

Webinar: “Detering Iranian-Linked Aggression,” with former Commander of U.S. Central Command General Frank McKenzie, Jr., USMC (ret.) and Dr. Michael Makovsky, CEO and President of JINSA. Held virtually on January 10, 2024.

---

## **Transcript**

**Dr. Makovsky:** Welcome everybody and thanks a lot for joining us. We’re honored today to have with us General Frank McKenzie, a Marine who was in the military for a number of decades. His last position was Commander of the U.S. Central Command [CENTCOM] from which he stepped down and retired from the military in 2022.

He now serves as executive director of the Global and National Security Institute at the University of South Florida. He also soon is going to be publishing a book entitled *The Melting Point: High Command and War in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, which I hope, at the end of this, General, we get to discuss a little bit. He also participated in JINSA’s 2022 Generals and Admirals Program trip to Israel.

He has a long biography, a very distinguished career obviously noted for many military achievements. He was the CENTCOM Commander during the killing of the ISIS leader Abu Baqr al-Baghdadi and the IRGC commander Qassem Soleimani, and he was also the Commander of CENTCOM during our withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.

Obviously, he has a long list of military achievements, a very accomplished general. Thank you very much, General McKenzie, for joining us.

**Gen. McKenzie:** Michael, I’m glad to be with you this afternoon.

**Dr. Makovsky:** I want to start, obviously we’re here to talk about countering Iranian aggression, and I commend our audience, if they haven’t read it, please do so, because I’m going to start asking you questions off it, but your piece in the *Wall Street Journal* from last week, I think it appeared online on January 4<sup>th</sup> but it appeared in the print publication in the *Journal* on January 5<sup>th</sup>.

It’s entitled, by the *Journal*, “Lessons of the Strike That Killed Soleimani. I want to quote the conclusion you had—because the U.S. forces have been attacked since 2021 by Iran-backed proxies in Iraq and Syria, until October 7<sup>h</sup>, there were something like 80 or 90 attacks and U.S. forces retaliated about four times.

Since October 7<sup>th</sup>, when Hamas invaded Israel and committed all those atrocities and triggered the current Gaza War, there have been about 120 attacks—that we count—on U.S. forces by Iran or its proxies in the region and we’ve retaliated about seven times.

And you say, and I want to quote the conclusion paragraph in your *Wall Street Journal* op-ed:

“Unfortunately, it is the United States that is being deterred, not Iran and its proxies. To reset deterrence, we must supply violence that Iran understands. Paradoxically, if done earlier, this violence would have been smaller, more measured scale. Indecision has placed us in this position. There’s a way forward, but it requires the U.S. to set aside the fear of escalation and act according to the priorities of our strategic documents and concepts. Iranians understand steel. They also understand mush. It is time to choose.”

So let me unpack some of this. Before I ask you what you think we should be doing, how do you explain what we’re *not* doing that, that we should be doing.

How do you explain what we're not doing? Again, in your piece, which I thought was really superb, you argued that the U.S. should be retaliating for these attacks to deter future attacks. And you say that we're the ones who are being deterred. Why do you think that is?

**Gen. McKenzie:** Michael, first of all, I'm happy to be with you here today. These are important subjects and I look forward to the discussion we're going to have.

Escalation is not good. We all understand that. We want to avoid escalation. But the principal goal of our foreign policy cannot be prevention of escalation. If it is, we should come home—we should draw back to these shores. We shouldn't go abroad, if that's our highest priority. Logically, certain things should follow. Clearly, that's not the case, and there are things that have a higher priority than escalation, and I would argue that we have talked ourselves into a logical fallacy.

So, as we consider what we need to do in the region where this concern about escalation has become such a higher priority, that we're hesitant to take the steps that we need to take, that our opponents will understand and our friends will be reassured by.

If we do that, the chances of escalation are relatively low. And I also believe that, had we done this sooner, months ago, we wouldn't be in the current situation we're in now, which is in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, where many of the world's oil companies or shipping companies are not sending their ships through the Bab el-Mandeb, which is having a significant impact on the global economy.

We could have avoided that. But by dithering, by arguing amongst ourselves, and by overly signaling and our responses—and our responses were, frankly, weak—we have created this situation where it could have been dealt with properly, aggressively, months ago.

So, you were Commander of CENTCOM during some of these attacks. So you had to deal with this, obviously. If you don't mind me asking, I assume you argued this when you Commander at CENTCOM. How do you understand the responses you were getting. which I assume your successor is dealing with today.

**Gen. McKenzie:** I won't speak for General. Kurilla, but I think it's a safe assumption, I can just say that, but again, I'm not speaking for him, I would actually go back to 2019, and I had just taken command of CENTCOM. In the spring, we know the Iranians looked at the significant drawdown of U.S. forces in the region, and they thought the time was right to move against us, more or less directly, to force our ejection from the theater, and a series of Iranian attack plans in the April-May timeframe, and we actually did some things to deter them, by overt surveillance, by flowing forces into the theater.

And, yet, when they struck against and shot down our RQ-4 in, I believe, July 2019—you're all familiar with the famous episode where ultimately we chose to do nothing kinetic in response—there's an example. Had we been hit the Iranians when the RQ-4 was shot down, it's my belief, based on my judgment but also my knowledge of what the Iranians were thinking at the time, we might have been to permit the escalatory practices that followed from Iran that actually led to Qassem Soleimani on the night of January 2, 2020.

When that happened, we could have averted that, we could have averted a lot of things that happened in Iraq, but our slowness to respond led us down that trail. It's almost where we are right now.

I would just add one other thing, Michael. The Gaza situation—while the Iranians welcome what’s happening in Gaza, they are the moral author of what’s happening in Gaza. They supplied Hamas. That’s a good thing for them, but it is not central to their strategy.

Their strategy is a three-part thing. They want, first of all, to protect their theocratic regime, the mullahs. Second, they want to achieve the destruction of the state of Israel. Third, they want to eject the U.S. from the theater.

So when we think about what's going on in the region, I don't believe the Iranians view the Gaza situation as central. It is not central to their plan, and I think that’s a trap we need to avoid falling into. When we consider the best ways to respond to Iran in the current escalatory spiral that we are in.

**Dr. Makovsky:** Okay. I want to ask you, I have a lot of questions, and I want to get to what you think we should be doing, but I just want to ask you one thing about this.

You mentioned 2019, and I think you’re referring to the \$120 million drone that the Iranians shot down, I think that was in June of 2019. Trump at the latest minute, seemed to—based on reports—called off a retaliation a few minutes before, supposedly, it was supposed to happen.

Is that right?

**Gen. McKenzie:** It was a little more than a few minutes. It was popular to say ‘airplanes were in the air.’ No.

What happened, Trump was given bad information by members of his national security staff about the potential collateral damage that our strike could cause. We had carefully looked at it at Central Command. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs had carefully looked at it. The Secretary of Defense had carefully looked at it.

We felt it would have been a very, very minor potential loss of human life. He was briefed it would be much higher.

Given that bad information, I understand why he acted. He was just acting on bad information that his staff gave him. The collateral damage would have been much lower it would have been a very proportional response yet it would have sent a sharp signal to the Iranians that you can't do this—there are going to be costs that are going to be imposed on you if you go after our unmanned aircraft.

**Dr. Makovsky:** If you don't mind—you’re saying that the military when you provide options to the Commander-in-Chief, or you send it up the chain, you say what you think the possible casualty numbers might be, you’re saying in the White House, White House aides sometime add their own, or they override, or they say ‘this is what the military says, but this is what we think it could be’?

**Gen. McKenzie:** In a nutshell, yes, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing.

I would argue that, at Central Command, we have an elaborate system for modeling casualties. We’ve been doing it for many years--it's very good. I have expert legal opinion that’s available to me here to talk about proportionality, to ensure we’re compliant with the law of armed conflict, and other things. We fight as a values-based organization, so we don’t want to cause unnecessary casualties as we go after the objective.

So, what goes up in Central Command in these kinds of cases, is a fully set-up package. Then it's looked at by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary [of Defense], and the Secretary can modify it as he wishes, and as he should, if he disagrees with it. And then it goes, as we say, across the river and the [White House] national security staff takes a look at it.

Ultimately, the President is the decision-maker here for most of those these things, not all of them, but for a big operation like this, he was the decision-maker. I think his staff was wrong in the information they gave him. I think that's widely known now. But, ultimately, under our system, that's the way it has to work. Ultimately, the civilian leadership gets to make a final call on this.

Now, we're not talking about a back- and-forth in a conflict. We're talking about a large sort of standalone strike. You wouldn't do this in every case, because if you do, you'll do nothing but go to conferences and talk about targets. In this case, that's what happened.

**Dr. Makovsky:** I see. I wrote a piece in the *Wall Street Journal* in early June of 2019 that said Trump needs to confront the Iranians on the ground or these things could escalate, and as you point out, things did escalate when they didn't retaliate, because in September 2019, the Iranians hit Abqaiq, one of the most sensitive energy facilities in the world, in Saudi Arabia, and we didn't retaliate at all for that either. Neither did the Saudis, for that matter, and things got a lot worse.

**Gen. McKenzie:** In cases like this, when you're dealing with a tyrant, or you're dealing with a terrorist organization, where you're dealing with any kind of totalitarian regime or entity.

Early action is usually better. The other thing is you want to demonstrate capability and you want to show that you're willing to use it. The goal of deterring someone is to produce cognitive doubt in their mind that the gain they seek is going to be offset by the pain that you're going to apply to them. The Iranians, as an example, have never doubted our capabilities, but they have always doubted our will to use those capabilities.

They know what will happen if we get into a large scale conflict with them—they are going to be hurt very badly in that conflict and will be defeated, there's no doubt about that. They never doubted our capabilities. But they have always doubted our will to use those capabilities.

They know what will happen if we get into a large scale conflict with them: they're going to be hurt very badly in that conflict and will be defeated, there's no doubt about that.

But, they doubt our willingness to actually embark on that conflict which is why we're in the current situation where they're pursuing those three objectives I talked about, and they believe they can do it below a certain level of pain that they have arrived at through their calculation where they believe the United States will not respond. And the decision to respond is not a military decision, that's a political decision, we all recognize that. Every president's different every president's going to approach it from a different perspective.

**Dr. Makovsky:** Before we get on the politics and the strategic decision, I'm just curious how an American soldier on the ground would see things. We have soldiers in Syria, we have soldiers in Iraq, we have soldiers elsewhere in the region.

You're a soldier, you're an American soldiers, you get attacked by these Iranian proxies, and the United States does nothing. Is that something where they say, "well this is what they signed up for, they're just the soldiers" is or do they say, "well, you know, I wouldn't mind if my leadership actually tried to protect me a little more." How do you think that impact morale?

**Gen. McKenzie:** What I can tell you is, at the military level, and right now I'm talking about Central Command today, they've gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure that we've done everything we can to protect our people on the ground in Syria and in Iraq and in other bases distributed across the region.

I'll give you a specific example. When the Iranians responded to the attack on Soleimani, and as you know, they responded with over 10 missiles over aimed at al-Asad [base in Iraq], we were able to avoid deaths, reposition forces, sort of at the last minute. That was done by commanders on the ground. While we did have a number of cases of traumatic brain injuries, and I don't want to discount or minimize that, nonetheless, we were able to protect our people there to a large degree.

So, I would say, here is the problem now. What's happening over the last year with all these attacks, and this is now Frank McKenzie's opinion, we're playing above the mean right now in terms of our ability to prevent the Iranians from running with scissors and hurting someone. Because we're that good, but the fact of the matter is, the battlefield always reverts to the mean, and sooner or later there will be U.S. loss of life if these attacks continue.

No matter how good you are, the battlefield operates in its own calculus, and there's province of chance of danger, as Clausewitz would say. And that's where, despite your best efforts, sometimes you're going to take casualties.

Now, you're in a position where the president's options are very circumscribed if there's been significant loss of civilian or military life as a result of this. You want to avoid getting to that stage by acting prompt. When you don't act promptly, you get into the situation we've got right now, where we're on the verge of some very dangerous things occurring.

**Dr. Makovsky:** I'm curious how you assess how the Biden administration is different from the Trump administration on how they've approached this, but if you take a longer view, it seems like since Reagan, the U.S. has generally been afraid—well, I should say, Reagan did sink about half the Iranian fleet, and that did help end the Iran-Iraq War. But when we were hit in the Marine barracks bombing [in 1983] which obviously you know much better than I do, we didn't really do anything. And there were a lot of occasions where we could have retaliated, but we didn't.

It always seems like we self-deter with Iran, whether it's a Republican or a Democratic administration. How do you assess that?

**Gen. McKenzie:** Great point. Very few people are aware of that object lesson you cited, which is the lack of effective response when the Marines were hit in October 1983 in Lebanon. Believe me, everybody in the Middle East knows that example well. It's only us that don't get it. They know that history, and they know that history going back hundreds, even thousands, of years before then.

We, being Americans, tend to view everything through what General Mattis used to call 'historical presentism' where it only matters what happened now, and we look at the problem bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for the first time. These problems don't emit solutions like that. They're far more complex and in-depth. And so that's why I think why we often do ourselves an injustice when we fail to appreciate the history and the complexity of the region.

Look, I would just say one other point. Iran is an imperial power dating back thousands of years. Iran is not going to go away. We have to recognize that. It's possible this theocratic government

will go away, but Iran as an economic engine, and as an entity in that region, is going to be around, and we need to think in those terms.

When most Americans, when they think of Iran, they think of the hostages. The hostage situation [in 1979], that's the beginning of time for the U.S.-Iranian relationship. No—you need to go back, you need to look at the counter-coup that brought the Shah into power in the 1950s. And then, you need to look even further beyond that.

We have an history with Iran. The Iranians know and understand this. All too often, we do not know and understand or appreciate that. And I think we need to do that, and accept that kind of nuance, when we deal with the Iranians.

**Dr. Makovsky:** Let me ask you some specifics. What do you think, given what's going on today, in the straits off of Yemen, everywhere in the region, what would you like to see the U.S. do to change the dynamics of what's going on between the United States and Iran?

**Gen. McKenzie:** Sure, Mike. Let me just set a little bit of background. The interesting thing about the Israeli operation in Gaza, aside from the operation itself, which we can talk about separately, is what's *not* happening. The Iranians are not attacking Israel and are not coming to the aid of Hamas. Lebanese Hezbollah [LH] is not, although I was confident that would not happen days ago. I'm still fairly confident that LH, that [Hezbollah leader Hassan] Nasrallah, doesn't want to come into this fight. So what's not happening is very important.

Now, the Houthis are in the fight, but here's the thing. The Houthis have a very limited capability to do anything to Israel. They can launch onesies or twosies which the Israelis are going to easily intercept. They can't gain the volumes of fires.

What the Houthis can do, of course, is disrupt shipping in the Red Sea and in the battle checkpoint of Bab el-Mandeb with their cruise missiles, with their short-range ballistic missiles, and with their unmanned aerial systems, and they are doing that and trying to do that very hard.

So, we need to understand, that's sort of the background. Now, on top of that, as I already noted, Iran is carrying out a policy aimed at us, the United States, not necessarily at Israel. The proxy attacks have ramped up a lot since 10/7, but I do not think we can view that as primarily motivated by what is going on Gaza. Iran's focus is ejecting U.S. forces from the region. They have a sought policy of ejecting us from the region. So, the attacks that have occurred in Iraq and Syria, which as you noted, Mike, occurred long before 7 October, have ramped up since 7 October.

Again, Frank McKenzie's opinion: we would be wrong to view those as solely, or even principally, or even primarily, motivated by what's going on in Gaza. They are pursuing a policy of ejecting the United States, and a policy of the destruction of the state of Israel, too. But I think we need to consider that when we look at what's going on.

With that said, let's talk about Yemen for just a minute.

So, the Houthis are sustained by Iran. As you know, there's been a terrible humanitarian disaster in Yemen. A lot of countries have sent a lot of food there. A country that's never sent a bag of rice there is Iran. They've sent lots of weapons, and lots of weapons components, and the Houthis—I speak of some knowledge of this—they are actually very good aeronautical engineers. They can build good systems. It's sort of shadetree mechanic work, but they can do it. I mean, they built a loitering SAM [surface-to-air-missile]; they do very good work on the systems they get from Iran.

But make no mistake—they are 100 percent supplied by Iran. So Iran has the luxury of really fighting what I would call a ‘hidden hand’ operation with very few Iranians on the ground, Quds Force people on the ground. They’ve fought a major war against Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and now they’re choking world shipping in the Bab el-Mandeb at a very low price for Iran.

So my view is this: the Iranians view that as good operation, not vital to them. If we were to strike the Houthis, it is my judgment that Iran would not respond to that. The Houthis would respond within their capabilities, but it would be geographically circumscribed.

What needs to happen now is—three months ago, had we been aggressive when the Houthis started this at a low-order scale, we could have launched a small attack—I now think we need to do something larger. What that would be, I have no idea, but I think we need to demonstrate to them that if you guys really want to go up the escalation ladder here, we can make it very painful for you.

And I do not believe the escalation ladder leads out of Yemen. I believe it stays in Yemen. I believe Iran would leave their partners down there, their proxies down there, to their fate should that happen.

**Dr. Makovsky:** So, let me ask you. We put together this coalition, of which Bahrain, I may add, is now a public partner. We’ve warned of ‘consequences’—I think that was the term—but didn’t say what kind of consequence, but it said consequences. So far, all I’m seeing is shooting down. We haven’t really done anything, whether it’s knocking out facilities, but I assume you’re talking about doing things in Yemen against Houthis that are going to send a strong signal that there’s going to be a severe cost to them if they keep doing this, so we don’t just play defense.

**Gen. McKenzie:** Michael, you’re exactly right. Shooting at boats that are attacking you and shooting at missiles, that’s the retail operation. You’ve got to go wholesale if you want to have an effect here. You’ve got to do something that causes them pain and that means you’ve got to strike targets in Yemen that are important to the Houthis.

Look, I’m sure we know where those targets are. We’ve got great target decks on them. And that would be clearly what I would recommend doing, and I believe that—now, could be you’ll get into an escalatory spiral with the Houthis, could be there’s a back- and -forth that’s the result of that—but I believe that it would be limited to that region. I don’t think you’d see the Iranians launch against Israel with the missiles they could fire at Israel or do something significant against our forces there, or see Lebanese Hezbollah come in. I believe that’s a separate little theater where there’ll be room to operate.

**Dr. Makovsky:** Let me ask you, are you encouraged that—it seems like some of these missiles that have been fired, they have also fired at Israel—Israel has shot down some but there have been reports that the Saudis have too, because the missiles went over their airspace.

Do you see a *de facto* more regional air shield that we, and others, have been discussing for a number of years emerging already now?

**Gen. McKenzie:** I believe the one thing all those nations in the region fear is Iran. And when they fear, Iran, of course they fear their proxies, but what they really fear are the air and missile capabilities that Iran brings to the fight. A major war in the region is going to be a fires war with weapons that are delivered by missiles—cruise missiles—and unmanned aerial systems.

Therefore, there's a compelling argument for nations in the region to knit their warning systems together and to talk to each other about the Iranian threat.

And I would tell you, Michael, furthermore, before I gave up command [of CENTCOM], I was able to host two chief of defense of conferences where had most of the chiefs of defense of the region together, including Israel, and we had an opportunity to talk about that threat.

Here's the thing about air and missile defense. In the region, as you know, there are significant concerns about sovereignty, giving up sovereignty. The beauty of air and missile work is that you don't have to give up sovereignty. What you're generally sharing is information, which still can be hard to share, but what you're trying to do is build what we call a common operational picture. Everybody sees the threat, warnings are passed.

So, for example, if the Houthis are launching against Israel, Saudi Arabia—and I have no personal direct knowledge of this—Saudi Arabia could either intercept or pass a warning to Israel or talk to our ships out in the Red Sea. Same with us. But what you try to do is knit it all together and that is the secret sauce, if you will, of coalition warfare. It's the unique convening authority the United States brings.

But what I also think it means is, with Israel coming into the Central Command region, it creates the operationalization of the camp of the Abraham Accords that allows you to think about how you might actually achieve an operational linkage with the forces, and the capabilities, that Israel brings to the fight. And we know, in air and missile defense regime, they are unsurpassed, and every country in the region knows that.

**Dr. MakovskyS:** I just want to mention for the audience, and you know because we've talked about this before, but actually JINSA put a report out two years called *Build it and They Will Come* that actually turned into legislation that was in the National Defense Authorization Act and mandated a Pentagon strategy for building regional air defense systems. And I think, it seems like it is actually starting to come together right now, maybe *de facto*, based on reports that we're getting.

Let me ask you, general. I want to get back to the retaliation issue. One of the ways we did seem to escalate our retaliation—because a lot of it seems like U.S. retaliations against Iranian proxies have been focused on facilities and haven't really killed many of the folks involved in attacking our forces.

We did recently kill a leader in the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Force in downtown Baghdad last week, and then Baghdad government reacted, condemned us and threatened to kick us out.

What I've gathered, and I'd be curious if you could explain this, what we've heard before is one of the reasons in recent years and this is Trump or Biden, it didn't matter, is there are some folks in the military that have been hesitant about retaliating against attacks on our forces in the region. We have about 3,500 troops in Iraq, I think we have under 900 in Syria.

If we're always going to be so worried about how the Iranians and their proxies are going to hit our forces, that there become questions of the effectiveness of the presence of our forces in some of these areas, are they more liabilities and assets if we're going to be so nervous about Iranian retaliation.



**Gen. McKenzie:** Look, here's the thing. As we look at what the Iranians can strike in Iraq and Syria—you're right 2,200 or so people in Iraq and about 900 or so in Syria, distributed bases, easiest thing for them to get to—we always thought that if they're attacking us in Iraq and Syria, you do not want to strike back in Iraq because it would further pressurize the Iraqi government and lead to a situation that we've got now where they're talking about kicking us out.

Look, they talked about kicking us out after the strike on Qassem Soleimani. In fact, parliament passed a resolution. We're still there some years later. So I don't know. And as you know, the way things are done in Iraq, they could be talking about this 30 years from now. So that doesn't particularly worry me.

I do think that it's important to select targets that cause pain to the opponent, and sometimes those are personality targets that you need to strike instead of empty buildings. However, because this is a ultimately a political decision in the United States, if no casualties are accrued on our side, there's often hesitancy to approve targets that could cause loss of life on the other side, personality-driven targets, for example. That's sort of the dilemma that we're in.

I would argue that sometimes, you do want to go up a step and say, "look, you guys need to knock it off, and you need to knock it off right now, and we're going to hurt you a little bit to show you that we can do that." And that should be something that sort of guides—and I have argued it in the past—how we craft our response to that. I mean, we are the power with significant military capabilities, we shouldn't be afraid to display that power to shape our objectives.

**Dr. Makovsky:** Okay. Let me ask about Iran.

This is an issue that comes up in Israel. Now, the Israelis have not been afraid of retaliating against Iran. They also had their own recent strikes. They just killed, it's been highly reported—everyone assumes it was Israel, they haven't officially taken credit—a senior Hamas leader who was basically their liaison with a lot of other forces in the region, [Saleh] Arouri, in Beirut. There have been questions in Israel, this has come up, I know, should Israel always be hitting back proxies or should they hit back inside Iran. And the issue is sometimes framed as, 'do you hit the head of the octopus, or do you just keep going at the tentacles.'

I wonder how you look at that. At some point—I mean, this is a massive disparity of attacks on us versus how we retaliate, as you've clearly pointed in your op-ed and what you're saying now, we're more self-deterred than deterring them—is there a point where we need to hit back inside Iran and not just go after the proxies in Yemen or Iraq or elsewhere?

**Gen. McKenzie:** So, you need to recognize that if you strike Iran, you're crossing a red line. It will be a different thing that we have not, the United States has not, done in the past and would probably take it to a new level.

I would argue, though, there are other things you can strike than Iran that are important to Iran that don't involve going into what I would call metropolitan Iran, the land mass of Iran itself, and we should consider those.

In terms of what Israel has done with the strikes against the Hamas leader and then the Hezbollah leader, of course, in southern Lebanon, in the case of the Hamas leader, I don't believe—again, my opinion, others can view it differently—I don't believe that is viewed as escalatory by anyone.

I don't think Lebanese Hezbollah is concerned about that. Now, they are concerned that they struck the Hezbollah commander, and that may lead to a tit-for-tat escalation. But I believe, in the case of Lebanese Hezbollah, [Hezbollah leader Hassan] Nasrallah is going to make a cold, clear-eyed strategic decision. If he wants to attack Israel, because he knows the massive pain that Israel can inflict upon him. Additionally, Lebanese Hezbollah politically and economically is weakened in Lebanon. This is not 2006, this is a time when the death spiral of the Lebanese economy, the complete gridlock of the Lebanese political system, all do in fact reflect in some degree on Lebanese Hezbollah. And he's aware of that. So he's got to walk a very careful path here.

Look, is he still inimical to Israel in the long term? Of course he is. But he is not necessarily going to come into this fight, certainly not because there's problems in Gaza, and probably not because the Iranians say do it, because he could be destroyed and Iran not hurt. He's not going to be an Iranian cat's paw here. He will make an independent decision.

Having said that, of course he's generally aligned with the goals of Iran. So I just think we need to consider that, as we think about, you know, decisions that we might make on escalation.

Now, Israel, look, I think they'll strike Hamas targets wherever they are in the world, I think wherever they can find an appropriate target. And by that I mean the high-level political and military echelon. I'm confident Israel will probably go after them wherever they are and under whatever circumstances they can. But I think Israel, too, would think twice about doing something large and not deniable inside Iran.

Look, the Iranian nuclear scientist killed a couple of years ago, it probably wasn't the Dutch that did that. And everyone knows that. But there's a veneer of deniability, and that's important. Something that was strictly undeniable, I think that Iran would probably be compelled to respond.

Now, how they can respond? Actually, they don't have a lot of good options. They've got to convince Lebanese Hezbollah [LH] to come into the fight. I believe they can hurt Israel. Iran's ability to hurt Israel is more than the Houthis' but is also limited, whereas LHs has capabilities much closer to them.

**Dr. Makovsky:** Let me ask you one more on that, and then I want to ask you about Gaza. Look, there's been this back- and -forth between Israel and Hezbollah. I thought, and it sounds like you do, that Hezbollah would prefer, the Iranians prefer, not to have a war with Israel right now. However, something could change, and God forbid one of these missiles that Hezbollah fires hits a school in Israel, or who knows what, then all bets are off.

I think Israel—they've tried having, let's say, genocidal Islamist terrorist organizations backed by Iran living a few hundred meters from their towns, and that didn't work so well in the south—they have a different approach about the north. At some point, it seems to me, this Hezbollah issue is going to have to be dealt with, whether its now or later.

Let's say, for the sake of argument, there is war between Israel and Hezbollah. They have 150,000 rockets or 200,000 rockets versus what Hamas had about 20,000 rockets, a few hundred precision-guided missiles. So it's going to be a different kind of war. What do you think the role of the U.S. should be if there's a war between Israel and Hezbollah?

**Gen. McKenzie:** Well, if there's an overt war in is and Israel were stressed I believe we would assist in the defense of Israel. I'm just speaking for myself now, but I believe that we would assist

in the defense of Israel. I'm just speaking for myself now, but I believe that we would assist in the defense of Israel.

I don't know that we'll be doing offensive things, that would be a policy decision, but you know the cruisers and destroyers that we brought into the Eastern Mediterranean, those ships are principally valuable because of their air defense radars, which can look deep into Israel, deep into Lebanon, and can work against missiles. Really, though, they're better suited for missiles coming from Iran, and that's why we have them there to take a look at that.

There are things that we can do to help Israel, and I'm sure we would. Look, a largescale intervention by Lebanese Hezbollah while the war in Gaza is ongoing, I think, is the worst-case scenario for the state of Israel.

I think Israel, to be successful there—I believe they would be successful—but there would be a lot of casualties. There would be lot of infrastructure destruction in Israel, because the simple volume of LH missiles is going to stress Iron Dome, it's going to stress David's Sling, it's going to stress all of your capabilities. Plus, now you're fighting a multi-axis attack. You've got to fight up north, you got to fight down south, and also you would, if LH comes in, you might think Iran would come in too. So now you're really in a real multi-axis attack and that's your worst-case scenario.

That's why, from my perspective, if I were Israel, I would go to great lengths to avoid fighting with LH. I don't mean [Israel goes] up there and swacks a Hamas commander if you see him or a Hamas diplomat up there to do other action, and the little tit-for-tat that we're seeing going back and forth now, I do take your point that the economic situation that is caused by the evacuation of people up north may create something that is unsustainable for Israel. And that might require you to recalculate.

Even [Hassan] Nasrallah, in his recent speech, I think most analysts believe he opened the door to some kind of an agreement up north. And I'm not one of these guys who reads when petty tyrants across the region say something, I glom onto it, and say you know 'peace is here at our time.' I've learned the hard way that's usually not the case. I do believe that there might be something there.

Nasrallah is going to make a calculation based on what's best for LH, not what's best for Iran. And so we should remember that well.

**Dr. Makovsky:** And by the way, I think there was a debate after October 7 in Israel, it seemed like at senior levels, whether Israel should go north with the ground incursion. There were reports that some of the military leaders, including the defense minister, wanted to do that. Israel obviously decided not to do it, and I think what you said is what they're thinking.

Obviously, our colleague, who I know you spent time with, General Yaakov Amidror, former [Israeli] National Security Advisor, two days after the war, was emphatic on our webinar two days after the war on October 9<sup>th</sup>. Israel has to go south and take care of Hamas, and I think that's where they are.

Let's talk about Gaza. How do you assess how that war is going? Obviously, President Biden was very supportive of Israel, but you have Secretary of State Blinken, who's there in the region now, there's been a lot of talks—I mean, President Biden once used the term 'indiscriminate bombing' once, although I think the White House kind of walked that back—there's a lot of pressure on them to move to a new phase.

And I'll add for the audience, every Thursday afternoon we have a webinar with General Amidror and also one or two of our other generals who are Fellow General Yaakov Ayish and General [Amikam] Norkin, former J-3 and former Air Force Commander in Israel. So I encourage everybody to listen in about where the war is tomorrow.

How do you assess, General McKenzie, how Israel is doing and what do you think the U.S. should be doing or not doing right now?

**Gen. McKenzie:** When I look at the Gaza war, I think in terms of five things, five Israeli objectives writ large.

The first objective is the obvious one. As they said, they're going in to dismantle Hamas politically and militarily and prevent them from being a factor in the future.

I think they are, at best, partially along that goal. I think a lot of Hamas light infantry has died. I think the Hamas high-level chain of command is still largely intact at the military and the political echelon.

So they've got work to do there. It's going slow, because Hamas is fighting a very smart campaign. We all know how they've embedded in the population. They're living underground, you know, they're falling back, they're making it very difficult and slow for the Israelis to go.

So I think that is, at best, underway. But it is nowhere near completion. I think it's going to take them a lot of time to finish that. That's number one.

Number two is, I think Israel actually does want to protect the civilian population in Gaza to the best of their abilities to do so. That's proven problematic because of the way that Hamas has chosen to fight. I'm acutely sympathetic to commander—you've got to make decisions about proportionality to go after.

The problem Israel has on the world stage is, the attack of 7 October is now months in the past. The news cycle has moved on and the news cycle now focuses on what happens every day in Gaza and gets louder and louder among people who have no sense of, you know, the historical linkage between these events.

However, I got to tell you, I think Israel has also struggled with this objective, to actually be on the right side of minimizing civilian casualties. I don't know that we could have done it any better I just know it's hard for them to do it.

The third thing that Israel's objective is, they want to keep their own casualties low, military casualties—and there have been significant military casualties but I think they've done about as well as they could—and they also want to protect the Israeli population, and I think that's a win.

Since October 7, since that date, I think Hamas's ability to fire rockets into Israel has proven problematic at best for them. They've not had a lot of success there. The Iron Dome has worked, they've been able to make the intercepts, and they've been able to prevent largescale military casualties. Although, military casualties have continued to occur and will continue to occur because that's the nature of this kind of fighting.

The fourth objective is the hostages. You want to get your hostages back. I think it's going to be very hard to get the remaining hostages back, Michael, that's just my opinion. I think that I think they're the last thing that Hamas has.

I was talking someone yesterday who said well there's evidence that you know they're they've got all the hostages around the leader down there in the south in his home city. I don't know. That wouldn't surprise me.

But in a larger sense, Hamas has actually used the entire population of Gaza as hostages to hide behind, and that's actually a law of armed conflict violation right there. They have caused this dilemma. So as I look at it, I am not optimistic that we're going to get a lot of these hostages back. That's just my candid professional military assessment.

The fifth thing is prevent wider escalation. That has, until now, generally worked pretty well. We've talked about Lebanese Hezbollah has not chosen to come in. Iran has not come in. Certainly the Houthis have rattled and tried to do what they can, but it's been limited and not effective against striking Israel. So as I look at the campaign, it's a campaign that to me at least is very much still in progress, and campaigns like this are nonlinear: you shouldn't assume that the progress of the last 10 days are going to be the progress of the next 10 days. A big event could occur positive or negative that could completely change the complex of the operation on the ground.

I believe that's something that the newspaper guys and the media that look at it, all they see is the trendline. Well, the trendline can change pretty dramatically you know if you get a key leader if you discover this or if you have a setback yourself. Those are all inherent to the battlefield the random nature, chance, and danger—the province of the battlefield.

You have to bear that in mind as you take a look at what's happening there. So look, they've done a lot of good work. There's a lot of hard work still left ahead.

You asked me to talk about U.S. support. I think one thing the US can do and has done is we have tried to prevent the war from spreading and I think largely we've been effective at that, an obvious show of force in the region has cooled Iran down. Iran behaves differently when there's an aircraft carrier in the region and they know that carrier is there. Iran behaves differently when we bring ships in, more aircraft squadrons in, they understand the capabilities those forces bring.

So I think we've been very effective at that. The last observation I would just have is this –it's just an objective evaluation. Time is not on Israel's side here, because of world opinion, the tyranny of the news cycle that we've already discussed, and the fact that this is not a campaign that's going to be on a timeline--it's a campaign that's going to take time.

You're in a period you're finishing a period of significant urban maneuver and now you're entering a period, as I understand the strategy, you're entering a period of focused counterinsurgency where you're going to ramp down these big attacks but you're still going to be doing attacks. People are still going to be losing their lives.

You're still going to be going after one of those elaborate tunnel networks in the world, maybe the most elaborate tunnel network in the world except the Moscow subway system. And that's going to be a hard thing to get after. So, I watch closely, and I know that.

I would like to have a better understanding of what the end state's going to be. What it's going to look like. And I think if Israel could clarify that, that would actually buy them more time, greater political support in the United States.

The one thing I know about the end state that I would be 100 percent for is Hamas can have no role in that end state. What's it going to look like. And I think if Israel could clarify that, that would actually buy them more time greater political support in the United States.

The one thing I know about the end state that I would be 100% for is Hamas can have no role in that end state. No role. But beyond that I think you need to think pretty imaginatively about what that could look like at the end. And without that, you're just fighting a campaign without a political objective. The objective has to be more than removing the political military echelons of Hamas. I'll pause there.

**Dr. Makovsky:** Thanks. And by the way, on that issue, I should say that JINSA, we partner with another group called the Vandenberg Coalition, and actually we have a group on this issue that's going to be putting out something—at least our recommendations—for the day after, the way forward, in Gaza. The group has been out to the region, just again over the weekend and went out last month, and has been in touch with senior officials on both sides, both there and here, among many experts.

So, I'll tell people, stay tuned for or release on that.

Let me ask you a couple of quick things because I know our time is running short. I have a couple questions that people have asked that I want to get to.

Before you mentioned our aircraft carriers in the region. I know we have very few that were able—you know, there's only so many places, there's only so many of them—we could deploy, we had two in the region and just withdrew one. I realize there are other commitments for these carriers, among other considerations of maintenance and things. Is that important, that one left, would it have been better to try to extend it? How do you see that?

**Gen. McKenzie:** It would have been better to have two. Now, I'm speaking as a CENTCOM Commander, but you know, there's 'CENTCOM Fatigue' in Washington. People don't want to study war no more in the Middle East. It's more fun to play against China. And the Navy, frankly, has significant trouble generating aircraft carriers for a lot of reasons that are beyond the scope of this discussion.

But I will tell you this. Posture matters in achieving deterrence. Iran knows and understands what our posture is, and they know when it goes up, and they know when it goes down.

**Dr. Makovsky:** Okay. Let me ask you. We had a couple questions, somewhat similar, one by Jay Solomon, a reporter. Do you think the Arab states—Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Egypt—will get behind strikes against the Houthis? So far, they seem to be against it.

Relatedly, my colleague John Hannah has a question, are you worried the Houthis would respond if we attack the Houthis in Yemen, would the Houthis respond by attacking the Saudis and/or the Emirates? There has been reporting that the Saudis are urging us not to escalate with the Houthis because they're negotiating a permanent ceasefire. How should we think about those issues, and how do we balance the concerns of our key partners?

**Gen. McKenzie:** First of all, I would assume we're in significant talks with both UAE and Saudi Arabia about what's going on in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. I would think, and I would hope, that we are consulting with those partners, but I believe we need to act. It would be best to have a

unified front. What you might get is, you often get in the region is, silence rather than objection. And as you know, that often happens.

But the Houthis are at a point now where if we do not take action, the problem is going to metastasize. It's going to get worse. Typically, appeasement is not an effective long-term solution, as we know from a lot of examples from recent and less-recent history.

**Dr. Makovsky:** By the way, have you been impressed the Bahrainis have actually been more out in front than some of our other Arab Partners in the Gulf?

**Gen. McKenzie:** I have always been impressed by the kingdom of Bahrain's leadership and his Majesty's willingness to make a decision and to be with us. I've had the opportunity to spend some time and the Crown Prince. They are genuine leaders. When the king makes a decision, they'll act an act immediately. They did that in joining the International Maritime Security Construct in the fall of 2019, I believe. We were looking for members and his Majesty made the decision.

I was at dinner with his Majesty. He made the decision to do it, dispatched the foreign minister from the room, and they joined that night, literally. It was an example of rapid decision-making, rapid execution.

Bahrain has been a good friend of the United States, and, as you know, our main naval base, our main operating base in the region is in Manama in Bahrain, and they've been good, loyal friends for many years.

**Dr. Makovsky:** One last question before I want to ask you about your book before we end. There was a lot of momentum for Saudi-Israel normalization before. It's been assumed that there should be some security arrangement between the United States, like a mutual defense treaty between Saudi Arabia and the United States as part of that. What would you think of that, by the way, if we had a mutual defense treaty with us and the Saudis to help facilitate also a treaty, a peace agreement, with Israel and Saudi Arabia?

**Gen. McKenzie:** I think that normalization between those two nations is going to continue, whatever happens in Gaza, I think it's going to continue, because I think Saudi Arabia is very concerned about Iran, and to deal effectively with Iran, they need to have a good working relationship with Israel and they recognize that. I think UAE recognizes that as well.

So, certainly, there's going to be posturing, there's going to be messaging over what's going on in Gaza, but I believe the long arc—the trajectory relationships between these states, they will continue to grow closer.

The problem with a treaty is, you're going to have to get 67 votes in the U.S. Senate. And that's going to be tough for a lot of reasons. Otherwise, and they know this, any agreement is not worth the paper it's written on because the next president can abrogate it. You can say, 'well we're going to do this,' but unless it's a treaty and the U.S. is bound to it, it's very hard to make it stick.

I understand why the Saudis want that, I just think from a practical political perspective, it is difficult to do.

**Dr. Makovsky:** Okay. One last thing – so with the three minutes left, do you want to say something about your book? And I'm going to ask you, and put you on the spot in front of everyone, I hope when your book comes out, we could do another webinar for you to discuss at length.

**Gen. McKenzie:** I'd be delighted to do another webinar, either for the book or before then even.

So, Michael, the book is entitled *The Melting Point: High Command and War in the 21st Century*. The title of the book is actually taken from Barbara Tuchman's great popular history of the beginning of World War I, *The Guns of August*. And there's a line in there, "that melting point of warfare: the temperament of the individual commander."

My perspective in the book is about the perspective of an individual commander and three years at U.S. Central Command. What I learned, what I knew. So, I talk about that. I talk in some detail about operations that we undertook, how we tried to achieve deterrence against Iran, how the headquarters was organized.

But there's some other things in the book as well. A critical theme in the book, and it's one that's very important to me, is the importance of civ-mil relations and the importance of civilian supremacy. On a couple of occasions, I argued for a decision, I didn't get what I wanted—at that point, it was my job to salute and execute the orders I was given. They were lawful orders, I felt they were wrong, but it's time to do what I swore to do to uphold the Constitution.

So, I spent a little bit of time talking about that, but really, it's sort of my view of what it meant to be a four-star general at a pretty turbulent time in our nation and in the world. Because as a combatant commander, you really live at the nexus of operations, strategy, policy, and, of course, politics as well.

As Winston Churchill said, at the very top, at the very apex, you're being foolish if you don't believe that practical politics have an effect on strategic decisions. And I believe that's not just true the last four or five years, but true all the way back throughout U.S. history from Abraham Lincoln and the war between states, 1862 and 1864 election and decisions he had to make there, to FDR's decisions on [Operation] Torch in the fall of 1942 to try get an invasion in before the midterm elections. These are not new things and when we just talk about them as if these are suddenly new and horrifying things, we do a disservice to our understanding of American history and our understanding of what civ-mil relations are.

**Dr. Makovsky:** Look, first of all, I appreciate you bringing in Churchill. You know my own personal interest in that subject, and I want to thank you very much for all the time you just spent with us explaining this. I know we had a big audience, we have a lot of retired military folks including some former commandants of the Marine Corps that signed up to listen to you, and other folks, and I really appreciate your joining us, and all your outstanding service to our country. Thank you very much.

**Gen. McKenzie:** Michael, thank you. JINSA's a great organization. I really appreciated the opportunity to go to Israel last year. Of all the generals that went I was probably the one that least needed the experience of going back to Israel because I'd dealt with them so much, but I never pass up the opportunity to visit Israel—thank you so much.

**Dr. Makovsky:** Thank you.