't be. But there's always that big doubt of chance of failure. I don't think, at least from my perspective, I don't think failure for me was an excuse for not trying. I think we saw winds of change blowing in the region. Iran certainly was a big problem for the region and gave us more impetus to try to work on this. And our view was we have to try and we shouldn't be discouraged just because pundits were saying we're going to fail or the chances were low. I wouldn't say this to President Biden now, I think he has the right approach and he had remarked on this trip that now is not the time to forge forward. And I think he's correct, but at the time that we did it, I think the ground was ripe for at least trying.

- [Carly] So you've obviously touched on Iran, which was a backdrop and still is to the region and the kind of 'mine enemy's enemy' logic was being applied to Israel and its Arab neighbours at this point, you know, we saw the comments last week from the UAE after President Biden's trip saying they're not necessarily following the rest of the region in looking to further divide from Iran. That's a slight change from some of their previous language. But how much do you think Iran did play and continues to play a role in the Abraham Accords?

- [Jason] I think it played a very, very big role. I think it continues to play a very big role. The region is definitely threatened significantly. It's not just Israel, right? And think about the Palestinians. If God forbid some sort of attack came from Iran, it's the Israelis and the Palestinians who are on the frontline of that attack. When Iran threatens to annihilate Israel and wipe it off the map, I don't think they realised they'd be wiping their Palestinian brothers off the map in the same stroke. But that leads into the region, Jordan, Egypt, and way beyond. So it plays a very, very big role. That said, I can't blame the Emirates or the Saudis or Qatar or any of these guys when they talk to Iran. You know, I think Ukraine is showing something that Israel learned long ago, which is they have to defend themselves by themselves. That doesn't mean the US isn't doing as good a job as it can to fund Ukrainian defence and to arm the Ukrainians and all that. But at the end of the day, it's Ukrainian boots on the ground that are defending Ukraine. It's going to be Israeli boots on the ground defending Israel, and it's likely to be Saudi and Emirati boots and perhaps some others that they hire defending those countries. So I think they realise that while they want to remain strong partners with the US and they think that the US is more or less reliable, you know, we go through those phases and some would argue until President Biden's trip this trip where he made it clear that he's going to stand with them they were worried, but in the end I think they realised that they have to watch out for themselves first and foremost and they're going to keep all their bets open to make sure that they try to protect themselves as best as they can. Just because they signed the Abraham Accords doesn't mean that

they shouldn't be talking to Iran if it's in their own best interest.

- [Carly] And let's look at President Trump's engagement with Iran and his change of approach. How important do you believe that was in building trust with the Israelis and helping the Israelis understand the broader dynamic and what you were hoping to achieve?

- [Jason] I think it was a huge factor for the Israelis as well as the Arabs, I think they all respected what he did. I think it, I don't want to say all because there's probably at least one country that may not, but I think for the most part they were against the JCPOA. Some were vocal, Israel was very vocal, others were less vocal in public, but they all felt abandoned before President Trump came into office primarily because of the JCPOA. I think unfortunately President Trump's pulling out of the JCPOA did not and the sanctions did not get enough runway because for the most part, many European countries continued to feed money and business to Iran. They found ways to avoid the sanctions. So I don't think his approach actually got the full chance at seeing if Iran could finally be swayed to stop developing nuclear weapons.

- [Carly] And looking at where we are now with the Biden administration's engagement with Iran, if you read the Israeli press in the last 24 hours, actually they are very positive about the Biden trip from a security cooperation point of view from having real serious discussions regarding Iran. But obviously, you know, time is what they often say the Iranians are biding for, it gives them more opportunities. There were some who felt that pulling out of the JCPOA just gave Iran the time that they were looking for. Now obviously, the lack of continuing negotiations and the kind of in and out of the room between the Iranians and the Americans and the Europeans is again giving them more time. Where do you see, looking with the benefit of hindsight, the Iran situation now? And do you think that pulling out of the JCPOA was the right way forward?

- [Jason] So let me break your question into two, your Israel attitude and then was the JCPOA pullback correct. On the Israel attitude, I definitely think that Israelis feel comfortable in terms of Biden's commitment to Israel's security. I don't think they're on the same page when it comes to Iran. In fact, Yair Lapid, the prime minister now, disagreed with President Biden at the press conference. He said that he does not think diplomacy is going to work in response to President Biden saying that diplomacy is his first choice. Now, he also didn't offer a specific solution because really there is no solution short of what Israel is doing at the moment, which is constantly going in and undermining. But those are putting Band-aids on a cancer, right? I don't see Israel necessarily fully attacking at the moment, but they're certainly trying to keep pushing back on Iran's progress. So I don't know that the Biden administration is on the same page as Israel or much of the region. I think they're still

trying to work through those details. But President Biden's view is diplomacy has to come first. So that brings me to part two of your question, which is was President Trump correct in pulling out versus, let's say, President Biden diplomacy? I always look at things long term, right? I don't want to be sitting in front of my kids in four or five or 10 years from now and saying, "It's true that we kicked the can down the road, and we kept Iran either in the box not developing nuclear weapons or doing it by cheating, and we didn't know about it until it was too late, but now it's your problem." I think that there are really two other ways to do it. One is what President Trump did, which is rip up what he perceived to be a terrible deal. They also got tonnes of money. Let's not forget that it's not just nuclear weapons, but it's the money that they use with proxies who attack Israel, who attacks Saudi Arabia, who attack Iran, I'm sorry, who attack the UAE and others, whether it's from the Houthi terrorists in Yemen, whether it's from Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza. There's even some attacks in Morocco and elsewhere. So I think if the world acted in a unified manner, really pushed Iran to the wall, really put the sanctions heavy on it, we could have succeeded. But here we are post, not post Ukraine, but in the midst of Ukraine, and it's clear the world can't even agree on what the right approach is for Ukraine. You have Russia aligning with certain countries. So I think the idea of pushing around to the wall in a unified fashion is not really in the cards now and I'm not sure it ever was.

- [Carly] So, you and I travelled together to Saudi Arabia about five weeks ago, and I think it was your third trip to the region and you'd obviously previously been there with President Trump, and then to return not long before President Biden arrived, how did you view the Saudi approach to Israel changing over the time that you've engaged? And how do you think President Biden was received on the ground in Saudi?

- [Jason] So, I think the view of Israel keeps changing and it keeps changing in a very positive way. You know, at the beginning, it almost felt like it might be a taboo subject when it wasn't. It's just the training that goes in your head from the US government made it seem like it would be a taboo subject, excuse me. But it really wasn't. But the conversation today is just so much wider and deeper and more open than it ever was. That's a huge positive and I think very encouraging sign. In terms of how President Biden was received, you're talking about Saudi or Israel or both?

- [Carly] Let's start with Saudi.

- [Jason] So, overall I think he was received well, you know, I think there's a lot of the press that's focused on this fist bump. There, I think President Biden answered it well when he landed back in the US and somebody asked him about the fist bump and he said something like, "Why don't you ask me something important?" Or, I'm misquoting him,

but something like that. And I think that's the right answer. You know, we have a big world to deal with fully, it's so complicated, it's so dangerous. And they could focus on the fist bump or they could focus on what he tried to achieve by going there. So I think he tried hard to turn a page there. I think that until he got there, he was busy squirming about how he wasn't going to meet MBS or MBS was going to be in the room, but he wasn't really going to meet him. I think that was a mistake. I think he just should have been open and honest and said, "Look, Saudi's an important ally. It's a key time I have to go there. I am going to meet MBS and we're going to talk about all the issues." That's what he ended up doing. He just couldn't say it until he got there. After he got there on the way home, I think he finally opened up and was honest. And I think they accomplished as much as reasonably possible. I don't know that we got anywhere with oil. You know, he didn't talk about it in advance and there's been a lot of conflicting information on what's going to happen with oil. If he doesn't get anywhere, I don't blame him, you know. I wish he didn't spoil the relationship, I don't think it's the spoiled relationship at this point if we don't get anywhere with oil. I think there's other dynamics going on. I think he probably left them as uncomfortable as Israel when it came to the Iranian threat, saying that we'll stand by you and saying Iran can't get a nuclear weapon is nice, it's nice words, it really is, but it's not a solution. But I think the visit on an overall basis was as positive as could be expected.

- [Carly] And do you see, you know, what I noticed when we were there is that the people we spoke to on the ground, actually the Israel normalisation piece was a bit of a red herring. It was starting to become a kind of "yes, yes, it'll happen" and depends on politics and what suits as part of a wider dynamic. But it was no longer a kind of taboo subject. And it was also not something that people were particularly afraid to discuss. But what it did look like was that actually it was getting caught up in the US dynamic that actually the Saudi-US relationship had almost become more of the front to how you engage with the Israel piece. Do you think normalisation with Israel will now be held up between the kind of US-Saudi dynamic and actually because of that take longer than it might have done otherwise?

- [Jason] Unfortunately I think it is a possibility because while the trip was as good as could be expected, there's still a strain in the air. And if the US can't give Saudi the comfort that it needs, whatever that comfort might be, whether it's security or otherwise, it's going to be that much harder to move Saudi, to move forward with normalisation. But Saudi does have a lot of issues besides its relationship with the US in deciding if, when, and how to move forward with normalisation, it's definitely not a taboo subject anymore. Many diplomats, including the crown prince himself, have spoken about normalising with Israel and what might need to happen. And some of them go a little bit strong on the Palestinian side, meaning until the Palestinian issue is resolved, there won't be normalisation. But even

those that say that, if you look at the words that they use, it's remarkably different from what it was in 2017 and earlier than that. Prior to that they were very clear on the parameters. Now, although their official communique a little bit reverted back to it, but in many cases their public comments say a resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and this is going to be the resolution, and the typical '67 borders which really aren't borders and East Jerusalem as the capital, and that's not going to happen. You know, that sort of thing. So it's a totally changed world. You know, to answer your question, I think the tension with the US, which is less now from the trip, still will play a role. But I think what we need to do is less focus on pushing them to normalisation and celebrate every step, whether it's tied to normalisation or not. Let's take the announcement that they made before President Biden went there about overfly rights, that's a big deal. And although the Saudis are couching it as nothing to do with Israel and normalisation and let's give them the benefit of the doubt that it isn't, it's still a big deal. I'm on the board of El-Al, I know how much El-Al is going to save in terms of time and fuel. And fuel these days is really expensive in terms of getting its flights out, so it's a really big deal. I commend Saudi Arabia, I'm not sure they got enough credit for what they did because people are trying to draw it into US politics and some people are saying it's not even a big deal. It is a big deal.

- [Carly] And so talking about these steps when you, when the Abraham Accords were signed and they had their big White House lawn moment, and I will say, you did an admirable job on preventing the leak. So somebody who was on the phone to the head of the Jewish community in the UAE about three hours before the initial news started to come out who didn't know anything, and three hours later called me to say, "Turns out I can't speak to you in two days time because I have to get on a plane to America to be part of what seems to be a signing of an agreement." So, on that, as someone who used to work for the Israeli government as well, you'll have to write a book on how you manage that part. But looking at the concrete steps that follow, you know, this week, next week, the IDF chief of staff is due to go to Morocco. That's a really significant sign of actually close, meaningful strategic collaboration. What are the other really big steps that you've seen that have followed since the actual announcements that show you this is a real deep meaningful cooperation?

- [Jason] So just to address the military part for a second, because you raised the trip that Kochavi is going on you know, the sides have to also trust each other or learn to trust each other in order for them to have effective military cooperation, they're going to have to share lots of sensitive, secretive information and techniques with each other. And it's going to take them time on both sides to get comfortable with that. But the fact that they're travelling and talking and slowly building that trust is a big deal. But it will take some time. Other things we were saying from the small to, you know,

the UAE made a pronouncement very shortly after the Abraham Accords suggesting that all hotels in the Emirates have kosher food available. You know, they're so great at hospitality, that's a really nice thing for them to do. But the number of Jewish visitors or Israeli visitors to Dubai within a couple of months after the Abraham Accords were signed was mind-blowing. I'm not sure the Emirates was prepared for that, having so many Israelis on the ground at once. But they found their level and I think it's working out just fine. Trade, one of the ministers from the United Arab Emirates mentioned at Davos, at the World Economic Forum that within a couple of years they expect to have about \$5 billion worth of trade between Israel and the UAE alone. That's pretty much up from zero before 2017. Yes, there was some under the table business between the two, but probably not in very significant numbers. So trade is huge, culture is huge, most important, friendship, right? You mentioned earlier on in the talk about Jordan and Egypt having sort of a cold peace and I hope that's changing over time. You don't see that at all when it comes to UAE and Bahrain and maybe Morocco I hope as well. I think that they're truly interested in learning from each other, with each other, about each other. And that's very, very exciting to me.

- [Carly] And what do you think future administrations can learn from the approach that you took with the Abraham Accords, either to further engagement in this region or in other parts of the world?

- [Jason] Well, in this region for sure they shouldn't give up on Qatar and Saudi Arabia. I'm not so sure about Kuwait, I think that's further away. But I think that they just have to keep developing it the way we developed it. It's no guarantee it'll work, but I think it's important for the Biden administration and any administration that comes after it to signal that this is a really important strategic issue for the United States of America. And I think they'll take that to heart. It's where we show division and maybe go back to the old ways and try to, for example, loop the Palestinian issue back into the Abraham Accords that when people pull back and say, "Oh, you know, maybe things are different again and we're going backwards." So I think there's just constant encouragement in the region and that's going to benefit everybody, not only the region, but also the United States. In terms of the rest of the world, what you can learn from it, it's very interesting. You mentioned I was in Korea, a lot of people in Korea support Israel, they're very interested in Israel. They were actually fascinated by the book. And at one of the speeches I gave, the person who opened for me who introduced me held up the book and said, "Maybe there's a clue in the Abraham Accords to how to solve the problem with North Korea." I personally don't think so. I think it's a totally different issue with North Korea. You have North Korea who wants to annihilate South Korea. I went to the DMZ, I walked into-

- [Carly] It's more comparable to the Iran-Israel situation than-

- [Jason] Exactly, I walked into the attack tunnels that North Korea dug to attack South Korea. And of course it reminded me of Gaza, right? When I toured the border by Gaza and saw the terror tunnels that Hamas had done. There are just evil destructive people who just want to, in the case of Hamas, destroy Israel, in the case of North Korea, destroy South Korea or take it over and do whatever. So I don't think that the Abraham Accords are a path to a conflict like that, even though I didn't want to take away hope from this gentleman. And maybe he's right and I'm wrong. I'm new to Korea, so maybe I'm totally off base. But what I do think it shows is don't just blindly follow diplomacy from years ago. Don't just repeat the same talking points because the world changes faster than we know it and different alliances are forming and societies are changing at such a rapid pace. So always look at things with a fresh set of eyes, always question, always push. To me, that's what the Abraham Accords represents.

- [Carly] And you know, the Abraham Accords to some degree was able to happen in a vacuum. You were able to focus on the Arab world and Israel. Part of President Biden's challenge in the run up to the recent trip to Saudi Arabia has been his vocal stance on their human rights record, his vocal opinion on Khashoggi. One of the challenges for Biden on the Palestinians has been his announcement of increased funding for UNWRA. He hasn't tackled these things in a vacuum. Do you think that if you take some of the human rights abuses in that part of the world into consideration, the normalisation in the Abraham Accords becomes more difficult to execute?

- [Jason] I think these have to be two separate conversations. Human rights, obviously everybody wants more people respecting human rights. And you should have those conversations, but you can't do it to the detriment of moving forward either security agreements or Abraham Accords type of agreements or everything else. You can't say because somebody is not meeting the standards of human rights or has very low human rights standards, therefore we won't deal with them or we won't make the world a better place in so many other ways. I think we have to learn to separate these important conversations, not give up on fighting for human rights, but at the same time not undermining tremendous potential, whether it's the Abraham Accords or other things or standing by friends and allies who don't meet our standards. Don't forget, people could criticise America too, right? There are many countries in the Middle East who would say you know, pick your issue of the day in America, Roe V Wade, some of the states are allowing abortion, late, late, late-term abortion. They would say that's abhorrent to them and therefore America doesn't respect human rights. There are lots of ways to spin that conversation. So it's a bit of a minefield if we try to demand human rights in order to deal with a country or in order to deal with a policy like the Abraham Accords or something like that.

- [Carly] And in terms of the Palestinians and President Biden's

engagement, both with increased funding for UNWRA after President Trump had obviously frozen that, the conversations around opening some kind of Palestinian consulate in East Jerusalem, do you feel that a lot of the policy positions that were taken by President Trump are being undone indiscriminately? Or do you feel that the justification the Biden administration is giving, that there is some stock in it?

- [Jason] Well, I'm not concerned about undoing some of the policies because I think that would be hard to do. But I don't agree with him going back to some of these old ways. Let's take UNWRA, right? It's a wasteful organisation. Many would say it's a corrupt organisation. But let me take it to its core. Why, all these years after the conflict, are Palestinians still living in these camps and need this kind of help? There are no others, whether legitimate refugees from the actual war or the descendants who are stuck in this limbo period forever, why don't we want them to have better lives? I believe that it's because they're used as political pawns for the Palestinian narrative. So what happens generation after generation, Palestinians have to suffer because of politics. I would say throw out that old way. It may have made sense decades ago. It doesn't make sense today. Let's figure out how to use this money wisely to give them better lives. They don't want to give up their claims, don't give up your claim. You want to fight and say you're entitled to X, Y, or Z in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that's fine. I'm not trying to undermine their position, but I am trying to say there has to be a way to allow these people who are suffering in these decrepit camps from having to live this way if the conflict isn't resolved for decades more. So I think it's a mistake to go back to the UNWRA way. I think that we should be encouraging other countries to figure out a different solution. East Jerusalem hospitals is making a very, very significant donation. I think it was a hundred million, plus he's gotten I think the equivalent from the Arab countries. Let's understand why there's not enough money. Palestinian authority is not using its money wisely. There is corruption and they're using a lot of the money to pay terrorists to harm and murder Israelis. If they cut out those rewards to Palestinians for killing Israelis, they would have more money to pay for their hospitals. I'm all for Palestinian healthcare, don't get me wrong, but let's demand accountability out of the Palestinian leadership before we just throw US taxpayer money at them.

- [Carly] And we always like to end on a more optimistic note. So what is your dreams for the Abraham Accords of the future and what do you see as achievable and real goals on the horizon?

- [Jason] Well, this is a dream, probably not achievable in the near term, but I think the Palestinians, at least those that are controlled by Ramala, should jump on the Abraham Accords. Not to sign it but to take advantage of it. They sorely need economic improvement. Many of them speak Hebrew or if they don't, they at least understand Israeli society. They obviously speak Arabic. They can become an incredible



part of the glue that binds the Abraham Accords together, bring a lot of money back home, and greatly improve their society without harming their political position in any way, shape, or form. It's not going to happen anytime soon for the same reason that the Palestinian leadership wouldn't allow me to do that TED-type conference because they're not interested in improving the economics of the Palestinians. This is the leadership. They're simply interested in their political positions and nothing else matters to them. What could be achievable is another country or two signing up. Not immediately, but you know, everyone is always trying to guess, is it going to be Oman, is it going to be Saudi Arabia? To me it's all about building bridges. Every one of us should be trying to build those bridges so we can get the next country and then the country after that to sign the Abraham Accords. Not at the expense of the Palestinians. These countries are still devoted to the Palestinian people, even if they're frustrated by the Palestinian leadership. But the more countries that sign onto the Abraham Accords, the better off those countries in Israel and the region will be generally. And then there'll be plenty more money to help the Palestinians as well. Again, not to undermine their political claims, just to help them live better lives while the political issue remains outstanding, because I do think it's going to remain outstanding for quite some more time.

- [Carly] Thank you very much. I really recommend everybody to get ahold of the book and to learn more and actually to sign up to listen to your podcast because then we get to follow you around the world on your amazing adventures. And I look forward to hearing the ones on Korea, which I haven't been to yet either, but I'm sure there are many interesting stories to follow. And I'm going to hand back over to Wendy just to wrap us up.

- [Jason] Thank you, your questions were great, thank you so much.

- [Wendy] Well thank you very much Jason, and thanks Carly for a really very interesting hour. And I just wanted to reiterate what you said. Just one example, Jason, you know, we are building a Guggenheim in the UAE and when we met with the Sheikh and his minister of culture, they were so excited to meet with us. And actually our chairman happens to be Jewish as well. So the president and the chairman were both Jewish and they spent a great deal of time speaking about Israel and the relationship that they're building with Israel and how excited they are to have us on board and the team. And it was really refreshing and very, very welcoming. So I have to say that I felt very, very welcome and very, very well received. And I love the excitement that they had towards their new relationship with Israel. So thank you very, very, very much. And I'd just like to reiterate as well to our listeners who weren't there when I introduced you, as Carly said, to buy your book "In The Path of Abraham," which is available on Amazon, where they will take a deeper dive, where you take a deeper dive into Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the US and

Israel, and the road to the Abraham Accords. Good luck with everything that you do, very good luck. We are very excited to watch your progress and also to have you back with us on Lockdown University.

- [Jason] Thank you so much, thank you so much for the opportunity. It was great.

- [Wendy] No, thank you, absolute honour and pleasure. And thank you Carly, that was outstanding. Thank you to both of you. And thank you to all our listeners for being with us this evening. Night-night.

- [Jason] Bye-bye.